

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO | The College
CLASS DAY 2017
JUNE 9

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I was so honored to be invited to be the inaugural Class Day Speaker. But obviously since I'm a graduate of the University of Chicago, I couldn't just accept the invitation I had to overanalyze it.

My first thought was that since this is Chicago it couldn't just be class day; maybe it was class conflict day with special appearances by Marx and Engels and Race, Class and Gender day with Betty Friedan T-Shirts.

Then I began wondering why the University of Chicago is asking me of all people to be a speaker at this big event. I remembered the major addresses of my own time here and how intellectually rigorous they were.

I remembered that Freshman year a noted philosopher gave an uplifting Aims of Education Address called "Death, Despair, Desolation and the Futility of Human Existence."

Then senior year at commencement our speaker was a noted biologist. I found myself tremendously inspired by his uplifting talk, "The Sixteen Qualities of Nucleic Acid."

Eventually I realized that I am being invited because Chicago is trying to be like a normal school with a celebrity commencement speaker. But of course they couldn't go for a big time celebrity the first time right off the bat. Chicago is a place where you lose your virginity slowly.

For the first class day speaker, they wanted someone on TV, but only on PBS. Then, after everybody is acclimated to the outside speaker thing, they could go ahead and invite someone big.

That's when the truth came to me. I am Chicago's gateway drug to Stephen Colbert. You, the class of 2017 will have to suffer through me so that future classes can listen to Matt Damon. That's what I call living for something larger than self.

When I realized what was going on, I confess I was tempted to do what you millennials are always doing. I decided I would feel triggered and unsafe and lead a campaign to get myself disinvited. All the historical traumas of being a lower-middle range celebrity came down on me and I retreated to my safe space, which is under the bar at Jimmy's.

But since none of you people did your generational duty and got me blocked from this gig, I've decided to go ahead.

Since Chicago is new to this game I should note that there are certain traditions involved in these kinds of occasions.

At occasions like this major universities ask a person who has achieved a fantastic career success to give you a speech telling you that career success is not important.

At occasions like this major universities often ask billionaires to give speeches telling you how much you can learn from failure. From this you can take away the lesson that failure seems really great if you happen to be Steve Jobs or J.K. Rowling.

Then we speakers are supposed to give you a few minutes of completely garbage advice: Listen to your inner voice. Be true to yourself. Follow your passion. Your future is limitless.

First, my generation gives you a mountain of debt; then we give you career-derailing guidelines that will prevent you from ever paying it off.

That's why when I'm asked to speak at these things I always try to tell graduates is that since you haven't graduated from college before you may not know the etiquette. When you get your diploma it's always nice to tip President Zimmer 10 or 20 bucks just to show he did a good job.

It's also nice to slip the class day speaker a few bills—maybe two or three thousand.

On these occasions I also always try to inspire students by telling them about the glittering possibilities in front of them.

Within just a few short years many you will be sleeping on your parent's couches while working for a completely dysfunctional NGO. Others of you will have soul crushing jobs as corporate consultants, working on power points presentations past midnight at the Topeka Comfort Inn.

I'm here to help you navigate these exciting possibilities.

I'm here to help you take advantage of the skills you learned at the University of Chicago. You learned how to dominate classroom discussion after having done none of the reading. You learned how to stare at professors with looks of rapt attention even though secretly you were completely asleep.

I'm here to urge you to lives of public service, working on Capitol Hill while bringing the nation's top leaders coffee and sexual tension.

I'm here to urge you to serve the world's poorest people in ways that will look really good on your resume, like organizing an anti-malarial bed net drives while rocking Jimmy Choos at Goldman Sachs.

I'm here because, as someone who now teachers at Yale, you should have some sense of what it would have been like if you'd been accepted there.

But ultimately, I'm not here to give you some standard speech. This is Chicago. This is the only time in my life that I will get to address the graduating class at my own school, at the place the formed me down to my bones.

I confess I didn't enjoy every day I spent here. I majored in History and Celibacy. I learned how to walk through campus while awkwardly averting my eyes from anybody I might know.

But like all of you, I was changed fundamentally in this place.

The older I get the more I become aware of how it shaped me. I'm 34 years out of college and I feel more influenced by the University of Chicago today than I did on the day I graduated.

So today I'd really like to talk to you about two things: The things Chicago gave me, which I've carried through life, and the things Chicago failed to give me, which I had to learn on my own.

When I think back on my time here I remember certain moments of great intensity. There was one very odd moment during my first year when I was reading a book called *The Death of Tragedy* by Nietzsche in a carol on the A level of the Regenstein.

I don't know what it was: the driving semi insane power of Nietzsche thought, the overwrought and intoxicating nature of his prose, but somehow while reading that book reality seemed to slip its bounds. I lost all sense of where I was or who I was or how time was passing or whether it was passing at all. Hours flew by and I was just buried inside that book.

I was not so much reading it; I was immersed in the torrent of its prose and the fury of its ideas. I was just a sort of dissolved, lifted out of myself, transported, subsumed and touched--in some sort of trance or a state of awed reverence or under a spell cast by a semi crazy long dead mind.

There I was in a shabby carol on the basement level of the ugliest building on God's green earth, and I was experiencing something close to transcendence. And when I awoke from that state I looked around startled and blinking, shocked to be re-entering the 20th century, and real life.

I never really became a Nietzsche fan, but it was exciting to know that the ideas of some dead genius, could transport me and give me a glimmer of a higher realm.

There were other intensities during my time here. There was intense arguing with all my friends about bullshit subjects at the dining hall hour upon hour. There were intense pseudointellectual debates with graduate students at Jimmys; the intensity of serious movie going at Doc Films; and most of all there was a certain intensity in class.

In those days it was pure Great Books for the first two years, and our professors didn't just teach them, they proselytized them. Some of the old German refugees from World War II were still around then, and they held the belief, with a religious fervor, that the magic keys to the kingdom were in these books. The mysteries of life and how to live well were there for the seizing for those who read well and thought deeply.

There was a legendary professor named Karl Weintraub teaching Western Civ then. Years later, when he was nearing death he wrote to my classmate Carol Quillen about his experience teaching these books.

Teaching Western Civ, Weintraub wrote, "seems to confront me all too often with moments when I feel like screaming suddenly: 'Oh, God, my dear student, why CANNOT you see that this matter is a real, real matter, often a matter of the very being, for the

person, for the historical men and women you are looking at — or are supposed to be looking at!

“I hear these answers and statements that sound like mere words, mere verbal formulations to me, but that do not have the sense of pain or joy or accomplishment or worry about them that they ought to have if they were TRULY informed by the live problems and situations of the human beings back there for whom these matters were real. The way these disembodied words come forth can make me cry, and the failure of the speaker to probe for the open wounds and such behind the text makes me increasingly furious.

“If I do not come to feel any of the love which Pericles feels for his city, how can I understand the Funeral Oration? If I cannot fathom anything of the power of the drive derived from thinking that he has a special mission, what can I understand of Socrates? ... How can one grasp anything about the problem of the Galatian community without sensing in one’s bones the problem of worrying about God’s acceptance?

“Sometimes when I have spent an hour or more, pouring all my enthusiasm and sensitivities into an effort to tell these stories in the fullness in which I see and experience them, I feel drained and exhausted. I think it works on the student, but I do not really know.”

It is a tragedy of teaching that sometimes the professors pour more into the class than the students are able to receive.

But in truth that intense teaching is more like planting. Those teachers like Weintraub were inserting seeds that would burst forth years or decades later when the realities of adult life called them forth.

I hated Edmund Burke when I read him here but years later he exploded in my mind and has become one of the great guides of my life. I was blandly indifferent to Augustine when I encountered him, it was only later that I understood the power of his loves and his wrestling with his own soul, and the need to be careful about what you love, because you become what you love.

Chicago gave me a glimpse of the mountain ranges of human existences. It gave me a set of longings, higher longings than any I had had.

In the first place, I longed to know how to see. Seeing reality seems like a straightforward thing. You just look out and see the world. But anybody who is around politics or many other arenas knows how many people see the world with a distorting mirror, how many see only what they want to see, or what they can see by the filtering light of their depression, fear, insecurity or narcissism.

Sometimes I think the whole disaster of the Trump presidency is because of a breakdown of intellectual virtue. A break down in America’s ability to face evidence clearly, to pay due respect to the concrete contours of reality. These intellectual virtues may seem elitist, but once a country tolerates dishonesty, incuriosity and intellectual laziness, then everything else falls apart.

John Ruskin once wrote, “The more I think of it I find this conclusion more impressed upon me—that the greatest thing a human soul ever does is to see something, and tell what is saw in a plain

way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see.”

At Chicago, I encountered so many writers who could see so purely and carefully--Shakespeare, Hume, Socrates and George Eliot, George Orwell and Hannah Arrendt. I met so many professors and students who could weigh evidence and who didn't tolerate intellectual shabbiness. It aroused a desire to have that virtue to have the ability to face unpleasant facts.

Then there was the yearning to be wise.

I really couldn't tell you then what wisdom consists of, and I still can't give you a concrete definition. But we all know wisdom when we see it. There is a deep humanity, gentleness, and stability to a wise person. That person can perceive, with love and generosity, the foibles of another heart. That person can grasp the nub of any situation, see around corners and has developed an intuitive awareness of what will go together and what will not go together.

That wisdom, I imagine, comes from paying deep and loving attention to the people around you. It comes from many hours of solitary reflection. It comes from reading of the greats. It comes from getting out of your own century, thinking outside of your assumptions and embarking on a great lifelong journey toward understanding

That sort of humane wisdom was admired here. We wouldn't have told each other this, because it would be too pretentious, but all those bulshitty dinner table and bar stool conversations about the great ideas were attempts to put together the building blocks of that kind of wisdom. They were attempts to put ourselves together so we could be of use. They were attempts to imitate penetrating insight of Hume, the smile of Voltaire, and the gentle guidance of a dozen professors whose names you would not know, and who remain warm in my memory even though many of them are dead to us now.

Third, Chicago gave me a yearning for ideals. It is sometimes said that we humans seek happiness. We seek the fulfillment of our desires. But of course that's not true. Peace and happiness is great for a while but after a bit it gets boring.

“What our human emotions seem to require,” William James once wrote, “is the sight of struggle going on. The moment the fruits are being merely eaten things become ignoble. Sweat and effort, human nature strained to the uttermost and on the rack, yet getting through it alive, and then turning back on its success to pursue another more rare and arduous still—this is the sort of thing that inspires us.”

James summed it up pretty well. Human existence is the same eternal thing: Some man or womans' pains in pursuit of some exalted ideal.

I recently saw the movie “Hidden Figures,” about some African American women who served the cause of space exploration and racial justice. They weren't exactly happy in that movie, but their was a spiritual intensity serving their two great ideals. That's what we want in our lives. Intense struggling for the good.

You can pursue beautiful and high ideals or low ideals and I sometimes think half the failures of life are because people don't have a high enough standard to shoot for and measure themselves by. Or else they have no conscious standard at all and they wander through life, wondering what it is that they really want.

If nothing else, Chicago presented us with high ideals in profusion: the patriotism of Pericles, the commitment of Fermi, the American dream of Alexander Hamilton.

I certainly wasn't smart enough to come up with my own philosophy or set my own ideals. But I could try on different ideals passed down to us from our betters, and I could see which ones seemed to fit, and I could join that parade.

They say that life here is about the life of the mind, but that is an injustice. The mind and the soul are not so easily separated.

These yearnings that I have described--to see the world clearly, to be wise, to pursue ideals--these weren't really the yearnings of the mind. They were yearnings from deeper, from the part of us that can only be called the soul.

We don't talk about this much in our secular culture, but there is a part of us that doesn't care about Facebook likes, or annual income or even how popular you are. This is the part of us that yearns for permanent things, for beauty and truth and justice and home. This is the part of each of us that is morally valuable, that with worthy of dignity and respect.

The poet Rilke once wrote, "I am learning to see. I don't know why it is, but everything penetrates more deeply into me and does not stop at the place where until now it always used to finish. I have an inner self of which I was ignorant. Everything goes thither now. What happens there I do not know."

I'll never be as deep as Rilke, but I deeper when I left Chicago than when I arrived. More important, I graduated from the University of Chicago with a little sense of my soul and its yearnings.

There was a lot of longing going on then. And there still is today.

Two Saturdays ago my wife Anne and I got together with the philosophy professor Candace Vogler in Cobb Hall and led a seminar under the sponsorship of the Hyde Park Institute. It was a beautiful spring day and we all spent it inside, talking about character and spiritual growth, about Aquinas and Beethoven and Victor Frankl.

And I saw that day this place is still wonderfully itself. I felt some of that old intensity of purpose. There is still the same honest and unironic hunger for wisdom. There is still the willingness to put your ideas out there and argue and listen. There is still that ardent searching for truth and the willingness to be silly in pursuit of it. I saw the same simple desire to know, the openness, the delight, the seriousness about serious things and the jokiness about jokey things.

Chicago gives you a taste for mountaineering, for climbing up toward the summits of human life. Afterwards, you're never quite content living in the flatlands, living solely in the stuff that gets written about on twitter, or even in the newspapers or talked about on reality TV.

Many years ago a man named Robert Maynard Hutchins bet this institutions future on one proposition: that if you put the big ideas in front of a bunch of 20 year olds you can change their life forever. I can tell you, it worked for me. It completely worked for me.

This change is a very practical change.

We have a Telos Crisis in this country. Many people do not have a clear sense of their goals and their own purpose. They don't know what they are shooting for, or what fundamental convictions should guide their behavior.

They've been trained in hyper-specialized research universities that tell them how to do things but don't ask them to think about why they should do them; that don't give them a forum to ask the question, What is my own best life? What am I called to do? Why am I here?

From college they enter the world we all live in, which is a busy world. The flow of a thousand emails, the tasks of setting up a career and family. These things distract the great teleological questions.

I find that many people haven't even been given a moral vocabulary to help think things through. They haven't been surrounded with a functioning moral ecology and a set of ideal to guide and orient them.

That produces a great fragility. Our friend Nietzsche said that he who has a why to live for can endure any how. But if you don't know what your purpose is then the first failure or setback can totally throw you into crisis and total collapse.

The young person without a conscious purpose graduates and hopes by piling success upon success he can fill the void within. He becomes what Matias Dalsgaard calls this The Insecure Overachiever:

“Such a person must have no stable or solid foundation to build upon, and yet nonetheless tries to build his way out of his problem. It is an impossible situation. You can't compensate for having a foundation made of quicksand by building a new story on top of it. But this person takes no notice and hopes that the problem down in the foundations won't be found out if only the construction work keeps going.”

But of course the reckoning always comes, usually in the mid twenties. It produces the crisis, the depression the sadness. David Foster Wallace noticed it back in 1996: “It's more like a stomach level sadness. I see it in myself and my friends in different ways. It manifests itself in a kind of lostness. This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values.”

You can see the fruits of the Telos Crisis in the rising suicide rates, the rising drug addiction rates. You can see it in the lives, especially of young adults, who are sometimes adrift.

The fact that you went to Chicago means you'll always have an orientation that is slightly different, slightly countercultural. You'll have a harder time being shallow.

You may not know your life's purpose or your calling, but you know that that mountain world exists and you can explore it, and that the answers can be found up there in the Museum of Beautiful Things, and that knowledge will be a source of great comfort and stability.

Life at the university of Chicago is not always filled with day to day happiness. But it gives you glimpses of cosmic happiness, which is glimpses of understanding the long story. And if you have cosmic joy, because you know this story is ultimately about something meaningful, holy and good, you can bear the day to day miseries much better.

So that is the good side of what I got here and what I hope you got here. Let me finish by speaking very briefly about what the University of Chicago did not give to me, where it failed me.

Now here I speak provisionally, because I'm going to start talking about the school as it was in the 1980s, and a lot of the problems may have been fixed by now.

It is traditional for alumni to say that the college was better in their own day. As both an alum and a trustee I can tell you that's nonsense. I'm here to tell you that Chicago is way better now than it was when I was here, and way better than it has ever been.

But in my era, and maybe today, Chicago did not prepare its students for intimacy. As I've grown older I've come to see that the capacity for intimacy is one of the crucial talents for a fulfilling life.

That's because the primary challenges of life are not knowledge challenges, they are motivation challenges. It's not only knowing what is good, but being completely and passionately devoted to what is good.

It's about passionately loving your spouse and family in a way that brings out their loveliness. It's about loving your vocation with fierce dedication. It's about loving your community with a serving heart. It's about loving your philosophy or your God with a humble fervor.

A fulfilled life is moving from open options to sweet compulsions. It's about saying no to a thousand things so you can say a few big yesses to the things you are deeply bound to. It's about loving things so much that you're willing to chain yourself down to them. The things you chain yourself to are the things that set you free.

And it's not only loving Platonically. It's actually and intimately living out the day to day realities of your fierce. It's intimately sharing the same bathroom or getting up every day and writing on that damn laptop.

It's about mastering all the phases of intimacy: being open to the first enticing glance. Having the energy to really learn about that person, like those people on a first date who learn how much they have in common with each other and treat these things as amazing miracles: "You don't like foie gras? Neither do I! We should get married!"

It's about having the courage to engage in the reciprocal cycle of ever greater vulnerability. It's about enduring faithfully when there is some crisis and your not sure you believe in this relationship, this job or this institution. It's about forgiveness for the betrayals committed against you and asking forgiveness when you have let down your friends or your profession or your spouse.

When you make an intimate connection—to a spouse, a friend or profession or a community—you are as Leon Wieseltier puts it, “consenting to be truly known, which is an ominous prospect.” And so one needs the skills of intimacy to live well in such close proximity. One needs skills of intimacy to achieve the kind of fusion that leads to real joy—when a couple become one loving entity, when you and your vocation have merged into a single identity, when your love for your God or your philosophy is a complete surrender.

What I’m describing here are emotional arts. They are not natural but have to be acquired by repeated vulnerability, commitment and experience.

When I was at Chicago, we students by and large did not excel at intimacy. We were artful dodgers, with a superb ability to slip out of situations at moments when deep heart to heart connection might come. We were in the business at age 21 of trying to make a good impression, so of course we weren’t going to show the unattractive sides of ourselves, which is an absolute prerequisite of intimacy.

We were busy with our work and our books and student activities, and we told ourselves, idiotically, that we didn’t have time for that kind of relationship. We too often approached each other shrouded in what Candace Vogler calls an “edifice of thought.” When confronted with uncertainty or a difficult situation, we tended to revert to our strengths, which were our IQs and our thinking and talking skills. We sought to be masters of our life, rather than surrendering to emotions which are so much out of our control.

The university didn’t help. The atmosphere at Chicago then was emotionally avoidant from the top down. Too much of life was defined by what could be discussed in the classroom, and everything else just fell by the wayside. There wasn’t enough dancing and drinking or any of the other activities that make diffidence impossible. There wasn’t enough joint physical activity.

Too much emphasis was put on scholarship and professionalism, and those things were defined by a pose of detachment, specialization, critical thinking, aloofness and a mythical belief in cool reason. The economics department had too much cultural influence then, with its exaggerated belief in rational utilitarian creatures. Too much time was spent studying, which is solitary activity. Too much of student life was oriented around the Reg, and not because couples were fooling around in the stacks.

I left Chicago better at reading books than at reading people.

I did not have the eyes to see the beauty in people who were so open hearted that they had nothing particularly discerning to say. I didn’t know how to handle the deepest and scariest intimacies.

I hope I’m a little better.

Life will offer you a diminishing number of opportunities to show how smart you are. It will offer an infinite number of occasions that require kindness, mercy, grace, sensitivity, sympathy, generosity and love.

Life will require that you widen your repertoire of emotions, that you throw yourself headlong into other people. That you take the curriculum of intimacy. If you haven't mastered it yet, turn to this task intentionally now.

So I'm asking one final thing of you members of the Class of 2017 right now. Tomorrow you will graduate. That is a great accomplishment. But before you do, I hope that tonight you will do one thing to cap your education. Go to the Regenstein with a special person in your life. Find the spot deep in the stacks where Nietzsche's "The Death of Tragedy" is found. But don't open the book. Take off some of your clothes and fool around.

Thank you and God bless you.