

“The Gifts of the College”

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Colorado College Commencement Address

Monday, May 18, 2015

President Tiefenthaler, members of the Board of Trustees, members of the faculty and staff, parents and family members of graduating seniors, and — above all others today — members of this great class of 2015, thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I’m honored and excited to be with you.

I’m excited because I missed my own Commencement. I finished my course work mid-year, and when spring arrived I was far away, in France, learning the language and studying philosophy.

Some of us who graduated in the late 1960s and early ’70s were dismissive of ritual and ceremony. Hard work and accomplishment should be their own rewards, we thought; formal celebration and high symbolism shouldn’t matter. Our dismissiveness had the added benefit of tweaking our parents and grandparents, which was practically a sanctioned sport with us.

But we were wrong. Ritual and ceremony do matter. And as the years have gone by, I’ve regretted missing my own chance to sit where you are sitting. So today is a kind of reprieve for me. I hope you won’t mind if I consider this ceremony a substitute for the one I missed and consider you my classmates. My mother will also be grateful for your generosity.

Thinking about today and about all of you has taken me back in other ways as well. I arrived here as a freshman in the fall of 1965, exactly 50 years ago next September. You can’t imagine how painful it is to say that. I know that my pain is shared by friends in the audience. We’re all just glad that Pikes Peak is still here and is older than we are.

I was 18 in 1965, and I was pretty sure of myself, at least on the surface. But I soon learned, as I’m sure you did too, that college involves a level of commitment very different from what’s expected in high school. I stumbled along for an entire year, barely getting by, missing lots of classes, and feeling lost. By the end of that year, I realized what some people here knew well before I did; I just wasn’t ready.

And so in the early summer of 1966 I enlisted in the Army. It was not the most obvious or logical thing to do. But like many young men and women at loose ends, I sensed that military service would help me grow up. I wasn’t wrong about that, but my timing was terrible. The war in Vietnam escalated substantially that year, and eventually, more than two and a half million American soldiers served there — including me.

After spending two years at various posts in the United States, I went to Vietnam in May of 1968. The capital city of the south, then called Saigon, was still reverberating from the shock of the Tet offensive several months before, and on the bus ride from the airbase to the city I heard gunfire.

It was a bracing beginning to a long and difficult year that changed me greatly, in good ways and in bad. The most positive change was that I moved beyond thinking mostly about myself and became intensely curious about what I was seeing around me. The sights and experiences of war made me angry and confused, but they also made me wonder, in the very broadest sense, what was behind it all. What was it about humans, our natures, our thinking, and our histories, that allowed us to go to war — or to love one another, or to make art and music, or to nurture a family? My service was, in a terrible way that I would not wish on anyone, a “gap year” that focused my attention on the future and gave me an appetite for study. When it was up, no one doubted that I was ready for college.

I was very lucky that there was a college ready for me — this one. I didn’t think much about why the college wanted me back. I know now that it was an expression of the basic nature of this place, where caring about the well-being of students is the foundation for everything else. I trust it’s not too late to say I’m enormously grateful to those who decided that I was worth the risk.

I had a wonderful experience here the second time around. I made new friends. We stayed up late into the night talking about philosophy, reading poetry, and listening to music. We demonstrated against the war on this very spot. And we imagined, like so many others in that time, that the world was starting over and that a new one would emerge, better and more just.

At the epicenter of this wonderful second chance were the faculty who gave me their time and attention. In their presence, I started to know myself and what I wanted to do. Their names would probably not be familiar to you, but others have taken their places and they have given you what was given to me: serious, steady and challenging attention and compelling examples of what serious intellectual life and commitment look like. I haven’t forgotten that, and neither will you. Of the many things you remember from these years, your relationships with faculty members will be among the most important.

Another thing you will recall, surely more obvious on this particular day, is your friendships. The sweet and sad sensation of Commencement is due in part to the fact that you’re about to scatter to different places and experiences, leaving behind the people with whom you’ve shared these years and this rare form of community. As masterful as you are with social media and other ways of staying connected over long distances, I’m sure you already know that nothing can replace close proximity.

Here’s some more good news: the really important friendships you’ve made here will endure and grow. Fifty years from now you’ll realize — as I do today, in the company of friends from those years — that some of your deepest and most meaningful relationships include the people you met here at the college.

Surrounding and informing these relationships is the remarkably rich liberal arts education that you received here; and that, too, is a wonderful gift.

I want to be especially clear about this. In your years here, you have experienced the best form of education ever invented. Nothing else comes close. You — and I — are the truly lucky ones.

This is especially important to remember just now, when skepticism about the value of the liberal arts is in the air. That skepticism arises from several sources — from our inclination to think in terms of short-term rewards, from the understandable anxieties connected to the long economic recession, and from our cultural inclination to value technical and instrumental knowledge over other ways of knowing the world.

Here's the irony: in the long run, and in the wide expanse of your professional and personal lives, the liberal arts education you've received here is the most useful, the most practical, of all.

Wherever you ended up in the college's curriculum, each one of you has experienced forms of intellectual empowerment that will serve you in any and every kind of work you end up doing in your lives after college.

You will be empowered for the rest of your lives by the intellectual capacities that you've developed here — your ability to write and to speak with clarity, conviction, and power; your ability to think about and through complex problems and issues — to analyze, criticize, synthesize, integrate; and your ability to exercise your imaginations and creative powers in many different directions.

This is not to say that your majors and areas of concentration are unimportant. Some of you will move very quickly into specific forms of work or professional education that are linked directly to what you studied. But for most of you, things won't be nearly so linear. And in the multiple posts you are likely to occupy in your professional lives, your ability to communicate with power and conviction, to think clearly and deeply about complex matters, and to exercise your imaginations will matter more — and more often — than you can now imagine.

While I'm certain that you've become better writers, better speakers, better listeners, and better thinkers during your time here, I'm equally sure that you know a great deal more about the world than you did when you arrived. What the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott said here in 1975 about a liberal arts education is still true: it's "an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure," he said, a conversation "in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves."

The modes of understanding the world and yourselves that you've encountered, both in the classroom and beyond it, almost certainly include healthy doses of history, the understanding of cultures and customs different from your own, acquaintance with the methods of science, and the creativity and insight embodied in works of literature and art. This, too, will give you enormous advantages as your working lives develop.

But, of course, professional careers will be only one focus of the rich lives ahead of you. I am interested in two additional dimensions in particular: your roles as citizens, and the terrain of your personal lives.

On the evening last month when protests turned to riots in some parts of Baltimore, I was just home from a day spent in the Martin Luther King Jr. archives in Atlanta. I watched the images on the TV news and thought about my conversation with historians there and with Lonnie King, who'd been a student leader of the early civil rights movement. What we shared, he and I — both products of the 1960s — was a sense of hope that things could change, because we had seen them change and we'd been

engaged in that change. But we also shared a sense of despair. Things do change. But still people are trapped in the same legacies and systems with which we have been grappling since before the United States was founded. So things also stay the same.

There is very little that divides our country more dramatically than the matter of race. But I am very sure that there can be no adequate understanding of our current situation without a better appreciation of the long and agonizing history of race relations in the United States, of our deep cultural assumptions and divisions, of the patterns of economic and social segregation and exclusion, and of the ways in which we actually live in and perceive the world. No one is better prepared to engage these things than you, graduates of a fine liberal arts college who have been trained to think about things from multiple perspectives, through the long lens of history, and with an appreciation of cultural and social difference.

You have learned, as well, to cope with the sometimes painful sense of ambiguity that such deep and divisive issues can cause. It is within the gray area, where minds are not frozen and where the struggle among points of view plays out, that the liberally educated thrive. Solutions to the most profound problems we face will come from minds like yours.

Our contemporary lives are full of such issues and questions. The challenges we face as a nation gather at the intersections of our history, our culture, our ideas and our values. We need the forms of understanding and knowledge embodied in the liberal arts — historical knowledge, cultural knowledge, emotional and psychological knowledge, scientific knowledge — because they illuminate the conditions of our lives and insert us more deeply into our own experience. Engaging our challenges in these ways won't make them disappear, but it will allow for a deeper understanding of who we are, how we got here, and how we might lead better lives. And that is why liberal learning is the best form of education for democracy and for democratic citizenship.

The same is true, and for very much the same reason, in our private lives. There, too, our experience is in some ways defined by how we respond to a set of familiar and persistent questions. What does it mean to be a good friend, a life partner, a wife, a husband, a parent? What are my obligations to others? What are my obligations to the planet? How am I doing as a person? Does my life have integrity? Do I have integrity?

I don't wake up thinking about these questions in quite the way I've posed them, and you won't either. But they're always lurking in our daily interactions with those with whom we live and work. They're as fully present in the headlines we read as they are in our internal monologues about what happened during the day and how we're doing in our lives. Sometimes we wish they would go away. But if my experience is any indication, so long as you're alive you will ask yourselves those questions.

I am sure that your intellectual journeys at the college have equipped you to deal with the moral questions and challenges of life. And the resources that you've been exposed to here — literary resources, the resources of art and history and science and philosophy — will always be there for you to return to when you need them. That is among the greatest gifts your teachers gave you — and you gave yourselves — in your time here at the college.

I hope you will indulge me in one last bit of time travel.

Several weeks ago, an alumnus from my era who is an accomplished photographer circulated some pictures he took during a demonstration here in the early spring of 1965, a week or so after the celebrated civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. As those who saw the film or studied the history will know, that march was disrupted by police violence, which shocked the country and prompted many protests, including the one here. I recognized several friends in the pictures that went around; at least one of them is here today.

As I looked at those images and the familiar faces, so concerned and yet so hopeful, I was reminded of both the profound worry and the optimism of those times. The worry was certainly warranted, but so was the optimism. In some important ways, the country is indeed a better place than it was in 1965 — more open and tolerant, certainly, and more just, too. And yet we've all been struck in recent months by the painful persistence of the issue that brought my classmates into the streets of Colorado Springs in 1965. And not just in places like Ferguson and Bedford Stuyvesant and Staten Island and Baltimore, but in Washington and Los Angeles and in Colorado Springs, too. Other things echo as well, including especially the fact that our country has been at war almost continuously for the last 25 years, depending on how one defines war.

As I look out at all of you, and as I think about those photographs and about my friends 50 years ago, I'm intensely aware of the fact that we are very near that moment when we will hand things off to you — the college, the country, the future. I don't intend to give you advice about how to engage the world we're leaving for you, but I do want to share one wish, several forms of hope, and one certainty.

I wish we had done a little better than we did and that the country you are about to inherit were less difficult. But I'm certain that what you've learned here has equipped you to be effective participants in things, should you have the interest and energy for it. I hope that you will. If you do, I hope that you will be more persistent and more patient than some of us were. And I hope that some meaningful number of you will want to engage in public service, including military service, where we desperately need people educated in the liberal arts.

There is one form of service that I can confidently say is obligatory for each and every one of you, and that is service to *alma mater*. That obligation stems from the fact that everything we see around us and everything that we did here was provided for us by others who went before. The buildings where we learned and played, the classrooms and labs where we studied, the scholarships that helped many of us attend — all of these things were gifts.

And now it's your turn to give. There are many ways to give back to the college that has nurtured you. You can volunteer in admissions or in alumni programs. As your working lives develop, you can help students here by giving them the benefit of your own experience. I expect that someday some of you will be called upon to serve as members of the Board of Trustees. And when the time is right and you're able, I hope and trust that you will also share your financial resources with those who follow.

Thank you for listening and for putting up with my time traveling. And best wishes to you in all of the places to which you now depart. You'll find lots of new family members waiting for you in those places,

alumni and alumnae of the college doing all kinds of interesting things. That is yet another enduring gift of the college. Don't hesitate to call on them, for I know they will want to meet you and to help you.

Congratulations, good luck to you, and thank you for giving me, at long last, the chance to graduate.