# COMMENCEMENT 2014

*[This commencement address was originally published in 2005. We rerun it at college graduation time. Feel quite free to send this to any recent college graduate you may know.]*

Mr. Chancellor, Members of the Board of Regents, Members of the Faculty, Honored Graduates, Families and Friends:

It's funny that they call this ceremony a Commencement, for you've all reached the finish line: college, goodbye, we're outta here. Yet of course, "commencement" means a beginning, not an end.

But one is supposed to at least start - commence - a talk such as this by saying funny things. So I'll start by talking about Clark Gable movies. If you've heard of Clark Gable at all, you know he was the biggest movie star in Hollywood a long time ago. His most famous movie was *Gone With The Wind*.

He made a movie in 1955 called *The Tall Men* with Jane Russell as his girlfriend and Robert Ryan as the heavy. It's a pretty ordinary Western flick with outlaws and cowboys and Indians - and at the end, Ryan, the bad guy, and his henchmen get the drop on Gable, the good guy, and all seems lost.

Suddenly, surprise, Gable outfoxes Ryan and triumphs. Gable makes his exit, and after he does, Ryan delivers a line that I want you to never forget.

Serendipity is funny, a very funny thing, finding something where you least expect it. Out of the blue, out of a movie awash with pedestrian dialogue, comes a line so profound it detonates inside your brain. Ryan turns to his men and says:

*"There goes the only man I ever respected. He's what every boy dreams he'll grow up to be - and wishes he had been when he's an old man."*

Tell me - do you think that's funny? I'll tell you - hearing those words will make so many old men - and old women - cry.

We get only one shot at life. You grow up with dreams and ideals but the older you get the more they slip through your fingers, and then you're old -- it seems just the day before yesterday when you were young -- and you realize that soon it will be over, over *forever*, and you look in the mirror and you think about the man or woman you once dreamed you would be and you hear those words in some Clark Gable western movie and... you cry.

You cry because it's too late and there is not one damned thing you can do about it.

But that's not *you*. You are not an old man or an old woman with old dreams that are now a reproach. You are commencing your life, not finishing it, and you have that chance, that opportunity that Heraclitus of Ephesus pointed out two thousand six hundred years ago:

*Character is destiny*.

Character is destiny. You, me, all of us, we human beings are not automatically provided with meaning and significance for our lives. We have to provide it ourselves, generate it for ourselves out of our individual character and soul.

This is what makes us different from other animals with whom we have emerged from evolutionary history. No lion, sitting underneath an acacia tree in the Serengeti, asks himself, "What does it mean to be a lion? What is the purpose of my leonine existence?"

A lion has no choice but to unselfconsciously follow his genetic program. But human beings have to *figure out* how and why to survive, they have to *choose a rationale* that gives purpose and meaning for their lives.

Our character is a matter of choice, *our* choice. The great gift of Providence to each of us is that our souls are self-made. Our destinies are what we choose them to be, because our characters are what we make of them. Character is destiny.

This does not, most assuredly not, mean that you can be anything you want. Most all of you cannot be Olympic athletes or concert pianists or Nobel Laureates.

*But all of you, everyone of you, can create a character of honor and integrity and lead a life of moral dignity, so that when you look into that mirror so many years from now you will not feel ashamed, you will not wonder how you lost your soul, for you will have always had it.*

Yet - you cannot do this, you cannot keep your honor and integrity and human dignity if you allow your soul to be dissolved in the acid of cynical relativism.

You know what I mean: the smart-ass cynicism that says we don't know anything for sure, there are no absolutes, who are you to say, what's true for you isn't for me. This is *idiocy*, and if any of you indulged in it in your years here, well, it's good that you got it out of your system, because it's time to commence with growing up and being an adult.

And if any of your professors ever taught you this idiocy, it's time they grew up and started being adults as well.

The idiocy, the absolute stupidity of claiming there are no absolutes, is apparent every time you have to go to the bathroom. When you gotta go, you gotta go, and that's the end of it. It's an

absolute and no wishing it away will do the slightest good.

What I wish is that you all could have had my professor who was my mentor in philosophy back at the University of Southern California, John Hospers. He had a cartoon framed and hung on the door to his office.

It was of a father changing a flat tire in the rain in the middle of nowhere, with his wife and kids in the car. One of the kids is yelling at him, and the caption is the father replying: "Son, you've got to understand. This is reality. We can't change the channel."

I asked Professor Hospers what was the greatest amount of wisdom in the shortest number of words. Without hesitation, he responded with seven words of the English Elizabethan, Sir Francis Bacon:

*Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed*.

Relativists hate this. They want their whims to command reality. They hate this rock-bottom truth:

*That the only way to get what you want out of life is to understand, understand all the way to your marrow, that things are what they are, that they exist regardless of your feelings or perceptions, that what is possible for them depends on what they are and not your wishes - so to get what you want out of them or change them, you must pay attention to what they are in the first place.*

Reality, you see, doesn't care. Reality isn't conscious. Clouds, mountains, oceans, the Earth, Mars, the Solar System, the Milky Way Galaxy, all are not conscious.

We are aware of them - they aren't aware of us. They just are. Reality just is. And thus it has no intrinsic value.

Let that sink in. *Reality has no intrinsic value*. Nothing can be good or bad for a rock or a cloud or a mountain or a planet or a galaxy. It is we, conscious living human beings, that give the world its value, not the other way around.

As the poet Kahil Gibran observed:

*We see beauty and magic in the world. But the truth is that the beauty and magic are inside ourselves*.

The universe is almost 14 billion years old. Our Earth is over 4 billion years old. It will continue to exist for several billion years more, the universe many more billions after that.

In all those eons, you and every one of us, have been granted this infinitesimally short instant, this

femtosecond of time, to exist. But that tiny instant is the one that *counts* - counts for *you*. All the vast oceans of time before you and after you don't matter. What matters is the single little drop that's yours.

For in all those billions of years that have been and will be, there never has been or will ever be another you. No one, of all the billions of human beings who have ever lived or ever will live, ever had or will have a life the exact duplicate of yours.

Never and ever. You are absolutely unique. And you have the absolute opportunity to create within yourself a soul of beauty and magic, of honor and integrity, of benevolence and dignity.

Don't blow it. Don't screw it up, lose your chance, the one single chance you've got in the history of the universe. Only you can give your life purpose and meaning. Only you can make sense of your life. That's the great dilemma, the great challenge, the great glory, the great privilege of being human.

It is such a privilege, such an honor to be a human being. And it is such a responsibility. Don't reject that privilege, don't deny that responsibility. Feel instead the thrill of being human, the pride of being a member of the human race.

I love being human. I want you all to be able to say that to yourselves with the deepest conviction: "I love being human."

Look to the person next you, feel his or her humanity, and tell yourself, "I am proud to be a member of the human race." Such pride will make you invulnerable to the worst mind-poison ever to infect human society: *Envy*.

If I could give you only two words of advice for the rest of your life, they would be:

*Reject envy*.

The wisest of the Ten Commandments, the 10$^{th}$, tells you to not be envious: "Thou shall not covet." There should be its corollary: "Thou shall not fear those who covet, those who envy you."

It is not easy to do, for you will be surrounded by envious guilt-peddlers all of your lives, insisting you apologize for your existence, the existence of your country, the existence of your civilization, the existence of your species, and for whatever accomplishments and success you personally achieve.

Dismiss all this envy and guilt-peddling as you would the ravings of a lunatic, for that is what they are. Embrace instead your humanity, your human existence and individual identity.

Your character is your destiny. It's the most wonderful thing on this earth to be a human being. Especially a young human being who can make of your life what you will. Do so.

Discuss this item on the forums. Click Here!