

**Commencement Address
Peace College
Raleigh, North Carolina
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By

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A pleasant aspect of my decade of legislative service was getting to know the splendid young people who served as interns and pages. One of those, a young Peace College student from western North Carolina, then known as Laura Carpenter, has remained my friend through over three decades since her internship with Senator Helen Rhyne Marvin. Now known as Laura Bingham, she is today presiding over the graduation of her last class as president of the college she was then attending. She would be the first to say that this occasion is about you, the graduates, not about her, the president, but it would be altogether inappropriate not to pause briefly to acknowledge the fact that she has chosen to graduate with this class and to give her a round of applause in appreciation for her splendid 12 years as the administrative leader of her alma mater.

Lincoln noted at Gettysburg that the world would little note nor long remember what he said there. History has, of course, proven him wrong; but he probably would have been right had the occasion been a college commencement. It is tempting to say “congratulations and good luck,” and no more.

But that would defy expectations. The expectation is that a commencement speaker will offer some cogent advice as you leave the

halls of academe and go out into the world, as though you had been living somewhere else until now.

I am reminded of the 6th-grader who, when asked to write an essay about Socrates, said, "Socrates was a good man. He went about Athens giving advice. They killed him." Perhaps it was the experience of Socrates that prompted Oscar Wilde to say, "It is always a silly thing to give advice, but to give good advice is absolutely fatal."

I hope to avoid being considered President Bingham's last big mistake at Peace, so at the slight risk of assassination, and the much greater risk of boring you and delaying the celebration of your accomplishments, let me attempt to meet the expectations of the occasion by offering a few thoughts for your consideration as you conclude the Peace College portion of your education.

The words I just spoke were quite intentionally chosen, for a college experience is not the end, but only the beginning, of an education. So my first bit of advice to you is that you should continue to learn. You are being rewarded today for your acquisition of knowledge, but you should continue to heed the admonition of Benjamin Franklin, who said, "If a man empties his purse into his head, no one can take his wealth from him." And you should be mindful of what President

Kennedy wrote in the address he was to deliver the day he was killed:
“Only an America which has fully educated its citizens is fully capable of tackling the complex problems and perceiving the hidden dangers of the world in which we live.”

Henry Adams once said, “They know enough who know how to learn.” Your presence here today is compelling evidence that you know how to learn. But it is the mandate of this occasion that you simply must continue to do so.

A second thought is that you should cultivate the discipline of hard work. Thomas Edison once said, “If we did all the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves.” The primary reason we fail to maximize our capabilities is that we lack the necessary discipline. Edward Kidder Graham, President of the University of North Carolina during World War I, once told his students: “It is easier for some men to crawl through the cold steel of bayonets than to crawl out of a warm bed on a February morning to attend an eight o’clock math class. . . .We are fighting for the privilege of staying in bed if we want to; but the victory of democracy will not be won unless, when we have won the right to stay in bed, we choose to get up.” The ancient wisdom of Ecclesiastes is still pertinent: “Whatsoever thy

hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave whither thou goest.”

A third thought is that you should be entrepreneurs, willing to take some risks or to improvise. There is no comparison between that which is lost by not succeeding at something and that which is lost by not even trying. While we cannot know what the future holds, we know it rests in the hopeful hands of people who will not be afraid to take some risks. As you attempt to assess which risks to take, keep in mind that change is the one unalterable law of life and that the important determination you must make is when to promote change, when merely to accept it, and when actively to resist it.

Among others, I suggest that you should take a chance on love. Love is a grand thing, and I hope you don't go through life without it. But, you might say, you're talking about taking chances. What's so risky about love? The risk, of course, is that the loved one will leave – perhaps by death, perhaps in some other way. While it is not a common thing with you yet, all of you have probably at some time lost someone you love. Grief is simply the price we pay for loving. It can be a high price indeed, but would we wish never to love in order never to grieve? Surely the answer is almost always no.

In an interview with the Dartmouth Alumni Magazine a few years ago, the actor Michael Moriarty said, “I was once asked what I wanted on my gravestone. Only one line: Here lies a man who knew the meaning of love.” Wow! I can’t yet claim that, can you? But I am trying, and I urge you to do the same. Yes, by all means, do take a chance on love. Intense grief may indeed be the price you pay, but surely it is worth it, and surely the greater the depth of our understanding of love, the more fully human we are.

A fourth thought would be that you should strive to achieve a proper blend of idealism and realism. Little is accomplished without some measure of idealism, for people must have faith in potential betterment or they will decline to put forth an effort. You would not have put forth the effort required to be a part of this ceremony today had you not believed you could better yourselves and your situations by doing so. Yet, the word “ideal” generally refers to that which is desirable, but difficult – sometimes even impossible – to attain.

President Kennedy once described himself as “an idealist without illusions.” That, I submit, is the proper balance – to retain one’s ideals but to temper them with a recognition that the world is neither wholly

rational nor benevolent and that neither contemplation nor action on our part can make it so.

I thus would urge you to retain your idealism, without which your future accomplishments will be unduly limited, but to temper it with an appreciation for realities that do indeed impose some limits on human endeavor.

A fifth thought is to strive to be contemporary. People often speculate as to what period of human history they would choose to live in were they afforded that choice. Given that choice, perhaps you would choose to live at another time and in another place, for these are awesome and perilous times in which we live.

I suggest that you choose the time in which you in fact live. The truth is that your blessings are greater than ever before, and with the exception of the problem of nuclear weapons, which admittedly is qualitatively different, and perhaps the problem of terrorism, which is not new but perhaps quantitatively different, your generation's problems are no worse – they are merely different.

I am not suggesting that you submit to every passing whim or fancy, for it is still true that she who marries the spirit of the times is doomed to be a widow. But I am suggesting that you avoid the

sentiment expressed in the title to the play “Stop the World, I Want to Get Off.” That sentiment appeals to some people, but I hope not to you. Instead, I hope that you will not long for a more simple age that never really was and certainly never will be, but will share in the action and passion of the times in which you live.

A sixth thought is to leave you with the challenge of accepting some of the responsibility for the public life of the times and places in which you will live and work and rear your families. In view of our recent political history, it would not be surprising if many of you are totally disillusioned with politics, politicians, and the political system; but it would nevertheless be tragic, for in your time, just as in the days of Washington or Jefferson or Lincoln, human experience and human aspirations are the materials of politics, and reasoned argument and honorable compromise are the civilized ways of conducting politics.

It is the task of leadership in a democratic society to help people think beyond immediate appetites to enduring interests; to persuade people to sacrifice their short-run, individual gratifications in order to achieve long-run, community interests; to accept a certain amount of pain in the short-run in order to minimize the discomfort of the long run; but it is the task of the whole of our citizenry to be responsive to that

kind of leadership. The occasional misdeeds of a few are inadequate grounds for denying the legitimate aspirations of the many, and responsible citizenship on your part is required if these legitimate human aspirations are to be fulfilled in the times and places in which you will live.

A friend of mine tells about his Missouri grandmother, who lived near a railroad track during the Depression days of the 1930s. She was not highly educated and had little awareness of the world beyond her small Missouri town, but when hobos, as the migratory homeless were known in those days, came to her back yard, she fed them a good meal. She barely knew there was a broader world out there, and she certainly had no notions of saving it, but she saved the part of it that came to her back yard.

The probability is that there are no Churchills among you – none who will, quite literally, save the world. But you can save the part that comes to your back yard, and you will find happiness in the process. As Albert Schweitzer told the Harvard graduates of many years ago: “I do not know what your destiny will be, but I know that the only ones of you who will be truly happy are those who will seek and find how to serve.”

Do your part, then, to strengthen the fragile fabric of our shared humanity, and the probability is that, in the process, you will find meaning and purpose, fulfillment and happiness.

A seventh and final thought is that you should strive to fulfill your potential. I suppose that is the sum of all the others. To avert to the biblical parable, hopefully you have learned here not to bury your talents. In a world crying for leadership, to contribute less than our maximum potential to the society in which we live is to be less than fully honorable, if not downright criminal.

One of my college classmates served on the Board of Trustees of the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics with Ronald McNair, one of the astronauts killed when the Challenger exploded in flight in January, 1986. He tells of asking McNair to autograph a picture for his son, who aspired to be an astronaut. McNair's inscription read: "Be the best."

Your mandate, too, is to be the best – not necessarily the best there is, for we cannot all be that – but the best you can be.

The humorist Art Buchwald always ended his addresses to students by saying, "We've given you a perfect world – don't screw it up." By contrast, when Hubert Humphrey left his U.S. Senate office to

go home to die, he swept his hand across a cluttered desk and with tears in his eyes lamented, “So much still to be done, so much still to be done.”

Buchwald, of course, was only kidding, and Humphrey, of course, was right. There is indeed so much still to be done, and some of it will in time be yours to do. Like the characters in the Wizard of Oz, you may feel that you lack the qualities requisite to the tasks. You will recall that the Tin Man thought he lacked heart, the Scarecrow thought he lacked a brain, and the Lion thought he lacked courage. The journey taught each of them, though, that what he was seeking was God-given and had been within them all along. You will find the same if you will only risk the journey.

It is now your time to join the enduring struggle for the vision of one of my father’s favorite teachers, Dr. Frank Graham, who dreamed of an America in which

democracy [is] without vulgarity, differences [are] without hate, and excellence [is] without arrogance. . . [where] the integrity of simple people is beyond price and the daily toil of millions is above pomp and power; where the answer to error is not terror; the respect for the past is

**not reaction; and the hope for the future is not revolution;
where the majority is without tyranny, the minority without
fear, and all people have hope.**

It was very cold in Boston on the first Monday in November, 1960.

The youthful United States Senator from Massachusetts had concluded the last campaign rally of his effort to attain the presidency, but the campaign was not quite over, for on his way home, he observed an elderly woman waiting for a bus. That he would carry his home state was hardly in doubt, but a habit of long-standing compelled him to stop and solicit her vote. He was somewhat taken aback when she responded that he was too young to be president, that he should wait for another time; but his retort was quick and incisive: “No, no, Mother,” he said, “this is it, this is it, now’s the time.”

And for you, the members of the class of 2010, this is it. Now’s the time. This is a happy occasion. Enjoy your reminiscences. Make the most of it in every way.

But in the process, remember these mandates. An imperfect world is growing impatient, indeed rather desperate, as it eagerly waits for the contributions you will make as result of the education you have acquired in this place and that we celebrate today.