

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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Thank you. Trustees; President Stukel; Chancellor Cantor; other officers and staff members of the university and campus; my fellow honorees; distinguished faculty; alumni and, most importantly, the graduates and their families and loved ones. First off, congratulations! Graduates, this is really your day. Mine was back in 1975, and although when I strolled through the Quad this morning, it seemed like only yesterday, of course it was not. It was ages ago.

In 1975, a new gadget was being introduced called the home computer; you had to build it from a kit and no one was much interested. Back then, M&M was only a candy. The beer was offered with foam but not the coffee. We ate spaghetti, not pasta. America was finally pulling out of Vietnam, and most of the Nixon White House was finally going to prison. Tiger Woods was born, but Jimmy Hoffa disappeared. Steven Spielberg made a movie about a big shark and no one wanted to swim in the ocean anymore. Our music was truly, truly great, not like yours today. The lyrics had transcendent meaning. One No. 1 song seemed to solve all mysteries of human endeavor, declaring unforgettably, “Gitchy Gitchy ya ya dada, Gitchy Gitchy ya ya dee.”

It is a great honor for me to be here. No one could be more flattered. Or more nervous, I might add. While this may be your first university degree, it’s also my first speech in front of so many people. You may be scared to death of what lies ahead. I’m pretty scared right now.

Journalists are taught to avoid clichés—avoid them like the plague—but we love them anyhow—and use enough of them to shake a stick at. There are some clichés for commencement addresses that I want to call to your attention. Once a university has gotten its graduates to dress exactly alike, as you are today, it brings in a speaker who tells them that one of the most important things in life is “individualism.”

And that speaker—invited because of his or her success—counter-intuitively informs the group that success is actually not so important, that you need to follow your idealistic heart and not your greedy hands, to crave personal fulfillment rather than professional acclamation and to learn to love life for its extraordinary journey and not for any particular destination. This wisdom is very often backed up with supporting quotations from Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Well...I actually agree with all that. Some clichés, like a comfortable pair of shoes, deserve to be overused. And while I won't be citing any Thoreau or Emerson, I am going to later quote from the movie "Spiderman."

Let me first to tell you a little about myself: I am a product of great opportunity—and some of that opportunity was to be able to attend this university. I was born in Chicago and grew up on the North Side and later in suburban Skokie. My grandparents were immigrants from the Ukraine and Lithuania. They never attended college. Neither did my parents, Saul and Claire, though as I tell you this, I can hear my mother saying, "Oh, yes I did."

In her day, which was about the time of the Great Depression, very few young women went to college and many of those who did were permitted only a single year, the sole purpose of which was to find a husband. My mom faced this marital deadline pressure not so far from here in Dekalb. But she failed to find a college boy in the allotted time, a story she liked to tell because of the punch line: so, instead I married your father.

My dad was a traveling salesman. Poverty had limited his schooldays. When he was 12, he began selling something called shoe findings, which are the soles and heels and thread that go into the repair of shoes. He was a practical man. When I decided to major in political science in college, he began flipping through the Yellow Pages and said, "OK, let's check to see how many listings there are for political scientists." Not so many years later, I went to graduate school to learn a craft, to study journalism.

Ronald Yates, the current head of the journalism department, suggested I recall for you some of the lessons I learned here and how they've served me well. I am about to make him deeply regret this. Oh, I did learn a lot here. I had good professors. But that was 30 years ago and over so long

a time it's hard to recall exactly what sparks lit up your mind. And yet, two memories do stick out very distinctly. I think of them most every day. One involves codfish and the other involves sounding like a moron.

I will explain.

News Writing 101 was an excellent course, but the accompanying textbook was a bit preachy and condescending. One chapter concluded with a strict warning to never, ever end an interview with the words okey-dokey or "a similar moronic expression." Well, I was enough of a rebel to take this as a challenge. I made a pact with myself that no matter how far I got in journalism, I was going to go right ahead and say okey-dokey whenever I darn well pleased. And over the years, I have said okey-dokey without restraint. I have interviewed actors and statesmen and titans of industry and said okey-dokey. I have interviewed George Bush, the former president, and said okey-dokey. I have interviewed George Bush, now the current president and he actually said okey-dokey before I did.

As a foreign correspondent, I've often needed translators. One of the very best I know had never been to the United States, but he had worked with many Americans and liked to use our pet phrases. The trouble was, he got them mixed up. For instance, he would call walkie-talkies talkie-walkies. He also confused the phrase honky-dory with hanky panky, as in "those crooks in the government got caught committing honky-dory," but "now that the police have caught up with them, everything is hanky panky." Making use of my University of Illinois education, I thought I could once and for all end this confusion. I told him to forget all about honky-dory and instead use okey-dokey. We ended up with hokey pokey.

The lesson I learned concerning codfish was more profound. My news-writing professor once told us a terrific anecdote. In preparing this speech, I've learned that the facts of the anecdote may not have been entirely correct but the spirit of the story was right and I will repeat it as it was told in class. It involves the writer Robert Benchley. While a student at Harvard in the early 1900s, he took a course in American diplomatic history. On an essay exam, the professor asked a question about a cod-fishing dispute in the Atlantic between the United States and Canada. Students were asked to explain the disagreement from a) the standpoint of the Canadians or b)

the standpoint of the Americans. Benchley instead decided to answer from c) ... the standpoint of the codfish.

As a journalist, this has always seemed to me to be the best way to approach a story, to view it from the standpoint of everyday people rather than only those who have the power and the high positions. After leaving Urbana-Champaign--ready to find codfish wherever they were and intent on saying okey-dokey whenever I could--I found that I had graduated into a recession and there were hardly any job openings Does this sound familiar to anyone graduating today?

I started out at a newspaper called The World, which was a rather grandiose name for a thin publication that only came out once a week in the Chicago suburbs of Elmwood Park and River Grove. It was a small operation. I was immediately made editor-in-chief, which meant I not only got to write my own stories but to type everyone else's.

But there's nothing wrong with starting at the bottom. Remember, the journey is more important than the destination. And some legs of my journey have been thrilling.

For four years, until last summer, my wife, Celia Dugger, and I were the two New York Times correspondents based in South Asia—attempting to be both intrepid reporters and the doting parents of two young sons, Max and Sam, who are here today. Celia and I covered eight countries, and because three of them were India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, our area included about one fifth of the human race. It's a region full of codfish, for in few places is the gap between the rich and poor any greater.

I spent a lot of my time in Afghanistan. Before America entered the war, there was a murderous drought going on. The country was devastated. A million people were on the move, trying to escape their own hunger, selling off their land just so they would have enough money for transportation to a refugee camp. With its stunning mountains and cascading rivers, Afghanistan may well be the most beautiful place on earth—and in recent years the most sad.

Then 9/11 came and Afghanistan moved to center stage. I felt an immense challenge. I was a reporter for the world's most influential newspaper. I was on a vital story in an absolutely lawless land, and often it was my duty to get to places where no one else was going. I can recall

running my finger across a map, deciding whether it made more sense to take the road booby-trapped with land mines or the one where lurked remnant elements of the Taliban, desperate to kill any Westerner but especially eager to blow away a Western journalist.

But in the midst of these horrors, something transforming happened to me.....I became rich...Not Bill Gates rich. Not exactly. It wasn't the sudden accumulation of wealth so much as the sudden comprehension of wealth. After all those years of being told I was fortunate to be an American, I came to understand, at least in a monetary sense, what that meant as never before. I'm rich. You're rich. We're all filthy rich.

Let me explain. I've certainly been around extreme poverty before, right here in America and most certainly in the Third World. It upsets me. And like many—or most—of you, I send money to charities that I think, that I hope, are doing good deeds among the poor. But in Afghanistan, I found myself in places that no other outsider was getting to. I went to villages where people were actually starving for want of a piece of bread, in places where people were dying because they lacked the simplest of medications. It felt terrible to witness this. But I also felt immensely powerful, perhaps more than at any time in my life, empowered by the cash that I carried in my wallet.

With \$100, I could feed an entire village for the winter. With \$100, I could put a pharmacist atop a donkey and have him carry enough medicine to cure a village's sick. With \$100, I could buy back two young boys who had been sold into bondage by desperate parents who had been unable to feed their children.

You probably see where I am going with this. It's my effort to steer you toward a life of ethics and generosity and away from the competing all-American urge to become an Enron executive. And it gets me to the part where I get to quote from "Spiderman." After high school student Peter Parker found out he could leap from building to building, shimmy up walls and kiss girls while hanging upside down, he also learned from his Uncle Ben that "with great power there must also come great responsibility."

Maybe Uncle Sam needs to think more like Uncle Ben.

The world may be naturally unfair, but do the decks have to be stacked in such wildly unequal piles? This crowd here seems pretty large. It's several thousand. But imagine: Nearly 3 billion people across the world live on incomes of \$2 a day or less. Earlier this year, 38 million people in Africa were in danger of starvation—more than the entire population of California. Each day, more than 30,000 children die of easily preventable disease. A girl born today in America may have a 50% chance of living into the 22nd century while a baby in Afghanistan has a 1 in 4 chance of dying before age 5.

I've just returned from Afghanistan. Our President had promised something akin to a Marshall Plan to rebuild that nation, but virtually no reconstruction has taken place. There will be more done, but it won't be Marshall Plan size. A woman doctor told me, "You Americans know how to make war but not peace." This was hard to argue. Even after the war has wound down, the United States spends more than \$1 billion a month on military operations in Afghanistan, which is about twice the amount it has spent on reconstruction in a year and a half. And generally speaking, America ranks dead last among wealthier countries in the amount of foreign assistance we provide when measured against the size of our economy.

"With great power there must also come great responsibility."

Well, I apologize. I think I may have gotten as preachy as the author of my news writing textbook. Perhaps preachifying comes with age. It happens. You will see.

If I may close with a few more clichés, life IS short, time DOES fly. Graduates, in 30 years much of what is hip to you now will seem mostly quaint. Eminem and 50 Cent will get pudgy and gray--and they'll perform at oldies concerts. We have The Legends of Doo-Wop, you'll have the Legends of Rap.

But for now, this is your time. Make the most of it, live at full speed, and yet don't be too hard on yourself. Being a good person, being a good parent: they are as important as being a good anything else. You don't have to conquer the world, you just have to live within its arms. Be kind—you'll never regret your kindnesses just as you'll never forgive yourself your cruelties. Be honest—it IS the best policy. And don't let 'em intimidate you. Whenever you feel like it, say okey-dokey.