

Drake University Undergraduate Commencement
May 12, 2007
David Maxwell, President

As most of you know – well, at least those of you who actually read emails from the president know – a while back I sent you a request for input on my Commencement remarks. I really did want to know what’s on your minds as you face the rest of your lives – and you gave me wonderfully serious, thoughtful, and thought-provoking responses. I wish that I had the time to quote a whole bunch of your responses, to share with you the sense of who you are that you communicated to me. I cannot begin to tell you how impressed I was with what you care about, and what you’re worried about as I read those emails.

I should note that one of you told me that if I even mentioned Coach Tom Davis’ name, I’d make your father’s whole day. But I’m sorry, I can’t do that – it wouldn’t be appropriate...

But it’s the request that I received from a number of you that I found most enticing, but it wasn’t as easy as it looked. Many of you graciously asked, in one form or another, “What is it that *you* hope we have gained or learned at Drake?” Someone else said, “Tell us what you wish you knew upon your own undergraduate commencement,” and another of your classmates simply asked, “*You’re* the president of the University – what do you want us to think about? It’s your last chance!” (That’s assuming that you won’t come to alumni events, which would be a foolish choice on your part!).

What a seductive opportunity for an aging college professor who’s gone over to the dark side of administration! Assuming that these requests represent the will of the whole graduating class (an assumption I’m all too willing to make), I’ve got hundreds of people asking me to tell them whatever I want them to know, whatever I want them to think about on this important day in their lives. Humanity has been failing to live up to my expectations for six decades, and I’ve got the chance to tell a large group of really bright, highly educated people what they need to do about it. *What* an opportunity!

But, as I said, it’s *not* that easy. I hesitate to say what I’d *really* like to tell you, to say what I believe *deeply* that you should know and care about, because these days I doubt that I could do that without offending someone. Not because of *what* I think, or *what* I believe, but because the degradation of public discourse, the disappearance of civility and respectful disagreement, in the last decade or so have led me to believe that no matter *what* you say on any issue of any

importance at all, *someone* will manage to be offended by it, and the last thing I want to do is offend anybody on this wonderful day.

We have become so polarized as a society, so intolerant of people who think differently than we do, that sometimes it seems impossible to say anything meaningful without inadvertently starting a fight (at least a war of words, or a series of outraged emails). Some of us have become so intolerant of others' beliefs – or so arrogant about the primacy of their own – that they condemn people to hell – or to death – for being as passionate about their beliefs as we are about our own, different beliefs; so intolerant of the behavior of others that is different from our own norms; *so ready to slap labels on one another*.

Some of you may know that in a former life I was a professor of Russian language and literature. And my faculty and staff colleagues who have attended the previous 7 commencements over which I have presided know that I've got my own tradition – I can't make it through my remarks without invoking one of my Russian masters. There are several 19th Century Russian authors (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov) who have had an immense influence on the way in which I see the world, and on my values and principles. So, like any good disciple, when faced with a challenge I turn to my masters for inspiration and guidance – and I'd like to share with you a passage from a letter that Chekhov wrote to his publisher in 1888, when he was only 28 years old – a passage that for decades has been part of my own personal "scriptures," and that expresses far better than I have the dilemma that confronts me today:

The people I am afraid of are the ones who . . . are determined to see me as either liberal or conservative. I am neither liberal, nor conservative, nor gradualist, nor monk, nor indifferentist. . . I hate lies and violence in all their forms . . . I look upon tags and labels as prejudices. My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom imaginable, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form the latter two take.

So *am* I going to take the plunge and risk having labels slapped on me, risk pushing hot buttons, risk being seen as a liberal, or conservative, or gradualist (whatever that is), or a monk? *Of course I am!* I spend too much time talking about the importance of taking intelligent and creative risks as vital to your education, to your success as a professional, and to our evolution as a society to back down now! So here goes...here's the answer to that question – what do *I* want you to think about?:

There are events, and people, and forces that are shaping our world – and shaping our future – that worry me, and I want you to think about them too,

and more than that I want you to think about what you're going to *do* about them. My own personal list is pretty long, but I'll send you off with Maxwell's current top eight:

1. For two centuries, the United States has been a model of freedom, ingenuity, opportunity, justice and achievement for the world. Now much of the world is afraid of us, and an increasing number of people hate us – whether or not you agree with the reasons, we need to do something about it.
2. The public education system in America is failing to prepare our children for higher education, for the workplace, for meaningful engagement in a participatory democracy, and for the challenges of the 21st century – and it is completely failing an increasing number of low-income students whose chance to escape abysmal conditions disappears as they drop out before graduating.
3. The yawning gap between the people who have things and the people who don't is widening, both domestically and on a global scale – that is morally unacceptable, economically unstable, and politically dangerous.
4. There are millions and millions of people around the world who are dying of hunger, thirst, malnutrition, and diseases that can be prevented or cured.
5. As Sam Harris has said, “people are killing each other over whose books were written by God.”
6. We are rapidly making our planet unsustainable and inhospitable.
7. In what one of my colleagues has called the “resurgence of irrationality,” we seem to be entrenched in a period of phenomenological relativism, in which all too many people – including prominent public figures – seem to be under the delusion that *belief* and *assertion* have the same rhetorical weight as *knowledge* and verifiable *fact* – to put it simply, that it's ok for them to argue against something that we *know* by simply asserting something different, even if they only *believe* it and don't have the evidence to *know* it.
8. And last, we in America are in the process of abdicating our role in determining our own future – we are abdicating our responsibility to the world's greatest democracy. The percentage of people who participate in elections at all levels – local, state and national – is abysmal. Adding to the problem is the fact we have allowed the consultants and the pollsters to hijack the national policy agenda, building coalitions of one-issue voters that enable their candidate to gain office. We are not, for the most part, demanding that

candidates for national office focus substantively on the issues that will shape our future as a nation; we are not demanding that they engage with us and with each other with respect and civility; we are not demanding that they tell us how they will use public policy to make *everyone's* lives better.

Perhaps the most important things I want you to know is this: I think you have an *obligation* to do something – an obligation that derives from the *privilege* of a Drake University education. Even more, you *can* do something about these things. You *are* capable of making things better.

I want you to know that you as students at Drake University have impressed *everyone* at this University with your intelligence, your passion, your creativity, your talent, your humor, your integrity, your commitment to justice, your curiosity, your sense of fun, your concern for the welfare of others. You are graduating from a very, very special place that has promised you, in its *Mission Statement*, to prepare you for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishment, and responsible global citizenship.

Again, you asked me what it is that *I* hope that you've learned at Drake University. Our *Mission Explication* document explains what we have promised you as graduates of Drake University. It says, in part, that if we've kept that promise, and you've kept up your end of the bargain, you have the ability to:

- Value the knowledge, perspectives, and input of others.
- Understand that important issues rarely have one, simple solution, and are able to manage the complexity of the challenges that face us.
- Appreciate that there are multiple ways of knowing, from the analytical to the creative.
- Maintain professional practices that are consistent with ethical judgment and stewardship responsibilities
- Understand the impact that our nation and its cultures have on the larger global community.
- Assume responsibility for the common good of local, national, and global communities.
- Fulfill your responsibilities as citizens in a participatory democracy.

I hope that each of you feels that we have kept that promise, for it is within that promise – and your embodiment of its ideals – that I find abundant reason for unbounded confidence in your futures as individuals, in our future as a nation, and in our collective future as a global community. I know that as you go forward, you will cherish your years at Drake, and that you will cherish the relationships that you developed here – many of which will continue for a

lifetime. But my confidence in you and your future derives from the certainty that you will also cherish – and embody – for the rest of your lives the ideals that bind us as the Drake family here on campus: the importance of *knowing* things, mutual respect and concern for the welfare of others, sense of community, ethical behavior, the quest for new and better ideas, and a passion for truth and justice.