

## **Commencement Address for Portland State University By James DePreist**

*Delivered On June 14, 2003 at The Rose Garden Arena, Portland, Oregon*

President Bernstine, distinguished faculty and guests, parents, friends, graduates:

Although being asked to deliver the commencement address at a distinguished institution of higher learning such as Portland State is a distinct honor, it comes with a sobering caveat: no one ever recalls either the speech or the speaker at graduation.

In general, commencement addresses come in the two standard lengths—too long and far too long. They are by turns predictable and pompous or boring and banal...all of them eminently forgettable. And probably mine will be no different. In fact, expectations are so low that even one original thought or meager insight per twenty minutes can be regarded as a triumph. But having done this a few times, I've discovered a technique that seems to be somewhat effective, one marked by stealth and intellectual blindsiding. Against this tactic, I have found audiences generally to be utterly defenseless. So this morning, if I'm lucky, anything truly worth hearing will tend to sneak up on your consciousness and hit you before you can fully doze off.

Having spent so much time in preamble you will be delighted to know that my time is almost up, but before those much longed for words—"and in conclusion"—I invite you to consider the following:

Graduates, the world in which we live is a mess. Myth masquerading as truth, our beloved United States is in crisis, many of its fundamental principles under assault. And yet, a goodly number of your fellow Americans seem oblivious...sleepwalking through these alarming times, heedless and gullible beyond belief. Our country simply cannot afford this and our hard won freedoms cannot long bear the weight of an unenlightened citizenry. This has nothing whatsoever to do with the unspeakable horror of September 11th or the very real menace of world terrorism. History has clearly shown that the ultimate weapon of mass destruction for any society is ignorance.

Those poor young souls whose promise spilled red onto the beaches of Normandy...that tragic society of the abridged, abed in Arlington, did not so bravely fall in order to preserve a nation that would so easily allow the raging torrent of their authentic patriotism and courage to become mere rivulets of passivity and acquiescence.

If some can sacrifice their lives then surely the rest of us can give our attention. I am certain that you are not graduating from this wonderful university in order to join the choir of the complacent. That chorus is large enough and sadly includes much of our once vibrant press. Former Vice President Spiro Agnew, the phrase-fashioning future felon of the Nixon administration, delighted in characterizing the media as "those nattering nabobs of negativism." But with few exceptions, it seems to me, the nattering of the nabobs has become the silence of the lambs. In a democracy, a free press is a vital bulwark against the excesses of those in power...democrats and republicans alike. This is not a matter of partisan politics, rather, it concerns the role of a populace in a government Of—By—And For—The People. Yes, a free press is essential to a free society. All we ask—tell us the truth. It is our free press that should distinguish spin from substance, and not add posturing and platitudes to the national discourse. The stakes in a democracy are too high to allow us a swing in the hammock of simplistic thinking. We must demand more of those in power no matter the political party. Stupidity is an equal opportunity failing.

To the noble enterprise of participatory democracy we must bring ideas that will enhance the public good. Cynics chuckle at this notion but cynicism is the refuge of the impotent and the badge of those who really don't give a damn.

You can help change all that. You can change it with quality ideas and inspired execution. Be assured that others will be at work to stop you. So the choice is yours. Participate vigorously or be content to be defined

by others. But in this terrain your words and concepts can have profound consequences. They can ennoble and enrich the arena of human intention or they can debase both language and life with lethal implications. Language—words—words should be more than mere linguistics "Lego." They should be symptoms of ideas, and a democracy begins to stray off course when the ideas it needs are drowned out by the din of the enthralled. Governments must understand that the natural corollary of power is humility, not arrogance. For arrogance breeds the feeling of invincibility...the handmaiden of disaster.

We do have much to be proud of but self-congratulation should never be a growth industry. Patting ourselves on the back at every turn tends to overlook the vital work remaining to be done...work that requires both hands. At any given time democracies need most of all the leavening good sense of our outlaw ideas. Ideas such as emancipation—women's suffrage—environmental protection...you know, small issues like these. Often the message is merely a call to first principles...a reminder that when our deeds fail to measure up to our lofty words, we dishonor both the ideals and ourselves. It took a massive civil rights march and demonstration in our nation's capitol to frame Dr. Martin Luther King's summons to our better selves: "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today." The irony of the context of Dr. King's speech, the essence of its impact, is usually lost. About a year after his assassination I received a score of a work for chorus and orchestra based on the speeches of Dr. King. It was stunning music. But there was one problem. The "I have a dream" section inspired by the beauty and nobility of the words, was too beautiful; it was misleading. This is why: The reason for that speech's poignant impact was its being declaimed in that setting—a civil rights demonstration. Harsh reality was in marked contrast to Dr. King's dream.

That's the point: the tragic bittersweet chasm between dream and reality, between a nation's words and its deeds...beauty in the wings. You must find the ideas that our society needs to hear and make your country heed your words. At the 1964 Republican convention Sen. Barry Goldwater let fly this provocative clarion reaffirmation: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice and moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue." Could the senator have been thinking of the Declaration of Independence and our revolutionary war led by that ragtag band of left-wing extremists like Washington, Jefferson, and Patrick Henry? Just imagine the list of those who today could rally 'round the banner emblazoned with Goldwater's words. Over here—the leaders of every coherent left-of-center and radical group. Right next to the team of Ashcroft, Rumsfeld, Rice, and Wolfowitz who in turn, are alongside Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins, and Ralph Nader. All of them listening to a concert by Lee Greenwood and the Dixie Chicks. You get the picture. The strangest of bedfellows all believing that Goldwater means them! At the center of the work of democracy is the avoidance of the difficult ascent to anarchy on the one hand and the far easier slippery slope toward fascism on the other. The navigational chart for our ship of state is the constitution. But make no mistake, the nation is kept on course—true to its promise and principles—by the people. All of its people. It is so very easy to veer dangerously off course.

I was in high school during the McCarthy reign of terror. It was a menacing and disgraceful time in the nation's history. The senator's "weapons of mass destruction," which he looked for everywhere, were communists. It was a time of loyalty oaths, neighbor asked to spy on neighbor, blacklists, wiretaps, and guilt by accusation and innuendo. The self-righteous wrapped themselves in the flag and denounced anyone who disagreed with them as being un-American and unpatriotic. Lives and careers were destroyed with reckless abandon. Let me know if any of this sounds familiar. One of the victims was my English teacher who was charged with nothing, but ruined nonetheless. He returned from testifying to tell us goodbye. But there were no words that day...they were not really necessary. His name had shown up on some supposed informant's list and he was gone. His legacy? Tears, anger, and the enduring question: "How can so splendid a country get so tragically screwed up?" In my mind our ovation for Mr. Soler has never stopped. Eventually McCarthy was taken on by one courageous and patriotic journalist, the legendary Edward R. Murrow on the CBS television network in prime time. McCarthy was soon discredited and he was gone. But McCarthyism continually reinvents itself and lives. As if once was not enough.

Graduates, an agenda awaits you: assuring quality education, affordable health care, hope for the homeless, eradicating hunger, protecting our environment, fostering arts and culture, advancing the cause of peace and justice.... Why can't we adopt a policy of preemption and attack these targets of opportunity? You can change all this. Each generation of Americans is asked to be vigilant against the erosion of our constitutional rights. The task of your generation is more than mere vigilance. Of you will be demanded the reclamation of eroded guarantees. By so doing, you will define a patriotism devoid of theatricality and profoundly authentic. It will not be easy. The era of Enron is distinguished by the almost-routine facilitation of malfeasance. Unbelievably, Enron actually had a code of ethics, but when greed entered the boardroom it was accompanied by an elemental cynicism that enabled the assembled to vote to suspend this inconvenient code so that they could plan the violation of law in strict conformity to Robert's Rules of Order...much like using a sterile alcohol swab before giving a lethal injection. In some quarters integrity, it seems, is becoming an endangered species.

But you can change all of that...and must. We all must, for yours is a multigenerational struggle, as vital to your parents as it is to your children. It is a quintessentially American struggle...a call not to arms but to our senses. Our sense of justice, our sense of duty, our sense of compassion, our sense of global interdependence, our sense of history, our sense of humanity, our sense of humility, and our sense of honesty. A great nation when it is in the wrong should have no trouble saying "my bad," and when it is in the right should allow others to trumpet the triumph. Being right is its own reward.

And in conclusion.... Today is a time to celebrate, a time to enjoy that which you have earned. But soon, after the parties, the congratulations, and the fun, you will have to choose.... In the crucible of conscience, you must opt either for the pragmatist's path of unruffled ease or for the rougher road of principle. You can transform the world. Just do it.

© 2003 James DePreist