

# **NEO COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS**

**May 9, 2013**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

President Hale, Regent Burns, Members of the Platform Committee, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, family, friends and, most importantly, degree candidates, it is an honor and a privilege to have the opportunity to address you for just a few moments before we get to the main business of the day: the conferring of degrees, in recognition of your successful completion of years of hard work.

## **“COMMENCEMENT”**

Degree candidates, you've spent a lot of time, energy, and money to get to this event. You have fulfilled your degree requirements. Shortly, you will walk across this stage, receive your diploma, and move your tassel to the left. You will celebrate with your friends and family. And then you will go

your separate ways, and bring to a conclusion not just the day's festivities but this part of your life.

Yet we do not call this exercise "Conclusion." We call it "Commencement," and it is proper that we do so. For today marks not an ending, but rather a beginning.

It is the beginning of many exciting things. Perhaps you will continue your higher education. Maybe you are starting your career. Possibly you are still determining what you ought to do next. Regardless, today marks the start of your post-NEO life.

### **BREVITY & WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON**

The commencement speaker has three jobs: to speak well, to speak inspiringly, and, above all, to speak briefly. I will *try* to do the first two. I promise I will do the third. And that's because, as a history major and a lifelong student of history, I am reminded of the lesson of President William Henry Harrison's

## Inaugural Address.

Harrison, known as Old Tippecanoe, was a truly great American. He was an Army General, a Governor of Indiana, and a Congressman and a Senator from Ohio, and in 1840, won a landslide election to serve as President.

Inauguration Day 1841 in the District of Columbia was cold, wet and windy. Harrison, however, chose not to wear gloves, hat or overcoat. Desiring to spell out precisely what he planned to accomplish as President, he delivered what remains the longest Inaugural Address in the nation's history, a speech of 8,445 words that lasted almost two hours.

Well, he didn't get to fulfill his promises. Instead, he caught cold, it turned into pneumonia, and, only 30 days later, he was dead. So Old Tippecanoe has gone down in history as a dual presidential record holder – he gave the longest Inaugural Address and served the shortest Presidential term.

Needless to say, there is now a long-standing American tradition against delivering an overly wordy speech. I plan to stick with that tradition.

### **THE MORE THINGS CHANGE....**

The previous year's election was tough and partisan, the president winning more easily than anyone expected. The economy is sluggish, although fortunately for us, the Oklahoma economy is doing well. The country seems as divided as ever. We see that in Congress, with one chamber controlled by the Republicans, the other run by the Democrats. The federal deficit is growing, with no end in sight. Even air traffic controllers face an uncertain future.

Climate change is a hotly debated topic. So too are our national energy policy, trade deficits, and apparently out of control federal spending.

Insofar as foreign affairs are concerned, we continue to be

strong, yet are constantly under attack. China, an emerging world power, remains an enigma. Recent revolutionary changes in the Middle East have resulted in a significantly more hostile reception in that vital part of the world.

Does all this sound familiar? It should. For what I have just described is not *merely* the world of May, 2013. It also describes the world as it existed the day I received the last of my diplomas. That was 32 years ago, in May, 1981.

The good news is that, in this country, we have much to look forward to. To be sure, our country faces difficult challenges. But, despite our difficulties, no matter how gloomily the doomsayers preach, those of us who are blessed to live in this great state, in this great nation, always have much to be thankful for, much to make us optimistic about our future.

### **TIME TESTED TRUTHS**

So, as someone who started his professional career facing

at least somewhat similar circumstances, what advice can I offer? Is there anything I've learned over the last several decades that you might consider applying to your lives? Are there time tested truths?

I believe there are. In fact, there are probably too many to tell in the few brief moments I have here. Given that my time is already almost half over, I will limit my comments to three things. And these are the same three things I would tell my own daughter, Susan Lester, who, just a few days ago, received her degree from Oklahoma State University.

### **SEIZE THE DAY**

1. *Carpe Diem* – Seize the day. And seize it with enthusiasm.

You are at the starting line. But you have a big advantage. You have an NEO degree. So now it is up to you.

What will you do with your degree? Where do you go from

here? How will you get there?

I don't know the answers to those questions. They differ for each person. But I do know this. Education is the key. And, whether or not you continue your formal education after today, you have not reached the conclusion of your education. Instead, you are at the beginning – the “commencement,” if you will.

Although I can't tell you what your goals should be, I can tell you this. You should love what you do, and do what you love. Let me repeat that: Love what you do, do what you love.

If you love what you do, and do what you love, you will find you are always fulfilled. If you love what you do, and do what you love, you will seek to excel. If you love what you do, and do what you love, work will be not a burden, but a joy. If you love what you do, and do what you love, you will give it your all, and find even the rough times are easier to overcome.

Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, said, “We are

what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” You have it in your power, right now, to excel. Aim high. Play to win. Give it your all. Do your best.

The flip side of the same coin is this: Do not fear failure. Do not fear failure. Some set the bar low because they fear failure. Don’t be that person. The one who is driven by a fear of failure is doomed to a life of mediocrity, or worse. Fear of failure paralyzes. It says, “I won’t try to do thus-and-so, because it might not happen, and I will fail.” Now, if you think about it, that’s silly. If you don’t try it, it is certain it won’t happen, thus dooming the endeavor to failure.

Be like the sage of old, who was able to say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” I don’t know what success means to you, but whatever it is, go for it. Put your all into it. Run the good race. Fight the good fight. Keep the faith.

2. Whenever you have a choice, do what is right. Do what is right.

Doing what is right is hard. You will face plenty of temptations to do what is wrong, to do things the wrong way. We live in a fallen world, and for reasons I can't fully explain, we humans have a tendency to err, to go astray.

You will be tempted in many ways. The temptation may be to cut corners, to cheat, to mislead, to deceive. It may be to put down others as a means of getting ahead. Peer pressure? It never goes away.

We all know how to do things the right way. Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not covet. Or, to put it positively, "in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."

Resist temptation. Flee from it. And when you find that you have erred – and you will (we all do) – don't sweep it under the carpet. Own up to it. Correct it. You will be amazed how far

honesty and integrity go.

Years from now, when you are looking back on your life, it will not be enough to repeat the Frank Sinatra lyrics, “I did it my way.” That satisfies sort of like drinking an old cup of coffee. You get a jolt, but the taste is awful. The words that bring real, complete satisfaction are not, “I did it my way,” but rather, “I did it the right way.”

3. In your relations with others, be humble. Listen. Give. Teach.

OK, I’ll just say it. You are smart. I *know* that. The fact that you are here says that. You’ve worked hard. You’ve persevered. You’ve gained knowledge others covet. You have abilities others do not have.

But, although you are smart, you are not so smart that you cannot learn from others. And I don’t just mean that you can learn only from those who either have more experience in your

chosen field than you have, or from those who know something wholly different from you. You can learn important things from virtually anybody, if you are willing to listen and to learn.

Have you ever debated with a friend or colleague who disagrees with you? Of course, in those situations, you are trying to persuade the other person of the correctness of your position. But consider this possibility – the person you are debating may be saying something to which you should pay attention. Maybe, just maybe, that person knows something you don't know.

Be humble. You know a lot. But you don't know it all. Socrates is reputed to have said, "True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand." Be humble enough to be wise; be wise enough to be humble.

You've heard the adage, no person is an island unto himself or herself. Well, it's true. Yes, one person can make a difference, and that person can be you. Lincoln proved it.

Churchill proved it. Salk proved it. But even they needed to work with others. Lincoln needed soldiers and generals. Churchill needed his countrymen and the Americans. Salk needed fellow scientists. So, listen to others. Get along with others. Learn from others.

Likewise, teach others. This, too, requires humility. For great teachers do not simply impart knowledge. Great teachers give to others what others have given to them. Great teachers listen to others, learn from others, and pass on to others what they have learned.

## **CONCLUSION**

There is nothing you can't do. Aim high. Work hard. Be strong in doing what is right. And be humble, humble enough to listen to others, to respect others, to do for others what others have done for you. To whom much is given, much shall also be required. You have been given a lot. Be ready and willing to

return it to others.

Today is a great day. Congratulations on your success at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College. I wish you God speed in your future endeavors. And remember: “Once a Norseman, Always a Norseman!”