

OSU Commencement Address

May 4, 2013

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INTRODUCTION

President Hargis, Regent Watkins, Regent Davis, Chairman Glass, 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”

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.

But we don't call this exercise "Conclusion." We call it "Commencement," and we are right to 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 profession. Many of you are probably still determining where you go from here. Regardless, today marks the start of your post-college career.

BREVITY & OLD TIPPECANOE

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; and 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, had served as an American General, a Governor of Indiana, and a Congressman and a Senator from Ohio, and in 1840, ran what many consider the first modern presidential campaign, winning a landslide election to serve as President of the United States.

Inauguration Day 1841 in the District of Columbia was cold, wet and windy. But Harrison 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. Legend has it that Harrison soon caught cold, it turned into pneumonia, and, only 30 days later, the President had died. So Old Tippecanoe has gone down in history as a dual record holder as President – he gave the longest inaugural address and served the shortest presidential term.

Suffice it 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 a divided 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 seemingly out of control federal spending.

Insofar as foreign affairs are concerned, we continue to be

strong, yet remain constantly under attack. China, an emerging world power, is an enigma. Recent revolutionary changes in the Middle East have resulted in a significantly more hostile reception in that important 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 on 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 negatively 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 about 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, as a member of the Oklahoma State University Class of 2013, is also graduating today.

SEIZE THE DAY

1. *Carpe Diem* – Seize the day. Seize the day enthusiastically.

You've heard this advice before. Let me put it into the context of commencement. You are at the starting line. But you have a big advantage. You have a college degree. Your degree is

from Oklahoma State University, an excellent institution of higher education that has produced more than its fair share of highly successful individuals. With your background – including having a degree from OSU – the sky's the limit. So now it is up to you.

What are your goals? Where do you want to go? How will you get there? I don't know the answers to those questions. It's possible you aren't certain yourself. But now is a great time to take stock of yourself, to set goals, and to start going after them.

Although I can't tell you what your goals should be, I can tell you this. 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 not be a burden; work will be 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.

When you set your goals, aim high. You can achieve whatever you want. That is what your formal education at Oklahoma State University has provided you – the ability to determine where you want to go and the means to get there. Go for it. Go for the gold.

Aristotle 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. 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 to do 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.

DO RIGHT

2. Do what is right. Do what is right.

This 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, 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 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.”

BE HUMBLE

3. Be humble. Give to others. Listen to others. Teach

others.

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 – yes, there is a “but” – but 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 willing 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.

Similarly, be willing to 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.

IN CLOSING...

There is nothing you can't do. Aim high. Work hard. Be strong in doing what is right. And be 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. You have the world by a string. As chairman of the Board of Regents, I have to tell you how proud we are of what you have accomplished thus far. Those of us involved in higher education do what we do because of you, because of commencement and what it represents. We are thrilled at your success at Oklahoma State University and look forward to your future successes as well.

Congratulations. And, “Go Pokes!”