

School of Liberal Arts
Pre-Commencement Address
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When a poet engages the graduating class of a School of Liberal Arts in conversation, it may be that there is nothing more appropriate than that the discourse be about language, about words.

It seems that we have moved from the last millennium to this, redefining language in ways that are ultimately hurtful, not only to us, but to the world's people. We cloak our intentions and our real goals in phrases that become martial music; phrases that show our young at war, that issue virtual A.C.U's for us to wear, and that hand us virtual M4's to carry at the ready - while we sleep through what is happening to us and to the country we cherish, convinced that if we just go along, we'll get along.

Your greatest challenge may be to break through the intellectual shackles familiar language can place around your minds. Noble Laureate Awardee Toni Morrison speaks of a state language that "...is ruthless in its policing duties, that actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, and suppresses human potential." Oppressive language, she goes on to say, "does more than represent violence, it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge-it discourages or inhibits (or, I would add - prohibits) the exchange of ideas."

You, the class of 2007, cannot afford to accommodate delusion as easily as we have done (I am reminded of Pat Tillman patriotic-heroic, symbolic of a generation.) You must move into a healing mode, transcend aggression, prevail over limitations, and develop the programs and connections that will improve the quality of life for those desperate even for a cool drink of clean water.

You have the tools - research the ways our unbelievable avant-gardist technology can be used to empower the powerless. Terrorists are made, not born, and despite all our spreading of hands, our allegations of innocence, we do, absolutely do know the answer to the question: “Why do they hate us?”

A terrorist is defined selectively: Seen through the lens of the assaulted country, he is obviously despicable, a villain, a murderer. Seen through the lens of the country to whom he feels an allegiance, he becomes a hero, or she/roe, striking for the liberation or protection of those he loves - and we are still talking about the awesome power of words, the manipulation of language, and your obvious responsibility for clarity, and for analysis if you are to make your way-enlightened, through the journey ahead.

More often than we are willing to acknowledge, even in May 2007, words become our virtual reality. They tell us what is, is not; and convince us that what is not, actually is. When we consider the awesome power of the language we use, our concern is rooted in the fact that we are a society that found it necessary to acknowledge the extraordinary level of deception that confronts us by incorporating words such as “double-speak” and “disinformation” into our lexicon - a society so accustomed to the use of hyperbole, unsupported derogation, insinuation, and random acts of naming where the allegation becomes the fact, in the reports we hear about ourselves and our neighbors, locally and globally, that we do not often challenge the veracity of what we hear and read. We merely incorporate it into the rest of what we think we know; and, with the diffidence that is the hallmark of much of our approach to life at this point in time, we accept as informed, insightful and timely, the words that both paint our canvass and then interpret the pictures for us.

Clearly you understand your responsibility to decode the language in order to introduce some level of clarity into the ways we view the world. Into the ways we live our lives. We might prefer honesty and integrity but we seem to require only an impressive, authoritative rendering. You must demand more, and with integrity provide more - aware that the ability to use words in ways that are powerful is an ability both we and the state exploit. If we feel we have a duty to police the world, should we feel a concomitant responsibility to empower the powerless in the countries we decide to police - and how do we select those countries of all the countries in the world? And what is our payback? You can think outside the box: do the research, do the analysis - this is only one of the problems that await your decisions in the world you are about to inherit.

How astute, how compassionate a 'decider' will you be? Will inhibiting language derail your efforts to 'do the right thing'? Do we apply our power initiatives equitably across the world's stage? How do we define genocide and when do we decide to intervene - if we decide to intervene - and what will be our payback? And is payback, the decider?

Words benefit us greatly when they are used to nurture the human spirit, to reverse those things that are negative, and, by so doing, change, in ways that are positive, the human condition. We are, largely, a society programmed to believe what we are told, and to disbelieve what we experience. Newscasters, reporters, lecturers, our television sets, police chiefs, social workers - whatever the list - are able to tell us things that assault our senses with deception and illogic.

Nevertheless, we reluctantly accept their information, agreeing with them that they probably know more about the issues, more about our concerns, and strangely, more about what we have in fact experienced, than we do. In other words, we concur with them that we do not see what we think we have seen, do not hear or understand what we think we have just heard, and are ill-equipped to support a logic that cuts through the delusion to the chase.

When we ask that our young be pulled out of harm's way and returned from the killing fields, we are rebuked with language designed to humiliate, words that cause us to question our patriotism and doubt our wisdom - words such as "surrender," "cut and run" - and although we know that is not where our hearts are, nor our minds, in the end, consumed with embarrassment, we silently drop our heads: All we wanted was our young back in our arms, not a triangular, folded flag, for we have yet to feel that integrity drives this conflict. Language again! Language can be a monster. Can turn your river from north to south.

On March 8, 1992, 15 years ago, the NY Times ran a lengthy article headlined "U.S. Strategy Plan Calls for Insuring No Rival Develops. A one super-power world: Pentagon's Document Outlines Ways to Thwart Challenges to Primacy of America." The article detailed aspects of a 48-page document not provided to Congress but "leaked" to the Times. It focused on a concept of "benevolent domination by one power" (the U.S.), and according to the Times "articulates the clearest rejection, to date, of collective internationalism," arguing that part of the American mission will be convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests..." What is significant is that the Times was never forced by the state to print a retraction of the article.

I believe that those of you who sit here, on one of the most momentous days of your lives, are not interested in world dominance...that you are interested in a more peaceful, humane, global society in which to live and eventually rear your children.

Vincent Harding argues that "the struggle is over the power to define." and we have been talking about language used as a political tool or weapon, a "definer," as a matter of fact, that largely drives the world you are about to inherit: A world in which you, the graduating class of

2007 now share moral ownership - for it is the awesome power of language that makes people and countries spin on their respective toes.

Where do we go from here?

One: You are going to decode the society's language. Baldwin says: "Drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides."

Two: You've either decided or you are trying to decide 'where in the world' you want to be. It it's about money - expand your vision: 22% of America's wealth is controlled by 1% of its people. Will you be one of those who has not lost your song, whose dream of helping to make a better world will be very much alive, one who gives back in ways that are maximally significant?

Three: Frantz Fanon, an Algerian psychiatrist, said: "The difference between the knight and the serf is that the knight calls down power on himself." Be a knight. And as you work toward your own evolution, analyze America's social and political moves to see - in the words of an old African American spiritual- "to see what the end will be."

We are all history-makers, some of us accidentally, some of us intentionally. Determine what skills, background and constituency you will need to so position yourself within the systems of power, that as a catalyst for positive change, you can, in ways that are meaningful, affect policies and influence the course of events. That's all Rice, Cheney and Rumsfeld have done.

Four: and finally-if you are passionate about social issues such as fair trade and 'china blue,' (Ethiopian women sort coffee beans for \$0.50 a day, and Asian teens work sweatshop hours and wages to produce jeans for Americans). Maybe you're concerned about homelessness in America - there seem to be no concrete figures - the Council of Mayors estimates 750,000 -

and we know there must be no less than several million... what is more tragic, however, is that the latest available figures tell us that 33% of them are veterans.

Or, maybe your concern is with the children, not just with those physically abandoned, but those itinerate and victimized in their own homes; those who live on the streets; or, dangerously, underground - then devise the systems or volunteer and work with others already active in those arenas. For the children are everywhere; they are the building blocks we need to concretize our vision of a "better world."

These are only some of the nuts and bolts of what must be done - what is waiting when you leave this space. If you are serious about your vision - you have the skills...you have the creativity...you have the brilliance....you have the intentionality - make it happen!!

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