

Someone once said, “There’s only one graduation speech, and it’s given thousands of times every year.” It is impossible to overstate how difficult it is to figure out how to say something meaningful and memorable to a group of graduating seniors who have been chilling for days and now are waiting for you to be done so that they can go out for brunch with their families! And I hope that you notice what I just tried to sneak past you – I just indulged in the time-honored tradition of the *commencement meta-speech*, starting one’s remarks with a soliloquy about how hard it is to *write* that speech. It’s an avoidance strategy exploited by virtually every commencement speaker – you get to start talking without *saying* anything, but I’ve never done it before and I wanted to see what it felt like. It feels silly.

The reality is that it’s never been difficult in my seven years at Drake to know *what* to say to you as you mark this important passage in your lives – it’s deciding *which* of the many things I want to say is what I think you need to hear on this morning. Because you’ve made it easy for me – when I sent you an email weeks ago asking you what you’d like to hear me talk about at Commencement, and I heard from dozens and dozens of you. You told me that you worry about what’s out there after graduation, and whether or not you’re ready for it (one of you made me promise I wouldn’t use the term “real world,” so “ready for *it*.”)

Some of you wanted to know if it’s ok if you don’t have your life figured out yet as you walk across this stage this morning. (that one’s easy: “YES, it’s fine!”) And you asked what I hope for and expect of you as graduates of Drake University.

And what you told me in response to my email, over and over, in a variety of different ways, is summed up by one comment that read, “I suppose it would be nice to have a big brother kind of talk – tell us *what we need to hear rather than what we want or expect to hear*.”

I wish that I could address all of the questions and suggestions, but I can’t, of course, so please know that even if you don’t hear an echo of your words in what I say today, I heard them and I thank you for them. What struck me in virtually all of your comments is the way in which you opened up your hearts in responding, and that you wanted the same from me – not just what I *think* and want you to *know*, but what I *feel* and what I *believe*. I’m touched and honored – and I hope you don’t regret it!

There’s a wonderful B movie that was made in the 70s called “Middle Age Crazy,” with Bruce Dern and Ann Margret – two names I’m sure most of you don’t recognize. While attending his son’s high school graduation, as the class valedictorian drones on with platitudes about the promise of their future, Bruce

Dern fantasizes about giving an *honest* graduation speech—something along the lines of, “don’t graduate! Don’t go out there! It’s awful—your parents and the rest of our generation have screwed everything up for you beyond repair and it’s hopeless! Don’t grow up – it’s not worth it!” The actual scene is a lot funnier, and a lot more risqué, than my paraphrase—but it’s a takeoff on the other predictable theme in the commencement speech that’s given thousands of times that goes something like this: “we, your elders, have not done a very good job of taking care of the world that we are leaving you, and it’s your responsibility to fix our mistakes. And thank goodness you are being graduated from this university, because it is *only* you who have the tools and the ability to do it.”

My problem today is that if I’m going to tell you something I think you *need* to hear, as you’ve asked me to, it’s going to sound a bit like that clichéd, hackneyed Bruce Dern-ish speech—only not as funny. In fact, it’s not going to be funny at all. But you’ve asked me to share with you what is important to me—what’s in my head and my heart as I think about your graduation from Drake University.

The fact is that Bruce Dern and his imitators at graduations around the country are right: human beings aren’t doing a very good job of it these days. Let me share with you what some of my evidence is for that statement. I want to warn you that I suspect that a few of you will find these next comments to be politically offensive, though I hope that you don’t—I do promise you that I do not intend to be political; these are not *political* concerns, they’re not liberal or conservative concerns, or left or right concerns, they’re *human* concerns. So what’s some of my evidence that we’re doing a bad job of it? Here’s just a few examples, put very simply:

- We are in the process of making the planet on which we live uninhabitable
- As Sam Harris said, “people are killing each other over whose books were written by God”
- We as Americans are failing to live up to the ideals of this wonderful democracy that the founders bequeathed to us
- We as Americans are failing to educate our young
- We as Americans have failed to communicate effectively with people who are not us—to understand and value who they are, and to help them understand the best in who we are

I’m not telling you all these things to cast a black cloud over your graduation day or because I think we’re doomed, or because I think they’re irreversible. I’m telling you this because I think with some of them we *are* getting close to the point of no return, and—here’s where I’m going to sound like that clichéd commencement speaker—*you*, all of you sitting in front of me, really *do* have to

do something about them. It's not that everything is bad – the generations that have preceded you have done some good and wonderful things, and so have many of you in the short time you've been around, but these days we all just aren't doing a very good job of being *us*.

The situation is paradoxical, because at the same time that we are stumbling collectively, human beings *individually* seem to be capable of astounding feats of boldness and ingenuity, of acts of profound kindness and love, of goodness and caring, of generosity and altruism, capable of creating things of soul-stirring beauty.

It is here that I'm going to remain faithful to my *own* tradition of commencement remarks at Drake and quote from a 19th-century Russian author, my favorite, the playwright and short-story writer, Anton Chekhov. In a wonderful story entitled *Lady with a Dog*, Chekhov writes of his protagonist, Gurov:

. . .soothed and enchanted by the sight of all this magical beauty – sea, mountains, clouds and the vast expanse of the sky – Gurov told himself that, when you came to think of it, everything in the world is beautiful, really, everything *but our own thoughts and actions, when we lose sight of the higher aims of life, and of our dignity as human beings.*

And I think that may be the heart of the matter – humanity somehow has managed to become a whole that is *not* greater than the sum of its parts – collectively we seem to have lost sight of what we're doing here, of the “higher aims of life and of our dignity as human beings.” So my *first* hope for you is that you do your best to not lose sight of what we're doing here, to not lose sight of our dignity as human beings, to not lose sight of all the good things we're capable of.

I know that you have all worked very hard for your Drake University education, for your degree, and that many of you, along with your parents, made great sacrifices so that you could afford to be here. But while you have certainly earned it and you've paid for it, ultimately a Drake education is a *privilege and an opportunity* – an opportunity that comes, as most do, with significant *responsibility*. Thus my *second* hope for you is that you accept that responsibility – that when you reach my advanced old age, you each will have a good answer to what ultimately might be the most important question of all: “*is the world better because I've been here?*”

Let me give you a few hints on how you might ensure that the answer is “yes,” and quote from a Drake document called the *Mission Explication*, which lays out in great detail the desired outcomes of a Drake undergraduate education. It is, in

a sense, an expression of our collective hopes and aspirations for our graduates. Under the heading of “responsible global citizenship,” (an important phrase in the University’s *Mission Statement*, the document says that Drake graduates:

- Assume responsibility for the common good of local, national, and global communities.
- Fulfill their responsibilities as citizens in a participatory democracy.
- Serve as active stewards of both the natural environment and the cultural heritage of society.

As graduates of Drake University, we’ve done our best to help you develop the foundation that you need to make things better – I hope that you feel a sense of responsibility to *do* it.

I have great faith in you that your answer, decades and decades from now, will be “yes, it *is* better because I’ve been here,” because – among other things – I can tell you that *Drake University* is better because you’ve been here. You’ve done lots of individual things, big and small, that are important and impressive, but what is most important is that you have proven to be an exception to my less-than-charitable characterization of humanity overall – your presence at Drake University, your *engagement* in Drake University, *has* helped make a whole that is better than the sum of its parts. Now it’s time to get to unleash your hearts and your minds on the rest of the world – it needs you.