

**Commencement Address
New Hyde Park Memorial High School
June 25, 2006
By Robert A. Scott, President
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Introduction

Principal Nugent, Superintendent Williams, members of the Board, teachers, distinguished guests, parents, graduating students, thank you for including me in your program. New Hyde Park Memorial High School and Adelphi have been neighbors for years, and this year alone a dozen or so from your school will attend our University.

This is commencement, graduation. It is a day of new beginnings, as is said by nearly everyone asked to speak on this day. And that's true. But let's take that assertion of "commencement" further. To do so, I would like to reflect on a couple of lives which have taken various turns and which may be illustrative of these themes: Live life, not work; make a life, a living will follow; be author of your life, not just an actor in a script by another's hand.

I have a story to tell and it starts simply. I cried. We had packed the car to drive my son to college and were ready to start the journey. As I closed the trunk lid I turned to my son, hugged him, and tears formed. He had graduated from high school and was leaving home. Not for good, of course, but symbolically he now was on his own.

I cried for reasons of happiness and sorrow: happy for him and his new journey, and sad that this partner in carpentry and tennis and Jackie Chan movies would not be home for any extended period until the next summer - - when he might want to study or work far away.

We entered the car and I was silent for what seemed like an hour. I thought of all he would do: Varsity Tennis, Dean's list, Phi Beta Kappa. As my mind considered these thoughts, I began to realize that my reveries about his college career were really about my own failings. Why is it that we parents and older siblings try to encourage on loved ones those achievements of which we have only dreamed? I had worked

twenty hours a week in college to supplement a scholarship, was a social being who liked to dance at the Sweet Shoppe several nights a week, and was active in student government. Studies came fourth, and I played intramurals, not varsity.

Nevertheless, I loved ideas and words, and debates on world affairs, discussed philosophy with professors and visiting scholars, and wrote essays and poetry, some even in math class. My work in the library allowed time to read widely books assigned for others' courses. I finally taught myself math while in the Navy. But these accomplishments were not entered on a transcript.

Somehow, I survived college and graduate school, and so did my son. He is a tenured teacher of Latin, with a master's degree, and Tennis Coach at a revered high school in Westchester County, happily married, devoted father of my twin grandsons, a homeowner, and accomplished in Tai Chi. We still do carpentry and yard work together, but not nearly as often as we would like.

Although neither of my parents attended college, I have been a university or college president for 21 years, achieved recognition as a scholar and writer, and am the only American to hold the three top jobs in higher education: head of a state coordinating board, a public college, and a private university - - and at each step I was told if I took the post I would never move to the next.

I recount all this to make several points. First, college - - indeed, life - - is about learning, observing, thinking, and acting in ways that are not always reflected in grades. Second, sometimes our thoughts about others say more about us than about them. Third, the career in which we flourish may not be the first we enter, the one about which we first dreamed, or the one our parents encouraged.

College is more than grades.

College is about learning and acting in ways that are not always reflected in a grade point average. No matter what your intended major, explore different fields. Be playful in learning, without a particular goal other than the joy of it. Remember, schooling is as much about character and citizenship development as it is about

preparing for careers and commerce, and it ends all too soon. Not learning, of course, but schooling. Not everything graded is of lasting value, and that which is valuable is not always graded. Please remember, a college's promise is not to teach you everything, but instead to prepare you to learn almost anything.

Many futurists agree that a liberal arts education -- -- whether in college or through a life of reading - - is the best preparation for work, citizenship, and family life. They agree that training is about answers - - how to - - and that liberal education is about questions -- why, who, when, where? Liberal education is an approach to life's questions and professional challenges that continuously leads to new questions and understanding. I think of the liberal arts and sciences as liberating - - freeing us from the provincial origins of time, place, and a single culture.

The goal of liberal education is to teach the ordinary student to become a cultivated person and to appreciate other cultures; to develop in students the capacity to assess assumptions and understand the value-laden choices that await them as citizens, consumers, decision-makers, and arbiters of ethical alternatives; to inspire students to contemplate the meaning of life and the role of religion, politics, and economics; to help students develop in their capacity to build a civilization compatible with the aspirations of human beings and the limitations of the natural environment; to apply theory to practical problems.

Liberal education helps students gain the confidence to formulate ideas, take initiative, and solve problems; develop skills in language, learning, and leadership; and increase their abilities for reasoning in different modes. It helps students to appreciate the pursuits of pure science and the difference between science and technology. More than any other form of education, the liberal arts help us understand nature, the world we meet; culture, the world we make; and ethics, the systems of thought by which we mediate between the two.

With liberal learning, students can improve in clear and graceful expression in written, oral, and visual communication; creativity; sensitivity to the concerns of others; and aesthetic values. Liberal study in this way prepares students to weigh competing arguments and distinguish between and among fact, faith, and fear as ways of knowing;

it frees them and us from ignorance and apathy. Liberal education fosters imagination, which Albert Einstein said is even more important than knowledge¹ - - although I would add that knowledge of history, or context, is essential to imagination. Alfred North Whitehead said, “Imagination is not to be divorced from facts: It is a way of illuminating the facts.”² A focus on imagination or “wonder” underscores the importance of the student and not just the canon.

To fulfill its potential, a liberal education must also involve experience, in internships, voluntarism, and study abroad. Only then can the useful elements of the liberal arts and sciences be realized to their fullest, by using what is learned in one setting to define and solve problems in another.

One of the lessons to be learned is that truth is more than what we feel. I am concerned that many people today do not seem to know the differences between empirical facts, religious faith, and bias or superstition. That an assertion is made in a book or a website does not mean it is true unless proof is cited. Nor does “maybe,” “perhaps,” or “relativism mean there’s no truth; it just means that the truth is not simple or singular”.³

Today, with numerous websites containing unverified assertions, and others allowing readers to add their own perspectives, without check, that which is asserted to be the truth may be no more than an assemblage of opinions by an unknown audience, and not the verified findings of fact by authors or authorities whose expertise is acknowledged.⁴

Remember: not all that is valuable can be measured. There is much to be learned that will not be graded. Learn about people; study other cultures; be active in sports or drama or volunteer service. Live a full life, even with deadlines. Learn to listen to other’s ideas “with open

¹ Friedman, Thomas L. *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005, p. 441.

² Bennis, Warren G. and James O’Toole. “How Business Schools Lost Their Way.” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2005; p. 102.

³ Davies, Gordon. “Higher Education as if People Matter: American College and University Leadership in the 21st Century.” Lecture at Adelphi University, February 23, 2006.

⁴ Greenfield, Baroness Susan. Testimony, House of Lords Hearing on Education, Science and Technology. London, 20 April 2006.

minds and mutual respect.”⁵ Engage actively in discussions and learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. Learn that “good enough can be great,” that “the right kind of failure is success” because we can learn how to do better without being stymied by waiting for perfection.⁶

Thoughts about others

Sometimes our thoughts about others say more about us than about them. Isn't that what prejudice is about? Isn't that what Mark Twain meant when he expressed surprise at how smart his father had become over the previous four years?

We live in an increasingly interdependent world and ever more diverse communities. You can see that in your own school. The richness of this diversity in which you have studied, played, and discussed the world, and the values new members bring, add to our personal growth, our sense of identity, and our ability to understand and communicate with others as employee, supervisor, neighbor, and citizen.

These experiences influence how we respond to others, and our expectations of them, just as our expectations of our parents, siblings, friends, and children can affect how we relate to them. We need to put ourselves in the other person's place, and try to imagine how they view the world, and us. We need to consider who the other person is - - in spite of his or her ancestry, accent, age, or achievements.

On a personal level, this means having humility, a sense of shame, and the courage to be self-reflective, to see ourselves as we are and want to be. I tried to capture these sentiments in a poem I wrote recently, from which I cite a few lines:

**I am a leader
who believes that, in all things,
truth matters, integrity counts;**

⁵ Tilghman, Shirley M. “2006 President’s Commencement Remarks,” Princeton University, June 6, 2006.

⁶ Anthony, Scott D., Matt Eyring, and Lib Gibson, “Mapping Your Innovation Strategy.” Harvard Business Review, May 2006, p. 110.

**I am a father and grandfather
who wants my family, and your family,
and everyone's family, to enjoy
the fruits of democracy, the responsibilities
of freedom, and the privileges of citizenship;**

**I am an advocate of informed
and civil debate, and abhor how
divisive politics has become;**

**I am a religious person
who believes in tolerance
and knows that you can
be right without my
being wrong;⁷**

In this verse, I tried to reflect on who I think I am and want to be, and how I hope others see me.

Such reflection is not limited to the personal, of course. I believe it can apply to global issues as well. For example, whenever I hear people talk about globalization in terms of competition for brains and economic advantage, I want to shout. Of course we should promote education and training so that our citizens can achieve self-sufficiency and success as they wish to define it, but competition is not a sufficient goal. To foster competition only is to promote "I" over "we," the self over others, personal gain over the common good.

We need to remember that the most intractable problems we face require cooperation more than competition. I think here of natural resources, the environment, public health, national borders, even immigration policy. In each case we cannot impose a solution, but must achieve balance through cooperation. And, in fact, such cooperation creates the foundation for strong societies with sound economies.

⁷ Scott, Robert A. "Everyman." Invited Presentation, Memorial Day Program, Garden City, NY, May 29, 2006.

Careers

The career, or more likely, the careers in which you will flourish may not be the first you enter, the one about which you first dreamed, or the one your parents encouraged. It may not even exist as we speak.

Life is, indeed, a journey, and we need to be both author and actor. In my case, I went to college to be a minister, entered marketing with Procter and Gamble, served in the U.S. Navy teaching cryptography, became a college professor and administrator, worked in state government, and became a college president. How many careers is that?

I liked what one of your classmates said when I met with a group of them – Analise, Jennifer, Melissa, Michael, and Larry -- to learn about your class and your school. One said, when asked what advice I should give today, “it’s all the little things that make up the big picture.” “Enjoy everyday; don’t wait until the end.” I agree on both counts, and both comments relate to careers as well as to the rest of one’s life.

You have had a career here during your six years at New Hyde Park Memorial High School. You have studied, yes, but you have been active in Model UN and Key Club; you participated in sports, and what a year you had, with many wins, a few losses, and major lessons learned.

You have watched your parents’ careers and have learned from your teachers. I think of those retiring today, Ms. Carrion in Art, Ms. Mavro in Math, and Mr. Scott in Science. Their lives are models to consider, and they are not the same person or professional they were when they started. In fact, they probably have had multiple careers in this one school. They also know that it is not enough to develop problem-solving skills and abilities. They know we need to have the knowledge and values to judge which problems to solve.

Life is like that. We continue to grow and change as we learn and act. Another lesson I hope stays with you is the value of friendships among peers and across ages and lines of authority. The students I met proclaimed that this school is special because teachers are supportive of extramural activities and are visible beyond the classroom. Reflect on

these great relationships as you consider the work environment you want for yourself. It may not tolerate “wacky lax,” but it had better foster fun and allow you to be an active citizen.

You may not achieve success as you define it any time soon. Remember, even Leonard Bernstein, Albert Einstein, and Michael Jordan were “late-bloomers.” The important lesson is that who we are can be defined by the results to which we aspire and the passions we exhibit, not only by our job title or the size of our house. Success requires passion, a love for what you do. And those with passion have a special talent to listen to an inner voice as well as to others, to hear and see what others do not. They understand the world on their own terms, not just on the basis of what they hear or read. As Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach for America, said when asked about her success, “I did not know what was impossible.”⁸

I believe you can be optimistic as you graduate today because of what you already have accomplished. You have established success and have secured your footing. Now it is time to extend your reach, without fear of what is possible.

Conclusion

It has been a privilege to be with you today. I enjoyed getting to know a few of you, and look forward to greeting some more of you at Adelphi in August.

In closing, know that you have the capacity to change everyone you meet and everything you touch; that learning is continuous, whether or not someone grades it; that others are like us as well as different; and that life is a journey in which a career is a milestone, not a destination. Go for it! Congratulations.

Thank you.

⁸ Kopp, Wendy. New York Times, June 11, 2006, p. 36.