

As those of you who read emails from the President of the University know, right after Spring Break I sent out a message to graduating seniors that asked for your suggestions on my remarks today – what would you like to hear me talk about for a few minutes in the midst of this wonderful ceremony that marks a major passage in your life? This is the fifth year that I have been soliciting this input, and I have been continually struck by the thoughtfulness, reflection, excitement and enthusiasm of the responses. Your comments this year have been no different in their depth and sensitivity, and I want to start by expressing my deep gratitude to you for your trust and generosity in sharing your concerns with me. And, not surprisingly, there is a consistent, deep current of healthy apprehension (if there is such a thing) about the world that you face after graduation: “What is it like out there, and how do you know I’m ready for it?”

This theme was wonderfully stated by one of you, saying: “We all know that there is life after college. But not the life we had at Drake, and that’s where we get a little nervous. . . And, in a sense, we look to you at graduation to now direct us out the door, into the real world.” I’m happy to do that, of course – humanity has been failing to live up to my expectations for decades, and as an aging college professor I’m always delighted for the opportunity to tell other people how to live their lives.

But you should know that scattered throughout your responses to me was compelling evidence of the fact that you don’t really need my help or direction, and I find that immensely reassuring. As one of you said, “The biggest thing that I have learned through my years at Drake is that I have the power to create my own path in life, something I can be proud of and happy doing. . . I feel like I have learned a secret and I am so excited for the future.”

One of you also noted that you “enjoyed the brevity” of my previous Commencement remarks, so I want to assure you that I got that message as well. I *think* you meant it as a compliment.

I’d like to tell you a story about a recent luncheon I attended at Drake with Erik Peterson, head of the 7 Revolutions Initiative in Washington DC, Profs. De Laet and Skidmore, and several students. They had just come from Prof. De Laet’s class, where they had discussed the 7 revolutions, or forces, that Mr. Peterson and his colleagues have identified as those that will shape our world in the next twenty years: population; resource management; technology; knowledge; economic integration; conflict; and governance, or leadership. For those of you who attended Mr. Peterson’s Bucksbaum Lecture that night, you know that these forces represent tremendous challenge, and that the future health and vitality of our society, and of our planet, depend entirely on our ability to confront and manage them successfully.

At the luncheon, one of your classmates asked Mr. Peterson a question that was wonderfully phrased, wonderfully passionate and sincere. She asked (and my paraphrase won't do her justice), "OK, I'm graduating from a terrific University, I'm smart, well-educated, energetic, committed and I have the time to do anything I want to do. Where do I start? How do I make a difference? These things are so huge – how does one person make a difference?"

Mr. Peterson's answer was a story about playing chess one day in DuPont Circle in Washington, where he was a graduate student. He noticed a man walking through DuPont Circle carrying a large sign – when he was able to make it out, it read, "*Embrace a dignified cause.*" *Embrace a dignified cause* – that's really the answer, isn't it – you need to find something you care about deeply and passionately, something that's not about *you*, but about *others*, an issue essential to the quality of the human experience, now and forever, embrace it and throw yourself into it. My personal definition of what qualifies as a dignified cause relates to justice, equality, freedom, human dignity and potential, education, truth, beauty, civility, the common good and respect for the environment that we inhabit. *Embrace a dignified cause.*

But the question remains, how do you go about doing it, really – how do I want to "direct you out the door?" The other day, after a lengthy Planning Council meeting on the University's new Strategic Plan had just concluded, my colleague John Smith had a wonderful insight. He said, in essence, "Don't you think what the students have to do now as they leave the University is a microcosm of what we're doing for the whole institution, stepping off from a position of strength, vitality and excitement, and shaping our own collective future?" He was absolutely right – the fundamental principles by which an organization such as Drake must plan and carry out its future form a perfect set of instructions for you as you answer those big questions, "What happens next? How do I make a difference?" So here goes – here's a strategic approach to the rest of your life.

First, and most important, there's the vision – what is your vision of your future, five years from now, 20 years from now, 50 years from now? Not just what you want to be doing, but *who do you want to be?* Can you identify the characteristics that make you – or will make you – uniquely *you*? Obviously, the farther out you get, the more speculative it becomes, but the exercise itself is tremendously informative and clarifying. *Who do you want to be? What will define who you are?* (I can tell you that wealth, position and power are *really bad* answers to that latter question...).

Next, what are your assumptions about the environment in which you will operate? This one is complicated, but essential, and requires research and thoughtfulness. In planning the University's future, we are assuming that the very nature of teaching and learning will change, that social structures and communications channels are changing dramatically, that many of the careers into which our students will graduate

don't exist yet, so how do we prepare them for uncertainty and exploration? I think you can ask that same question of yourself. What are your assumptions about the world in which your vision of yourself is grounded, and what's your evidence for those assumptions?

Third, what are the challenges ahead that must be managed, and – at best – exploited? For the University, it's changing student demographics, vacillations in the financial environment, the fact that our endowment currently isn't large enough to support our ambitious aspirations, that in many fields there is a growing shortage of qualified faculty. For you, perhaps Erik Peterson's 7 Revolutions are a good start – how are you going to reach your goals in the context of those global challenges that affect every one of us. On a more personal level, there's the balance between work and family, finding a career that brings intellectual and emotional satisfaction as well as income, finding time to ensure physical, emotional and spiritual health.

Next, and here's where we get specific – *you need a plan*, a strategic plan for your life, or at least – as we do for the University – the next *five years* of that life. What are the concrete objectives that will take you that one big, five-year step toward making your vision of your life come true? What are the specific strategies that you must implement to realize those objectives? For Drake to fulfill our vision as a national model for the very best in higher education, our objectives focus on an exceptional learning and living environment for our students, an exceptional work environment for our faculty and staff, on the role of the University in serving the common good, and on ensuring that we have the foundation on which to build our future. What are your personal objectives – the *big* things that you need to accomplish to move you toward making your vision a reality? And what are the concrete steps – the strategies – that you need in order to fulfill those objectives?

Fifth, what resources – tangible and intangible--will you need? A University needs people, physical plant, and financial resources to achieve its mission. Will you need more education, and money to pay for it, do you need more reflective self-knowledge in order to become the person you want to be? What kind of personal network of family, friends and professional contacts will you need?

Next, you need to recognize – as we do as a University – that we exist in a dynamic, rapidly-changing environment, and that there may well be major factors in your future that you cannot even imagine today. If we had created a 20-year vision for Drake University in 1985, envisioning the Drake of 2005, we would not have come up with the Internet and the web, or cell phones and text messaging, or web cams and podcasts. Think of how far off the mark we would have been. The message in this is that while you can't lose sight of the vision, you have to have the flexibility, the responsiveness, the adaptability and the courage to flourish in the context of change over which you have little control. The vision doesn't have to change – but the route you take to get

there probably will – perhaps numerous times. You also to step back periodically, as objectively as you can, and reassess your vision, goals and objectives – are they still right for you, are they still the most appropriate in the context of a changing environment?

And that's where your Drake education comes in: if we have truly prepared you, as our Mission Statement promises we will, for "meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishment and responsible global citizenship," then you have developed the intellectual tools, the habits of mind, the knowledge, the perspectives and the strength to not only predict and respond to change, but to manage it, exploit it for the good of the cause, and – most important – *to make change happen*.

Which takes us right back to the issue with which we started, doesn't it – how do you make a difference, how do you make change happen? *Embrace a dignified cause*. Have a vision of *who* you want to become. Have a plan to get there. Be flexible, be adaptable. Be patient; be determined. Be selfless.

Let me close by sharing with you a very personal metric for all this. When I get to that point that it's time to look back at my life and assess it (I'm probably already at that age chronologically, but I know I don't yet have the maturity to do it), I already know what the most important question will be – it's the question that shapes my behavior every day as I decide what I am going to do and how I'm going to do it, and I'm going to be presumptuous enough to suggest that you ought to be asking it too, as part of your vision of yourself. It's a simple question: "Does it *matter* that I'm here? Is the fact that I'm occupying space on the planet worth it to *other people* – not just to me – or am I just using up oxygen, water and food for my own self-interest? Is there a *chance* that the world will be better because I was here?" It's a simple question, but it sure does help you get your priorities in order. I hope that your vision of yourself requires that you be able to answer that question with a resounding "yes;" knowing so many of you as I do, I can't imagine otherwise. You're already making a difference and you're already asking all the right questions. The answers will come.

We congratulate you on everything that you have done so far, on what you will do in the future, and – most important – for *who* you are. You *will* matter. You *have* to.