

Essays

Keeping Our Eyes on the Horizon Line

by

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This is a day when we celebrate the attainment of a milestone by a group of determined women and men who will within moments receive their degrees from Cambridge College. After working so hard for so long, balancing the demands of family and classroom, library and jobs, sleep and study, deadlines and the need for free time, the women and men who graduate here today deserve great credit. They have earned our respect and admiration through their demonstrated commitment to excellence, hard work and self-discipline. Graduates, you should feel a great sense of pride welling up inside at having completed a rigorous course of study. Congratulations to each and every one of you and all who have helped you thus far along the way!

In preparing these brief remarks, I began by thinking about all of the commencement addresses that I have heard and trying to remember what was said. I am humble as your speaker here today because, truth told, I couldn't really remember much about the commencement speeches given even by people at my own graduation ceremonies. Consistent with age, I did remember two things though. First, I remember that when I was in the sixth grade, our principal at graduation recited a poem about Christopher Columbus, which included these lines:

Behind him lay the gray Azores
Behind the gates of Hercules
Before him not the ghost of shores
Before him only shoreless seas.

The good mate said, "Now must we pray
For lo the very stars are gone.
What shall we say, brave captain, say
If we sight naught but seas at dawn?"

"Why you shall say at break of day
Sail on, sail on, sail on and on."

This was a simple sentiment, but it was meant to convey that we must look forward to our unknown and uncharted futures with hope and overcome fears of the challenges we will meet along the way. That message I remember, and I hope that you will, too.

The other graduation speech that I remember was by a speaker who said with great emphasis and enthusiasm that her brother always polished his shoes every night before he went to bed. I suppose this stuck in my mind because it seemed so odd. But what the speaker was really saying is that one must always prepare for life's challenges and develop sturdy habits of mind and practice. Of course, I don't polish my shoes before I go to bed, but I do try to work each day to a high standard of excellence, my own personal best. I know that you will, too. As the old Aesop's fable teaches us: "Methodical and steady wins the race." I am sure that you will remember this message, if not the speaker, since developing your minds and talents was the reason why you went to Cambridge College in the first place.

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Dr. C. Eric Lincoln, a scholar, activist and dear friend, in his book, *Coming Through the Fire*, wrote these words:

The times we live in certainly require more than a casual approach to the business of thinking straight. Our problems are massive, and we live with perpetual anxiety; but our possibilities are as viable as our efforts to realize them. Neither the catharsis of overkill nor the narcosis of avoidance can ever be an effective substitute for thinking things through. Indeed, the senseless bang and the graceless whimper are alike demeaning in a society so generously endowed to excel. *We can think. We can reason. We can be better than we are.*

We can be better than we are. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the great animating spirits of history, has reminded us that progress in human affairs is neither promised nor automatic. It flows from effort and from leadership.

Teachers have a special mission and leadership role to play. You will help to shape the consciousness, values and sense of self of others. You are the living bridge between past, present and future. You can inspire others to become bigger than themselves. This is an awesome opportunity and responsibility.

You are graduating from Cambridge College at a high point of uncertainty, conflict and desperation in our nation and the world around us. Global terrorism is a reality. Economic inequality is growing in our nation. Demographic changes are transforming our communities, schools and workplace. Students of diverse stripes bring many unmet needs to our doorsteps. A seemingly endless debate about high standards, accountability, testing, school reform and finance, and professional development fills our days, unmatched by promises of resources adequate to do all that is required or desired. Our nation is on the edge of war,

and no one of us knows what lies ahead. The challenges that we face are many and profound. In the midst of such uncertainty and dread, it is hard to keep one's sense of balance and perspective.

But if you don't succumb to the distractions and despair of the times, you can provide the leadership that is needed to help us all pass through this troubled time. If you remember that each of us has within the power to do good, to serve justice, to exemplify fairness in our lives and work, to exercise benign influence,

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and to model service to our brothers and sisters in our lives, you won't be thrown off balance. Look to the light inside of you—your intelligence, experience, values, learnings, and character—and you will not lose your way. You will light a way for others. You have each demonstrated that you have personal strength, courage and commitments. Never lose confidence in your own worth or capacity to help the world become a better place.

Look to the horizon line when you are confronted with people who would divide rather than unite us. Don't fill yourselves up with negative rather than positive energy. Keep your eyes and thoughts riveted on the things that matter in life. Think straight about the web of interdependence that binds all human beings together in interdependence. Most of us eat food that others have grown and brought to market. Few of us make the clothes on our back. I doubt that many of us could build a house or manufacture a car or even make paper from pulp or a pencil from wood. In short, human beings such as we are social animals. We are made to live for and with each other. Guide your students and their families with compassion, kind regard for their humanity, and high expectations. When you exemplify in your life and practice good character, good values and good straight thinking and sense, you will inspire others to rise above their circumstances. Isn't that what teaching is all about?

Look to the horizon line and live your life fully and with purpose. There is an old expression to the effect that if you don't know where you are going, you won't know when you get there. Think about what matters in life and act upon your convictions.

My Dad is a minister, and he says that in all of his years of counseling the sick or the dying, he has learned an important truth: Many people think that they are afraid to die, but what they really fear is that they have not lived. I wish for you full lives lived with zest and purpose. This is not a dress rehearsal; this is the real thing.

Look to the horizon line and realize that to be and remain effective, to live life to its fullest and to excel as professionals, one must commit oneself to lifelong learning. It may be hard to think about more learning on

graduation day! But if you don't continue vigorous pursuit of knowledge and skills development opportunities in this Information Age in which we live, you will stagnate and fail to achieve the full measure of your potential. You have developed minds, porous minds. If you remain open minded, adaptable, flexible and strategic in your work and your lives in community you can make a real difference and be a transformative force for good.

The horizon line, which is always before us, is our future. It embodies not what is but the promise of what can be. The Bible teaches us that "without vision, the people perish." You can't reach what you cannot see. You must help show your students and all others whose lives you will touch to develop a vision of what can be and the skills to make that vision a reality!

In conclusion, I want to share with you a few words written by Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa. Mr. Mandela spent 27 years of his life in prison, but he emerged whole, without bitterness, with clear vision and an abiding will to do good in the world. He used the long years of isolation, not to brood, but to learn, to reflect, and to think. He knew that we struggle against ignorance and cruelty and injustice and inequality not because we think we will win—although we always hope to win—but because we have no choice. We must work ceaselessly for the good because it is the only way of standing up for who we are and what we believe in. If we are not part of the solution, we really are part of the problem.

Mr. Mandela wrote:

...[T]o be free is not merely to cast off one's chains but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others....I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made mistakes along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.

Graduates of Cambridge College, walk toward the horizon line with pride, with inspiration, with purpose and with deep commitment to serving and leading. Your long walk has just begun. There are many who wait to learn from you. We all have great expectations for your good works in the years that lie ahead.
