

129th COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Cornell University

As prepared for presentation
by

Hunter R. Rawlings III, President

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Chairman Weiss, members of the Board of Trustees, fellow members of the faculty and staff, families and friends of the graduates -- and most important of all, members of the Class of 1997 and candidates for advanced degrees:

Today is a splendid day for us all to celebrate the achievements of the graduates and wish them well as they move on to life's next stage. A colleague of mine recently went back to his alma mater -- obviously not Cornell -- to deliver the commencement address and receive an honorary degree. As he accepted the diploma, he remarked, "Frankly, I always thought the first one was honorary too."

But at Cornell, there is no such thing as an honorary degree. The only way to receive a Cornell degree is to earn it. "There's nothing to it, really," one ebullient senior told me as she was finishing up her course work. "You just stare at your laboratory equipment . . . or your book . . . or your computer screen . . . until little beads of blood stand out on your forehead." But behind the jokes about workload and pressure, there is also real pride in succeeding at a difficult and demanding task. All of us here are proud of you. We know you have

worked hard to earn your degrees, and all of us, not least your families and friends in the stands, have high hopes and expectations for your future success.

Your families especially have encouraged you and supported you through these long years at Cornell, and I'd like to invite them -- your parents, children and spouses -- to stand so that all of us may thank them on your behalf.

But the graduates are not alone in moving on to new challenges. Today is also a day of commencement for several others here this morning. At the Baccalaureate Service we recognized, along with the graduates, those on the faculty and staff who are retiring from Cornell, and I want to thank them here as well for their many years of devoted service to the university. I especially want to recognize Professor Emeritus Raymond T. Fox of the Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture. Cornell's 129th Commencement represents the 50th year that Prof. Fox, with help from an enthusiastic band of volunteers, has coordinated the floral arrangements for Commencement Weekend. For 50 years, his has been truly a labor of love.

I also want to acknowledge this morning those who are completing their terms of service on the Board of Trustees:

- Eleanor Applewhaite is completing four years as an alumni-elected trustee;
- J. Thomas Clark is not leaving the board but is moving from the position of alumni-elected trustee to trustee fellow;
- Kety Maria Esquivel is completing two years as a student-elected trustee;
- Ichiro Inumaru is completing four years as a trustee fellow;

- Sanford I. Weill, one of our very first trustee fellows, is completing a term that began in 1988;
- and Stephen H. Weiss, who has been an at-large trustee since 1973 and chairman of the Board of Trustees since 1989, will pass the chairmanship into the capable hands of Harold Tanner on July 1.

I want to pay special tribute to Chairman Weiss because his 24 years on the board represent a level of service and commitment to Cornell that goes far beyond what one would expect for someone engaged in a demanding Wall Street career -- as he has been for his entire tenure as a trustee. For the past eight years as chairman of the board, Steve Weiss has, in effect, held two full-time jobs: one at Weiss, Peck and Greer, where he is senior managing principal and chair of the executive committee, and the other at Cornell. He has given extraordinary amounts of time and resources to the university, and he has encouraged others to join the board and to participate in university affairs.

Why have Steve Weiss, the other members of the board, and so many of Cornell's other 125,000 living alumni remained so devoted to the university? Why, in fact, have more than 1,600 members of the Class of 1997 contributed toward the Senior Class Gift -- a Class of 1997 Scholarship that will help future students meet the cost of attending Cornell? Many people talk about the high cost of higher education -- and it is expensive, although not nearly as expensive as ignorance. Yet many members of the Class of 1997 chose to take an extra step to enable others to follow them here.

What are the qualities that make Cornell so compelling? As a classicist, I cannot resist consulting Greek models for contemporary behavior. There are a few principles in a speech of the Athenian leader Pericles that help us understand the qualities of communities that engender intense loyalty.

In paying tribute to his fellow citizens who had given their lives to Athens, Pericles chose to remind the Athenians of the characteristics that made Athens distinctive among the Greek city-states.

"We throw open our city to the world," he wrote. "We trust less in system and policy than in the native spirit of our citizens."

Cornell is similarly open to the world. It is not just that students and faculty members come here from every corner of the globe; it is also that Cornell canvasses new ideas, differences of opinion, and unconventional approaches to knowledge. Centrally isolated though we may be in terms of geography, we are a remarkably cosmopolitan place where the life of the mind is concerned.

In another well-known phrase, Pericles said, "We cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without pedantry."

Theirs was not just knowledge for knowledge's sake -- devoid of any connection to human life and concerns. Rather, Athenians saw the value of both the theoretical and the applied -- as do Cornellians. We value the arts, the humanities and the basic sciences. And we engage in applied studies -- from engineering to agriculture; from human ecology to veterinary medicine -- which are no less esteemed for having direct professional utility.

Pericles went on to say, "Wealth we employ more for use than for show, and we place the real disgrace of poverty not in owning to the fact but in declining to struggle against it. . . ."

Herein lies the promise of "any person, any study" -- the founding vision of Ezra Cornell. It is Cornell's continuing belief in that vision that motivated the Board of Trustees to reaffirm its commitment to need-blind admissions and to helping Cornell families meet their demonstrated need for assistance in obtaining a Cornell education.

"Here [in Athens]," Pericles continued, "each individual is interested not only in his own affairs, but in the affairs of the state as well. . . we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all."

Cornell is a place where students are full members of the community, not just learners. Whether in the Student Assembly or with a microphone in front of the Straight, whether in newspaper columns or in volunteer service, students engage as full citizens in the debates and issues of the campus and town.

Pericles summarized his description of Athens with these words, "In short, I say that as a city we are the school of Greece; while I doubt if the world can produce a person, who where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility as the Athenian."

Independence and versatility: It is independence of spirit that enables Cornellians to hold their values and their hard-won truths and to open new ground -- such as coeducation and non-sectarianism, which were among the

divisive and ultimately defining issues of the university's early years. And it is versatility that enables Cornellians to succeed as Space Shuttle astronauts, Supreme Court justices, Nobel Prize-winning physicists, investment managers, and all the rest.

Of course, Athenian activism was not necessarily viewed in the same light beyond the borders of the city-state. As a Corinthian observed with a mixture of admiration and fear, the Athenians "are addicted to innovation. . . Their view of a holiday is to do what needs doing; they prefer hardship and activity to peace and quiet. In a word, they are by nature incapable of either living a quiet life themselves or of allowing anyone else to do so."

Cornellians are activists by nature. They are known for their works as well as for their ideas. Hence the high level of volunteer service performed by our student body. Cornell students, and Cornell alumni, are vigorous, entrepreneurial, innovative -- and that has been true from the earliest days of our history.

In his annual report of 1882, Andrew D. White, the university's first president, noted:

It is a well-known fact that, thus far, . . . our students in every competition with other important universities have carried off the lion's share of prizes and testimonials. Our graduates are taking far more than their proportion of influential places, especially in the West. . . Our young [people], coming as they do largely from [families] obliged to feel the value of time and to train themselves to self-denial, self-control, hard work and economy, are achieving a success which is already attracting attention to them in that thriving part of our country.

We see those tendencies today in the Class of 1997, which has been extraordinarily successful in winning major national and international scholarships. With our Rhodes, Marshall, Keasbey, Churchill and other major award winners, we will have a mini-Cornell class at Oxford and Cambridge next year. The award winners, who have achieved a high level of academic distinction at Cornell, have also contributed to the Cornell community and to the larger world in significant ways. So have the twelve seniors, Cornell Tradition Fellows all, who were honored earlier this month for their community service activities. The winners of these Senior Recognition Awards donate their prizes -- some \$30,000 worth -- to support human service agencies and other non-profit groups or to help future students at Cornell. They, like so many members of the Class of 1997, are not just people of intellect. They are not just people of action. They are people of character.

Character, an old-fashioned attribute, is what links action to intellect. And it is exactly what you, as new graduates, need most in a rapidly changing, tightly networked, and unpredictable world. In the shifting sand of our culture, where everything is turned into a problem for debate rather than a value to live by, character will be one of the most important things you take with you from Cornell. But you have not come by it easily or quickly.

While it is exciting to be at a university so global in its curriculum, its faculty, and its student body, it can also be confusing and hard to find one's bearings. Old notions of national cultures and literatures are fading. Internationalism is rapidly taking their place, spread on the internet with astonishing speed. Just

as most business is today international by nature, so is the university's approach to knowledge itself. The traditional truths have lost some of their status, as scholars and students alike debate the merits of the traditional literary canon. To focus solely on Western Europe is to miss Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other important regions of the world. To focus solely on dead white males of European descent is to ignore the contributions of many others -- male and female, living and dead, of every color and from every part of the globe. So far, universities have responded by increasing the complexity of the curriculum. The old approaches to knowledge, such as close reading of texts, are still with us, but so are structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and cultural studies.

This is difficult intellectual terrain for students to maneuver in, but it mirrors, to a considerable extent, what lies ahead -- for universities are bellwethers for the society at large. You can assume with virtual certainty that you won't enter a job and stay in it for life. Over the course of your lifetime you may have several jobs and perhaps more than one distinct career.

What do you need to survive and prosper in that kind of fast-paced, changing world? Was Robin William's father right when, upon learning that his son wanted to be an actor, he said, "Fine, but study welding anyway, just in case"? My guess is that far more useful than welding . . . or acting . . . or molecular beam epitaxy . . . or electron microscopy . . . or any of the other specific skills you've gained at Cornell will be the qualities of spirit -- the character -- you've developed here.

Character has a moral dimension, which presumes that the linkage between action and intellect will be effected with grace and linked to some purpose larger than yourself. Character is impossible to teach and impossible to measure, but it is one of those attributes you know when you see it. And I have seen it amply demonstrated at Cornell: in the selflessness of Steve Weiss and other members of the Board of Trustees, who devote so much of their time and their resources to the university; in the professors -- including Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Debra Ann Castillo, David Feldshuh and Clifford Pollock, who were named Weiss Presidential Fellows last night -- who have made you partners in their scholarship while mentoring you and encouraging you to go beyond what you thought you were capable of; and, not least, in the way you as students have handled some of the difficult and divisive issues with which we've been confronted during your time at Cornell.

Let me give you one very recent example. As the semester drew to a close, a student publication printed an article that many of us on campus found highly offensive. Campus reaction to the incident was both rapid and robust. Responses ranged from peaceful protest to civil disobedience to resolutions before the Student Assembly that would have limited free speech. Throughout the time when the article and the campus responses to it were very much on everyone's mind, *The Cornell Daily Sun* did an excellent job of encouraging "informed and patient discourse" that is so essential to the functioning of a community such as Cornell. The *Sun* ran a full page of letters on the controversy, and the following day offered its own views on the subject in a two-

column editorial, which seems to me to embody the character -- the union of action, intellect and grace -- of Cornell.

Let me quote briefly from that editorial:

The Sun struggles with the multiple ironies, imbedded hypocrisies and thoroughly painful realities of this situation. . . . Students and faculty feel rightly hurt by an insensitive and disgusting article in a highly visible campus publication. We, as a community, must attempt to heal that wound. Education, dialogue, action are important. But the Sun cannot condone -- and in fact vociferously opposes -- tactics that limit debate, both on this issue and others sure to come up in the future. . . . But we all also must not pass on this opportunity to voice our opinions on a controversial article and issue. . . . Without the full spectrum of views presented, debate, dialogue and education cannot occur. These rewards are surely worth the price we pay.

That editorial is a demonstration of character.

Livingston Farrand, who served as Cornell's president from 1921 until 1937, once remarked: "There can be no doubt at all of the material growth and the creation of an educational monument of surpassing beauty and impressiveness on the unrivalled site which the Founder made available. The great task for us and for those who come after us is to see to it that the Cornell of the future shall have a spirit, a quality and a character worthy of its opportunity."

That is the task that has been taken up by so many of Cornell's 125,000 alumni around the globe. It is the task that continues to inspire us today. It is a task, members of the Class of 1997 and candidates for advanced degrees, that I commend to you this morning, for it is the basis of a successful and satisfying life.

Congratulations to you all.