Oxford College
of
Emory University

Commencement Address

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Thank you, Dean Bowen, members of the Oxford faculty, administration and staff for allowing me to be with you on this special day.

Dean Bowen, I know this address is for this year’s Oxford graduates, but it also is for you. Indeed, it’s about you. Thank you for all you have done for Oxford.

I am humbled to speak to you today, graduates of the Oxford class of 2016, because it is a true honor to represent my Oxford class of 45 years ago. As I am older than your parents, maybe I have a few things to share with them along with you today about my journey after Oxford. My journey isn’t really that different from other Oxford graduates, so it may resonate with you. Maybe that’s why I was asked to speak with you today, since there are many other much more distinguished Commencement speakers who have spoken to prior classes and certainly will speak to future classes.

Yours is a wonderfully diverse Oxford class: in ethnicity, beliefs, national origin, life experiences. You came to Oxford from places as near as Covington and as far as New Delhi and Beijing. But now you share a common, unbreakable bond: you are Oxford graduates. It is a timeless bond; as I know: relationships formed here will be with you the rest of your life. Those relationships are integral to the Oxford experience, created by the very soul of this place, and they have given you the early foundation
for a life of character infused with meaning and purpose. Let me share some thoughts with you about this.

The dictionary defines Soul as “the central or integral part; the vital core.” While one may argue Oxford is a Place and cannot by definition have a Soul, the human beings that have passed through here over nearly two centuries have created a Sense of Place that is both physical and spiritual. Its unseen tethers bond us together as Oxford alumni. Our Collective Soul drives us to purposeful behavior founded on our values. Your Oxford professors have sought to nurture, maybe even awaken, this in you. The words of C.S. Lewis all the way back to 1943 ring true today, “the task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.” Your Oxford education has sought to encourage and challenge your intellect while irrigating your soul.

In a real sense, the outward projection of Soul is Character. What do I mean by Character? The dictionary defines Character as “a person’s attributes, traits or abilities.” In elaboration, persons of strong character make principled decisions and take principled action. Something that sets Oxford apart from others is its community which is small and thus more tightly connected, reserved just for freshmen and sophomores, attracting faculty who really want to work with freshman and sophomore students. Because of the personal relationships between faculty and students, and students with each other, Oxford challenges and supports
individual students in ways that build character through accountability.

David Brooks, one of my favorite contemporary authors, wrote in “The Road to Character” about people with an “inner cohesion” attained through life’s learnings from both joy and pain, building a strong inner character and depth. Brooks said, “In these people, at the end of this struggle (toward maturity), the climb to success has surrendered to the struggle to deepen the soul”. Oxford certainly provided a naïve farm boy like me with an incredible start to my adult life with its emphasis appreciating the value of a strong inner character, much as Brooks points out in his writings. There is no doubt that the loving guidance provided by my parents were formative in setting my values: humility, fairness and caring of others, while instilling a demanding work ethic to achieve beyond others’ expectations. Oxford further nurtured this in me as a young man and I’ve been building on it ever since, in an uneven, non-linear path, but building on it nonetheless. Whether it was such character-building experiences as being Dooley’s Spokesperson or the sage guidance of my Oxford professors that I was not destined to be a medical doctor, Oxford certainly prepared me for my adult life. I’ve enjoyed a lot of personal success in my life: a great marriage of now over 37 years and a great career of over 40 years. But all of it took a lot of hard work and commitment. Anything of real value takes hard work and commitment, with bumps and bruises along the way, but with real joy in the journey.
Character is especially important in leaders. They should challenge you to a higher purpose and build on your soul. For many years, fortunately, I have worked for principled leaders at Rollins and let me tell you, it makes it much easier to do my job to attract, develop and keep talented people when our employees are encouraged always to “do the right thing” with each other and their customers. Let me give you a quick example of what I mean: After Hurricane Sandy in the Northeast, several of our employees suffered significant damage to their homes and they could not pay for the repairs. We could have easily just expressed sympathy and left them to handle it. Instead, my company’s leaders stepped in and contributed both company and personal money to help them. Additionally, like a number of responsible employers, we have since set up a non-profit foundation to help our employees with any future disasters. So, work for ethical leaders, not bad actors.

You are already leaders in different ways because of your Oxford experience and you will grow even more in your leadership skills and roles as you gain work experience. But the world will expect more of you and you should expect more of yourself, too, because others less talented and resourceful than you will need you. They will not expect you to be perfect, but they will expect you to care as a leader.

So, fellow Oxford graduates, I speak to you today as one further down the path toward maturity. We are all
incomplete in our journeys; either in earlier or later stages of maturation. We are still building upon our Souls and our Skills. My Oxford professors, among them, Bond Fleming, Marshall Elizer, Curry T. Haynes, Hoyt Oliver and now, your professors, Stephen Bowen, Mike McQuaide and their colleagues, have sought to irrigate our deserts; to fuel our lives to be led with meaning and purpose. But what is this mandate for such a purpose? We must pursue endeavors that spark a passion deep within us, giving us a sense of joy in the use of our gifts. But that joy is not the same as peacefulness, fun or comfort, but in fact is fraught with great sacrifice and discomfort. Why? Because as I learned in Oxford Biology, organisms only have fleeting moments of homeostatic equilibrium: organisms are either growing or dying. Growth demands discomfort, dissatisfaction with the status quo and with current self. A drive to achieve -- to excel -- to grow in our Souls and Skills. Oxford, more than most places, with its dedication to principled teaching, has sought to grow the Souls and Skills of those that pass through this unique Place. Do not waste this incredible gift by settling for a path that you cannot be passionate about or fails to bring purposeful joy, because if you settle, you will not use your talents to serve the world community in some meaningful way. As Brooks asks, “What problem is addressed by an activity you intrinsically enjoy?” So, your selected vocation must seek to solve outside, deeper problems in the community beyond your own personal needs, or your vocation will be just be passing the time; a superficial transaction simply for the purpose of collecting a paycheck. If a person with a limited education and
modest talents will rise to the occasion to serve a higher purpose, then how can you justify not doing the same?

This internal conflict and drive to excel within us cannot be an excuse to be insensitive to others, especially those in our family or at work. Indeed, the use of our talents must be ever attuned to fairness and sensitivity to those around us. Remember, you may be now and certainly will become more talented and skilled than most, but you are better than none. Your Oxford education must be toward a higher end: not just for personal achievement or the drive of the “shrewd animal” that David Brooks speaks about to “make [your] ascent more aerodynamic.” But to be Brooks’ person of real character with an inevitably flawed effort but true moral purpose, your talents must be used for a higher purpose beyond your own selfishness. Use your Soul as the guide for your Skills.

In closing, I confess that I don’t remember a word that my Oxford class’ Commencement Speaker said. I don’t even remember who the Speaker was. Assuredly, most of you will forget my words today, but I may be able to assist some of you in a way you will remember. To help you find a place in the world where you can act on your Oxford-fostered character, I offer to teach each member of the Oxford Class of 2016 who is ready to enter the workforce after completion of a bachelor’s degree how to find a job. I make this offer at no cost to you for my services --- getting anything from Emory for no cost will be unique in your Emory relationship, let me assure you. I will not
find or give you a job, but I will teach you some concepts about how to find a job that I have successfully taught hundreds of others over the past 25 years of my Human Resources career. I’m confident most of you will not take me up on this offer, but it stands as an offer to all. Just tell the Emory Career Center about your interest and they’ll set you up to visit with me beginning early in the Fall Semester.

Thank you for bearing with me while I rambled on today. I wish you a long, prosperous and meaningful life.