

**Text of the Commencement address delivered Sunday, June 16, 1991,  
at Stanford's 100<sup>th</sup> Commencement Ceremony  
by John W. Gardner, the Haas Professor of Public Service**

I am honored to have been given this opportunity, an honor too to be sharing the platform with you, Don, at this centennial commencement.

As many of you know, I returned to the university two years ago after 50 years in the East. Of course I had to go through the inevitable period of missing Washington. That took a couple of days.

There can't be many in this audience who were alive 100 years ago when the first commencement occurred. But I do know of one alert and vital woman who meets that description and is here today. She supplied you with your commencement speaker and she put me through Stanford, so I want to acknowledge the presence of my 100-year-old mother.

We are here to honor this year's recipients of degrees, but since it is the centennial commencement we are also celebrating an act of faith and vision on the part of Leland and Jane Stanford. I consider myself fairly inured to the pain and tragedy of this life, but I've always thought that the loss of a child is the one event that would leave me completely shattered. For the Stanfords to fashion out of their grief a vibrant, living memorial is a tribute to their spirit. And when I think about Leland and Jane Stanford, that's what I think about.

Wallace Stegner, in his remarks on Founders' Day, dealt brilliantly with the historical background of this centennial occasion. I want to talk about you who are receiving degrees today - you and your lives ahead.

Let's begin by assessing your present situation. I don't agree with David Starr Jordan that you are children. You are now, for better or worse, adults.

At puberty you were made self-conscious by the apparent attention of others. Now you are old enough to know that most people aren't studying you critically; they are thinking about themselves.

Up to this point your jury in most matters has been packed by your elders. Now you must be willing to be judged by your peers - if you think you have any.

At age 16 you were old enough to doubt. Now you're old enough to believe again and to bring doubt and belief into some kind of productive balance.

In your mid-teens you became old enough so that your parents could stop punishing you. Now you're old enough to stop punishing your parents.

I once wrote a book called Self-Renewal that dealt with the decay and renewal of societies, organizations and individuals. I explored the question of why civilizations die and how they sometimes renew themselves, and the puzzle of why some men and women go to seed while others remain vital all their lives. And it is the latter question that concerns me today.

In the years ahead you will find that some of your contemporaries, even ones in fortunate circumstances with responsible positions, seem to run out of steam earlier than need be.

One must be compassionate in assessing the reasons. Perhaps life just presented them with tougher problems than they could solve. It happens. Perhaps something inflicted a major wound on their confidence or their self-esteem. Perhaps they were pulled down by the hidden resentments and grievances that grow in adult life.

I'm not talking about people who fail to get to the top in achievement. We can't all get to the top, and that isn't the point of life anyway. I'm talking about people who have stopped learning or

growing or trying. And I don't deride that. Just to keep on keeping on is sometimes an act of courage. But I do worry about men and women functioning far below the level of their possibilities. It need not happen.

As you settle into your adult lives, you cannot write off the danger of complacency, boredom, growing rigidity, imprisonment by your own comfortable habits and opinions. A famous French writer once said, "There are people whose clocks stop at a certain point in their lives." I could without any trouble name a half dozen national figures resident in Washington, D.C., whom you would recognize, and I could tell you roughly the year their clock stopped.

If you are conscious of the danger of going to seed, you can resort to countervailing measures. At any age. You can keep your zest until the day you die. If I may offer you a simple maxim, "Be interested." Everyone wants to be interesting, but the vitalizing thing is to be interested. Keep your curiosity, your sense of wonder. Discover new things. Care. Risk. Reach out.

Learn all your life. Learn from your failures, from your successes. I know that some of you are a little frightened - more than a little - of what's ahead. You know a lot - perhaps too much - about the ways in which lives get messed up. Bright illusions aren't your problem. But someone said, "Life is an error-making and error-correcting process." When you hit a spell of trouble, ask yourself, "What is it trying to teach me?" Sometimes it's confusing but Irene Peter pointed out that today if you're not confused, you're not thinking clearly.

We learn from our jobs, from our friends and families. We learn by accepting the commitments of life, by playing the roles that life hands us (not necessarily the roles we would have chosen). We learn by taking risks, by suffering, by enjoying, by loving, by bearing life's indignities with dignity.

The lessons of maturity aren't simple things such as acquiring information and skills. You learn not to engage in self-destructive behavior, not to burn up energy in anxiety. You learn to manage your tensions, if you have any, which you do. You find that self-pity and resentment are among the most toxic of drugs. You conclude that the world loves talent but pays off on character.

You discover that no matter how hard you try to please, some people in this world are not going to love you, a lesson that is at first troubling, and then really quite relaxing.

You learn to live along the way. You don't let the nagging pressures of life smother moments of beauty that can never be recaptured. Careless people treat unique moments as throwaways and live to regret it.

Those are hard lessons to learn early in life. As a rule you have to have picked up some mileage and some dents in your fenders before you understand. As Norman Douglas said: "There are some things you can't learn from others. You have to pass through the fire."

You bear with the things you can't change. You come to terms with yourself. As Jim Whitaker, who climbed Mount Everest, said: "You never conquer the mountain. You only conquer yourself." You master the arts of mutual dependence, meeting the needs of loved ones and letting yourself need them. You can even be unaffected - a quality that often takes years to acquire. You can achieve the simplicity that lies beyond sophistication.

I suppose every man and woman with the capacity to face reality - which eliminates most of us at once, including your speaker no doubt - recognizes that humans want meaning in their lives.

Robert Louis Stevenson said, "Old or young, we're on our last cruise." We want it to mean something.

In the stable periods of history, meaning was supplied in the context of a coherent community and traditionally prescribed patterns of culture. On being born into the society you were heir to a

whole warehouse full of meanings. Today you can't count on any such heritage. People run around searching for identity, but it isn't handed out free any more - not in this transient, rootless, pluralistic society. Your identity is what you've committed yourself to. If you make no commitments, you're an unfinished person. Freedom and obligation, liberty and duty, that's the deal. It's a popular view today that the important thing is to find out who you really are, to liberate the "real you." But self-knowledge isn't enough. You build meaning into your life through your commitments - whether to your religion, to your conception of an ethical order, to your loved ones, to your life work, to your community.

Gandhi said, "Almost anything you do might be insignificant, but it may be very important that you do it." What he was saying, I think, is that you can't know the end of your efforts but you have to make an offering.

The aim is that you not suffer the contemporary fate of rootlessness and hollowness and faithlessness, that you not succumb to the ailment of the age, the tyranny of the imperious, imprisoning self.

The commitments that people make to values beyond the self are manifested in various ways - in their family and community life, in the way they treat any and all humans, in the goals and standards they set for themselves. There are men and women who make the world better just by being the kind of people they are. They have the gift of kindness or courage or loyalty or integrity. It really matters very little whether they are behind the wheel of a truck, or running a business, or bringing up a family. They teach the truth by living it.

One reason for the decline in the observance of ethical values is that the soil in which such values are rooted - the family and community - is being blown away in the dust storm of contemporary life. Families fall apart. People lose connection. More and more rootless people drift through life without a sense of belonging or allegiance to anything. Rebuilding community is one of the challenging tasks ahead.

But in the contemporary world, a community of any size has within it diverse subcommunities. So the problem - whether in the Stanford student body or in contemporary Europe - is to achieve wholeness incorporating diversity.

The goal is not to achieve wholeness by suppressing diversity, nor to make wholeness impossible by enthroning diversity, but to preserve both. Each element in the diversity must be respected, but each element must ask itself sincerely what it can contribute to the whole. I don't think it is venturing beyond the truth to say that "wholeness incorporating diversity" defines the transcendent task for our generation.

Today our communities need us, desperately - need our loyalty, our understanding, our support. Thanks to Don Kennedy's leadership, Stanford students are among the most active in the nation in service to the community beyond the campus.

But Stanford itself is a distinctive community which also needs our attention. Curiously, as you leave it, Stanford as a community will become in some dimensions more real to you. You will move into a larger Stanford community - dispersed throughout the world, sharing relatively few common activities, composed of many generations and yet bound together by a common allegiance. The physical beauty of the campus creates a sense of place that never leaves one. Deeper is the intellectual experience, intangible but powerful. And deeper still the personal bonds. Fifty years from now you will rediscover, away back in the cluttered attic of your memory, acts of friendship exchanged long ago, remembered with tears.

As many of you know, I count it as one of the marks of maturity that men and women nurture the institutions that nurtured them, not uncritically but lovingly, not to preserve them unchanged but to renew them as the times require.

Leland and Jane Stanford dreamed a remarkable dream. And what they created not only served the future - it helped to shape that future. We ourselves are moving toward a future we can only dimly discern. To pretend otherwise would be fatuous. Great currents are sweeping us along. Yet we must begin now to gather the knowledge, formulate the concepts and design the institutions that will enable us to survive that future, and perhaps with luck have some part in shaping it. In those tasks, no instruments will be more helpful than the research universities. And Stanford stands in the front rank. We must strengthen it, protect it, improve it, renew it and help it to move to new levels of greatness.

But I began this speech talking about you and your futures, and I want to return to that theme as I conclude.

One of the enemies of sound, lifelong motivation is a rather childish conception we have of the kind of concrete, describable goal toward which all of our efforts drive us. We want to believe that there is a point at which we can feel that we have arrived. We want a scoring system that tells us when we've piled up enough points to count ourselves successful.

So you scramble and sweat and climb to reach what you thought was the goal. And when you get there, you stand up and look around and chances are you feel a little empty. Maybe more than a little empty.

You wonder whether you climbed the wrong mountain.

But the metaphor is all wrong. Life isn't a mountain that has a summit. Nor is it - as some suppose - a riddle that has an answer. Nor a game that has a final score.

Life is an endless unfolding and -- if we wish it to be -- an endless process of self-discovery, an endless and unpredictable dialogue between our own potentialities and the life situations in which we find ourselves. By potentialities I mean not just intellectual gifts but the full range of one's capacities for learning, sensing, wondering, understanding, loving and aspiring.

Perhaps you think that by age 35 or 45 or even 55 you will have explored those potentialities pretty fully. Don't deceive yourself! The capacities you actually develop to the full come out as the result of an interplay between you and life's challenges - and the challenges keep coming. And the challenges keep changing.

We are just beginning to recognize how even those who have had every advantage and opportunity unconsciously put a ceiling on their own growth, underestimate their potentialities or hide from the risk that growth involves. It is my hope that you will keep on growing, and that you will be the cause of growth in others.

Let me conclude by saying as plainly as I can that this nation is facing a test of character, all the more profound for being diffuse, all the more difficult for not being precipitated by enemy attack. The test is whether in all the confusion and clash of interest, all the distracting conflicts and cross purposes, all the temptations to self-indulgence and self-exoneration, we have the strength of purpose, the guts, the conviction, the spiritual staying power to build a future worthy of our past. You can help.