



**CLASS DAY ADDRESS
Stanford University
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I want to start this Class Day Address by congratulating all who are graduating this weekend for having made it to this point – more or less in one piece – and by thanking the Class of 2006 for the invitation to speak. I was immensely touched by your gesture, and promise to do my best to say something profound – or if not profound, at least amusing.

I also want to welcome the parents, families and friends of today's graduates and graduating seniors. This is, indeed, a very special day, one that never fails to move and to inspire even those of us privileged to experience it more than once.

In trying to decide how to frame my remarks today, I did something I don't usually do. I let my mind wander. This wasn't easy for me, as I'm a goal-oriented, no-nonsense, get-to-the-point kind of person. But I held out this time, and – as I hoped it would – the substance of what I want to say to you today came into focus.

I want to take the next 25 minutes or so to talk about four deceptively simple concepts: *utility, humility, honor, and service*. Why these four out of the thousands of possibilities? To be honest, because I wish that someone had addressed them when *I* was sitting, figuratively speaking, where you seniors are now, some 34 years ago.

So, with your indulgence, let us begin. The first of the themes I want to touch on is the concept of *utility*.

Jane and Leland Stanford drew particular attention to the notion of "usefulness" or utility in imparting life to this institution. It has been a hallmark of a Stanford education ever since. But why, among all the virtues, would they single out "usefulness" as something worthy of cultivation and exaltation?

The Stanfords spent a good deal of time meeting with prominent scholars, including university presidents, in the first several years after the death of Leland Stanford, Jr. as they sought to honor the memory of their only child through some kind of an educational statement. In the end, as we know, that statement became this university.

The Stanfords' preoccupation with utility even found its way into the Founding Grant where they declared that the primary object of a Stanford education should be "to qualify students for personal success, and direct usefulness in life." The explicit emphasis on utility suggests, at least to me, that Jane and Leland Stanford were underwhelmed by what they heard – and what they saw – in their extended tour of America's best colleges and universities.

From what I have learned about higher education in the United States in the last quarter of the 19th century, they were right to be concerned. As one observer of the Yale undergraduate

scene wrote at the time, the typical student could be characterized as “a careless man-boy who is chiefly anxious to ‘have a good time’ and [who] shirks his work and deceives his instructors in every possible way.”*

Lest students be seen as the only weak links in this flawed educational chain, faculty – even faculty at such august institutions as that place along the Charles River – were routinely excoriated for their sub-standard performance. One report, produced by members of the Harvard College Committee on Instruction, found that “certain lecturers failed to interest, some were inaudible, and some wasted time dictating data or having it copied from the blackboard.”* Ouch.

Although he died a very rich man, Leland Stanford, Sr. was born into a family of modest means. The same was true for Mrs. Stanford. Throughout their lives, they cherished the sturdy middle-class values with which they had been raised, and were eager to see them perpetuated by the institution that would soon bear their name.

Importantly, they did not set out to create an elite institution modeled on the Ivy League colleges that had both attracted and repelled them. They sought, rather, to create something different, something new: an institution of higher learning decidedly more accessible, more inclusive, and more “practical” than was typical for the time.

Thus, when Stanford opened its doors for the first time in the fall of 1891, women as well as men were welcomed to its classrooms and enrolled students paid no tuition. That inaugural class also included an African American, as well as several students of Asian descent. And from the beginning, Stanford, unlike many of its peer institutions, embraced the opportunity to train people in the professions – in engineering, of course, but also in law and later in business, in medicine, and in education.

In this, as in so many other ways, Stanford was – and remains – different from most of its sister schools. Clayton Brown, a GSB student who spoke at this year’s Founders Day Celebration, characterized Stanford – correctly in my view – as “the first American university” with its emphases on practicality as well as erudition, on turning outward as well as inward, and on running risks in pursuit of excellence.

On Opening Day, October 1, 1891, Stanford President David Starr Jordan reminded members of that first class that they labored under no hallowed traditions; that this new world was theirs to make. “Our university,” he declared,

has no history to fall back upon; no memories of great teachers haunt its corridors; in none of its rooms appear the traces which show where a great man has ever lived or worked. No tender associations cling, ivy-like, to its fresh new walls . . . Traditions and associations it is ours to make.

One hundred fifteen years later, traditions we now have – in abundance. Some, such as the Wacky Walk, are silly, if endearing. Others, such as honoring the founders every year, are solemn and moving. The one that I most cherish, though, because it says so much about us as a community, is the one that all but compels us to make practical use of the marvelous education to which you now lay claim.

My advice to you is to embrace this tradition; let it guide you in everything you do. Whether you know it or not, it’s in your blood; it is now a vital part of who you are. Understand, accept and revel in the fact that you are, indeed, products of “the first *American* university.”

As you burst forth upon the scene, I urge you to do so with energy and determination, certainly, but also – and here I come to my second theme – with *humility*. Being the weak and vain little creatures that we are, we sometimes imagine ourselves to be miniature suns, with the planets, and perhaps even a weak-willed star or two, in perpetual orbit around us. While some might be tempted to forgive this seemingly harmless conceit, I urge you to resist. It is a conception of self that is hideously wrong-headed and profoundly destructive.

The older I get, the more conscious I am of the fact that I am the elaborate construction of others. These include family and friends, of course. But also, and just as importantly, are the teachers, the mentors, the colleagues and yes, even the students, from whom I have learned, and continue to learn, so much. In matters large and small, they have enabled me to grow in ways that I could never have imagined when I set out on this journey three and a half decades ago.

I'm not referring here to the false humility that some have raised to an art form in the mistaken belief that obsequiousness in dealing with others, most notably with superiors, is simply the price of doing business in a world as competitive as the one we inhabit.

There is nothing wrong in feeling a sense of satisfaction – even a bit of pride – in one's accomplishments, whatever they might be. The danger is in believing that you did it all on your own. Guess what? You didn't. None of us did. It can't be done. We are who we are because of the countless acts of kindness that have come our way, many of them from people who were under no obligation whatsoever to lend us a helping hand. And yet they did – time and time again.

Believing in one's self is an essential tool for survival. And many of us find self-confidence – not to be confused with arrogance – an attractive personality trait. But understanding that our ability to navigate successfully the often rocky shoals of life – not to mention the occasional header directly onto the rocks – is the consequence of investments made in us by others, is one of most important lessons you'll ever learn. There is no such thing as a self-made man or a self-made woman. Take my advice: learn this lesson now, lock it in place, and never, ever forget it.

At a dinner for the Stanford Board of Trustees, held at Hoover House in the spring of 2004, President Hennessy asked me take 10 or 15 minutes to preview for Board members what is now known as the Stanford International Initiative, which is the university-wide effort to invigorate and extend Stanford's excellence in international studies. At the conclusion of my remarks, one of the Board members asked why (in his words) "any self-respecting academic" trained, after all, to think, to write and to teach, not to organize, to administer and to implement a campaign as ambitious as the one I had just set out – would agree to undertake such a mission.

"Oh that's an easy one," I said in response. "Whatever modest achievements have come my way professionally are the result of the privilege of my being associated with this University for the past 25 years. Simply put, I owe Stanford everything. And if Stanford – by which I meant President Hennessy in this context – wants me to take on this new task, who am I to decline?"

The point, I trust, is clear. With success comes responsibility – first of all to the people who have made your success possible – but more broadly as well. As you move through life, never forget the debt you owe to that handful of *institutions* that have nurtured and sustained you.

The third theme I want to devote a little time to today is *honor*, by which I mean engaging with others in an honorable way.

There is an ever-present tendency among us deeply flawed humans to do things the easy way and, whenever possible, to cut a corner or two en route if we can achieve our goals more quickly or by expending less effort. Reliance upon such efficiencies is perfectly acceptable – indeed, it often makes sense – but only if in the act of so doing we do not deceive, mislead, or misuse others with whom we are sharing the road.

Dealing with other people – whoever and wherever they may be – in an honorable and trustworthy manner is the essence of the social compact. It is the glue that holds communities together, the lubricant that keeps the wheels turning and the cogs meshing. Violate this most precious of contracts, and we endanger the entire enterprise.

Trust, the confidence that one individual invests in another to do the right thing, whatever that may be – in other words, to act in an honorable way – is the wellspring of an ordered society. Social scientists may not know much. But we have come to understand that an essential precondition for human development is the existence of good institutions – be they economic, political or social in nature. But what *is* a good institution? While a longer explanation would be more satisfying, a shorter one will have to suffice. A good institution is one that is transparent and accountable. One that is not corrupt.

Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? The problem is that most institutions *are* corrupt, to one degree or another, because human beings are not – and will never be – perfect. The fact that we, in virtually everything we do, fall short of some idealized notion of perfection is no excuse, however, to lapse into cynicism, or, worse yet, to act in dishonorable ways because everyone else is doing it – or so it seems.

Institutions that are corrupt can be reformed. New institutions, struggling to take root in inhospitable soil, can grow strong when led tenaciously by committed and honest individuals. Good can and does triumph over evil. Not every time, unfortunately; and certainly not without the expenditure of enormous treasure, human and otherwise. But it does happen. It happens when people conduct themselves with honor, when they treat others as they would wish to be treated, when they abide by the rules that they, themselves, make, and when they believe – as I believe – if not in the perfectibility of human kind than, at the least, in the notion of human progress.

Tolerating, knowingly participating in, or securing advantage from institutions and processes that are corrupt not only weakens the fabric of the society of which you are a part, it also weakens you. It robs you of your honor, and it diminishes your humanity.

My mother used to say to me, “You know, honey, life isn't a dress rehearsal.” It took me years to figure out what she was trying to tell me. I think I get it, finally. I believe she was saying that all of us have but one shot at life. We're not afforded the opportunity to come back to the starting line to run the race over again. We can't right the wrongs we committed the first time around in some future life. This is it.

So, by all means, make the most of life. But live that life – your life, that is – with integrity and conviction. In everything you undertake, do your utmost to conduct yourself honorably – not so that others will think well of you, but because it's the right thing to do. Trust me on this one: there is no way to live a morally satisfying life without a moral compass. Let honor be that compass.

The last concept I want to touch on today is *service*. I'll skip the exhortation, now so familiar to you all, that as you do well across the long arc of your career, be sure to husband your time and resources so that you can also do good. Working on behalf of others – in whatever way brings you pleasure – is as much a part of your Stanford experience as never going to bed before 2:00 in the morning. You certainly don't need another lecture from me on the topic at this late date.

I want, in any event, to make a somewhat different point. When you do direct your attention to some socially beneficial activity, I implore you to pick one that will test you to your very core; pick one for which you are less than ideally suited, either by temperament or by training; pick one that at some level gives you the "heeby jeebies," – one that at first blush makes you want to bend over and throw up on your shoes.

Where, exactly, is he going with this, you may be asking? Let me cut to the chase. The most rewarding experiences I have ever had have been those that required me to fight above my weight class – in other words, that demanded of me a level of performance far in excess of anything I had ever demonstrated. This has certainly been the case in my professional life. But it has also guided the choices I have made in terms of public service.

Some of you know that I have twice taken leaves of absence from Stanford to work in Washington, D.C. The first time, when I was in my early thirties, it was to work as a legislative assistant to a U.S. senator – a job, by the way, for which I was objectively unqualified. Despite this fact, I survived and gradually came to understand what was expected of me. And along the way, I learned a lot.

The second time was to serve as special assistant for national security affairs to President Clinton. When a senior member of the President's staff called to sound me out about joining the administration, my first instinct was to pretend that I didn't speak English. My second thought was to chuck the phone out the hotel window where I happened to be staying at the time. I knew a little bit about these positions, and I knew one had to be seriously disordered – deranged, in fact – to accept such a commission.

My reluctance to sign on was based on several considerations, including the incredibly long hours and the nearly complete loss of privacy that are the very essence of these kinds of positions.

But this wasn't what concerned me the most; it was something else entirely. The truth is I had no idea how to *be* a special assistant to the president. There was no manual to read to help me prepare, no clever little 20-minute DVD that I could pop in and watch, secure in the knowledge that I now knew all I needed to know before plunging in.

The night before my first day at the White House I remember thinking, "Of all the stupid things you've ever done in your life, this one really takes the cake. How long is it going to take them to figure out that they've made a colossal mistake, that they have, in fact, hired a total nincompoop." How long can I last in this job? A month? A week? A day?

I had this image in my head of walking in to brief the president for the first time and suddenly losing consciousness or uttering complete nonsense or tripping on the carpet and splitting my head open on the corner of his desk. I'm not making this up.

The old adage, "That which doesn't kill us, makes us stronger," kept coming to mind as I watched the minutes tick by on my last night as a civilian. I'm pleased to report that my

service at the NSC did not kill me. There were times, to be sure, in the moment, when I wished it would, but these became less and less frequent as time went on. It did make me stronger. And it did change my life – for the better.

The lesson is a simple one. However you choose to serve, make sure it demands more of you than you believe you are capable of giving. Because only by moving beyond our comfort zones can we access that part of us that we didn't even know existed. And it is through this process – and only through this process, as painful and disorienting as it is – that we grow, that we mature, and that we contribute to the very best of our ability.

So, dear graduates of the Class of 2006, the wait is over. It's time to stop revving your engines and to get out on the track. Life beckons.

As you set out from this glorious place, please know that all of us who have been a part of your education at Stanford wish you both happiness and success.

If you remember nothing else of what I've said today – and believe me, you won't remember much – please register and store the following for future reference. Be useful. Be humble. Act honorably. And give of yourself until it hurts.

Thank you very much, and good luck.

* Quoted from Derek C. Bok. *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.