

1994 Distinguished Professor Lecture  
Commencement Address: "what is a university?"  
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Philosophy

President Herbert, distinguished guests, faculty, students, parents and friends - and special greetings to my parents who were able to be here tonight.

At this great celebration tonight, I want to speak to the ones leaving the University of North Florida, the ones staying on, and the people just visiting, but I speak especially to you who are graduating. Finally. After six years? or four years? or maybe two brief years? It's been a long, hard haul. You deserve a hurrah.

Graduation is a ritual of passage. You graduates are passing to a new stage of your life. Some of you are moving on to a new job, another institution, or another location. For some the change will be less perceptible and you may continue with the same job or in the same school or place. And I won't forget those who feel like they are passing into a time of less security and uncertain job prospects. But all of you will be moving forward. Definitely, graduation is a time to look ahead. Looking forward, you can't help but look back also, perhaps with a sense of nostalgia about some things, and relief about others. At the time of graduation you are in-between - a good time to think about what this place you're passing through actually is.

We call it a university. This University of North Florida -- just what is it? Fifteen or so reddish brown brick buildings with a little green between them and an extensive forest around them? Or is it people, all kinds of people, male and female, foreign and domestic, young and older, serious and playful? Or music and movies and parties, and then classes the morning after? A mass of concrete walkways leading from one corridor to another in a maze of forms and schedules, assignments and deadlines, requirements and exams? At least graduation is a time to take a break from the pressure, and an occasion to take a more composed view of the university that you are passing through.

If you have thought of the university as a place located somewhere outside "the real world," I invite you to think of it differently. Yes, UNF is, and should be, a kind of haven, a place where we have the freedom to devote uninterrupted time to study, creation, and sport. Outside this haven, it will be more up to you to ensure that such

freedoms live on in your life. I hope that you will continue to concentrate, study, create, and play in ways that you have learned here. But the university is not an isolated haven severed from the world. Most of you already see that the so-called "real world" has been in the university, and the university in the "real world," all along. Better yet, think of the university as the measure of the "real world," as the place where we can take stock of its concerns.

Consider for a moment some of the work done by faculty here at UNF, just during the last year or two, and often with the help of students. From that work, we may learn how an African teenage princess named Anta was captured in a slave raid in 1806, became a free woman, a survivor of racism and civil wars, a property owner, with her husband Zephaniah Kingsley, and a progenitor of children with ideals. We may take example from the history of abolitionist women, black and white, who feared for their lives but did not yield to the angry crowds. We may learn why single males in America, from the shoot-out at the OK corral to the streets of Jacksonville, have been singularly prone to violence.

On a different scale, we may discover how ancient myths that seemed so alien and stories so familiar both display a plot that we all live through, from our initiation at birth to the trial binding of death when our lives, if ever, will be whole. Looking to the transformation of our physical life we may do research - and some of you students have with your professor- on how enzymes break down proteins to incorporate food and build our bodies. We may learn to engineer computers, create programs, and map artificial intelligence. In the links between the sciences, we may explore the biological, medical, social and legal issues of AIDS, or the psychological dimension of our legal system, the economic consequences of state lotteries, or the volatile connection between inflation and wars. Through literature we may come to feel a little more closely the visceral costs of war and peace, and intimate the agony of severance from loved ones lost too soon. Together with a philosopher we may consider precisely whether any wars are just and if so why; or as Socrates said, we may learn how to die, that is, to pass on what we have been given, transformed. With a poet in the university we may hear untold stories and probe the limits of the power of language to speak about life and death. With a music teacher we may hear or even create great sounds that lift our spirit.

All of this certainly seems like the real world to me. But thank heavens the university is also big enough to include the imagination. We need that to take stock of the world. I

know you've had your imagination stimulated at this place. Now use it to transform your real world.

UNF is also called a "regional" university. That does not mean it is simply a service station for the immediate needs of the region. It is rather a funnel for bringing the wider world to this region. What you get from the university enriches Northeast Florida and puts its needs in a balanced perspective. Training students and teachers in foreign languages as well as computer languages is one way we do this. Learning a foreign language lets you hear other peoples in their own voice, and lets you speak to their concerns. Cultivate the languages you have learned, whatever they are; let them grow in you and empower you to see further and hear more of this wider world. You become a conduit between it and the region.

The treasure that we call a library is another way the world is brought to this region. This treasure is not confined between the covers of the books or the walls of the building; in fact, it doesn't turn into usable currency until you open your mind, let the contents in, and take them out again into your daily conversations. Don't let this treasure sink to the bottom of the sea. Keep on reading. Continue to use the library: this library, public libraries, libraries on CD ROM. Support libraries; they are the reservoir of civilization. Keep them filled and constantly flowing in an out.

This regional university of ours taps into past worlds as well as present plans. Think of the university as a time capsule of culture that is never sealed shut. And the culture and heritage preserved here need not remain in your past any more than they have to stay on campus. You can take them with you, and consciously or not, you do. If you have thought of your graduation as the time to leave the university behind, think again! I maintain that you won't really leave it behind; you cannot entirely leave it behind. First of all, part of you is left here. You've invested your brains, sweat, toil and tears and laughs in this place, and you have contributed ideas, service, and energy, not to speak of money, that help keep this place going. Part of you is forever invested here. And you take something precious with you. It's called an education, but it's not a stack of books, a few gigabits of information, or simply a set of skills. It is the lifeline of thousands of years of human achievement handed down to us in the trust that we will carry it on. That cumulative achievement is preserved and renewed in the university, but it lives on only if it passes into people like you and out into the rest of the world.

How many of you graduates here tonight are teachers, or will be teachers? That's a lot of you, but it's not all. I like to think of ALL of you graduates as educators, whatever vocation you pursue. You came here for an education, and ended up an educator, able to draw out the best in yourselves and in society.

There is something else that our particular university gives to the region and the world. UNF is unique because its buildings are surrounded by an expansive wildlife sanctuary. This university preserves not only human culture but also a natural habitat. The timberland and wetlands serve as classroom for some of our courses and provide environmental education for thousands of school children. I hope you will continue enjoying the nature trails named after the late Professor Robert Loftin, or perhaps walk them for the first time. I encourage you especially to help ensure that we have an ecological preserve, here and elsewhere, to hand down to the next generation.

Finally, about your diploma: it is of course a certificate of your personal achievement up to now. You already know that what you're getting in a diploma is nothing like automatic job security for the rest of your life. That doesn't, however, diminish its importance. What you're getting is a document that tells others you are ready to handle more challenges and obligations. You will continue to be tested and judged. Your diploma - you're going to like this - is another final exam, but you have the rest of your life to work on it. In a few minutes you will come up to this podium and receive it with an open hand. Take this diploma and be ready to hand over your education to everyone you meet on your life's way. Your diploma is not a permit that lets you leave the university, but a sign that you now carry it with you into the world. Leave here tonight with the awareness that you are doing just that.

Thank you for listening.