

Commencement Address
Westminster College
Salt Lake City, Utah

June 2, 2007

President Bassis, Provost Seidelman, Dr. Ginger Giovale, Dr. Nick Rose, trustees,
graduating students and your families and friends, alumni, staff, and faculty colleagues,
thank you for this honor.

I was not the first choice as this year's Commencement speaker. Rock and roll legend
James Brown was, but he died earlier this year (causing Susan Cottler to take an
unscheduled sabbatical). Colin Powell couldn't make it due to a conflict in his schedule.
And then several weeks ago, the Board of Trustees realized that Homer Simpson was not
a real person. That's kind of how I got here.

So do you know why we have commencement speakers at all? It's because, fifteen
minutes away from receiving your diploma, we think you need to hear one final thing that
will frame all of your learning and experiences and propel you into the future a changed
and better person.

No pressure there.

Even more intimidating than that is my own experience of having listened to thirty-five years of commencement speakers. We would ask them to be brief, original, relevant, amusing and truthful (the acronym for that is BORAT). We asked them to appeal to a diverse audience of students, alumni and friends, including potential donors; we reminded them that representatives of the media and young children were present, and then we told them that because graduation is a celebration, they shouldn't offend anyone.

Not much pressure there either, or given 600 students just wanting to mount, shake, clutch and party (that's commencement shorthand for mount the stage, shake hands, clutch their diploma and... party); given graduates ranging in age from 19 to 62, in fields as diverse as Art and Aviation, Philosophy and Finance, to say nothing of a couple of hundred masters degree recipients with...well, with unequal earning potential. What do on-campus and commuting students, those from Riverton and Somalia, those moving onto graduate schools, new jobs, the armed services; those returning to old jobs, starting management training programs, getting married (same as a management training program); those taking a year off and those precipitously sliding back into restaurant work, what do you have in common? And what could anyone say that would be relevant to each of you? Other than announcing that the banks have decided to forgive your loans.

And as if all that weren't enough pressure, like many of you, my Mom is also here today.

And then, Dick Cheney came to speak at BYU's graduation.

Here was one of the most powerful people in the world, one who, no matter what you think of his politics, has influenced history and who can marshal enormous resources to the challenges we face. But instead of speaking to the pressing matters of the day in his commencement address, he went with platitudes, self-deprecation and then he smiled. I thought, “That was my speech!”

So now I’m thinking maybe I’ve dropped into Seinfeld’s Bizarro world, where everything is upside down and the opposite of what you would expect. Because given the state of the world, when someone as important as the vice president of the United States talks about nothing, then maybe someone as unimportant as I am should talk about something.

Like the 500-word essay, the term paper, the senior thesis and most relationships, commencement addresses have three parts—a beginning, a middle and an end. The first part, following the warm-up (which can lull listeners into thinking “Hey, this isn’t going to be so bad”)...the first part is about the state of the world. It ends with an exhortation to the graduates about how particularly well suited they are to fix everything that the speaker, on behalf of his or her generation and somewhat disingenuously, takes credit for screwing up.

The middle section, with no discernible transition, veers sharply into friendly and predictable sentiment about the importance of this day, your achievements and the keys to living a meaningful and purposeful life.

Then the conclusion is either a quote from a person more famous than the commencement speaker, thus showing the speaker's humility, or it's a nugget of advice, sometimes embedded in a perplexing personal anecdote. This leaves graduates turning to one another and saying for one last time in their educational careers, "I don't get it."

Here we go.

Part One: The State of the World or What Would a Liberally Educated Person Do?

From the confounding tensions and an escalating nuclear arms race in the Middle East; to the excessive burning of fossil fuels and climate change; to the rape and slaughter of innocent people in Darfur and the equally horrific genocide in Somalia; to the more than 3,000 Iraqis and 100 Americans killed each month and 250,000 Iraqis fleeing the country each year of the war against terrorists; to the decades-long struggles of the poor and homeless in this country; to the lack of adequate care for returning soldiers; to building an 800 mile fence on our border; to generations of unequal pay for equal work; to stem cell research, privacy, family values and the rights of male legislators to choose; to the lowest voter turnout in presidential elections of any industrialized country; to human rights abuses, torture and illegal surveillance; to the re-emergence of the Taliban; to hip-hop lyrics and censorship; to the incessant expectations for on-demand information and entertainment; to a health care system unhealthily strapped to employment; to unethical lobbyists and greedy CEO's; to trying to be both sustainable and affordable; to

genetically engineered food; to our national confusion about guns and violence; and to multi-million dollar salaries for athletes, billion dollar buyouts for start up internet entrepreneurs, and 30,000 dollars and 30 students per class for starting school teachers....we have made a mess. And now perhaps you can see why Vice President Cheney eschewed this requirement of commencement addresses.

But even given our inadequate responses to these admittedly overwhelming challenges, it is our failure to learn from the past that is most troubling.

One would think that we had learned enough from our experiences in Korea, Vietnam and Bosnia to prevent what is becoming the incomplete liberation of Afghanistan and violence without seeming end in Iraq. You would think that being re-awakened to our responsibility for destroying the planet by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* 40 years ago, or the oil embargo 30 years ago, or the oil spills 30, 20 and 10 years ago, that we would have moved past just thinking about alternative sources of energy and actually had some. One would have hoped that the fire-hosing of African-Americans on the streets of our southern cities during the civil rights movement in the 60's would have prevented an equally sodden lack of respect for the stranded and floating poor in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. And wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that the world's unconscionable delay in responding to the killing and suffering in Rwanda would have produced a more timely response to the killing and suffering in Darfur? For sure, these and dozens of other old and new messes are not exactly comparable. But that does not explain why we are still re-inventing, repeating and re-witnessing new and discordant

variations of wars and crises past. We move ahead, it appears, unburdened by what we have not learned.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 have left us unable to focus on anything but restoring ourselves as a powerful nation. And yet even as we appear to be recovering within our own borders, in trying to re-establish our invincibility in the rest of the world, we are losing grace and dignity, if not influence. Our focus is on terrorists and ourselves, as perhaps it needs to be, but while it is, most all of our other and the world's challenges have been put on hold. Is it too much to expect that we should be able to do more than one thing at a time?

There is, additionally, a curious new form of apathy in this country. Where, for example and especially on our college campuses, are the daily protests and boycotts and sit-ins and street noise about war, climate change, human rights and genocide? It seems as if we are content now to work through the systems rather than trying to disrupt or dismantle them. There's been a good deal written in the last several years about how the young people of the 90's and 10's are so unlike the generations of the 1960's and 70's. For without a military draft and with the Internet, you have, actually we all have, become, at once, both over-informed and over-insulated. The draft had an extraordinary way of making things personal. And the Internet has an extraordinary way of delivering but leveling information. The result, and I know there are notable individual exceptions

sitting on this stage and in this audience, but the result is that we have lost our collective will to focus and then sacrifice for change.

In the midst of this relative malaise, we seem to be becoming a nation of ironists. The 1960's were not a particularly ironic time, at least politically. But now, for answers, inspiration and for solace, we look to the Simpsons, to Jon Stewart, to Stephen Colbert, South Park and Doonesbury. Amidst the laughs, what we learn is to expect the worst from everyone. And then when we get it, instead of being surprised or offended, we're gratified since we kind of expected it all along. It does help us cope and it is funny. But ultimately, and this is coming from a person who has basically fashioned a life out of irony, it is not very helpful.

And finally....don't get too excited, it's just the end of the section about the state of the world...previous generations have failed to deliver any usable, coherent message or lessons that would have us be able to understand and use the past to prevent eerily similar futures. Generation after generation has been more interested in announcing its uniqueness than in seeing connections. Our penchant for parsing differences between Vietnam and Iraq, My Lai and Habitha, between Rwanda and Sudan, has been intellectually stimulating but resulted in little progress.

Mark Twain, himself an ardent ironist, once observed that "even if history does not repeat itself exactly, it sure does rhyme." That observation should not give us hope. We need to

learn to hear the world's rhymes coming and instead of confusing predictability with inevitability, we ought to be working on alternative and unrhymed endings.

Perhaps then, 30 or 40 years from now, one of you won't be standing somewhere talking about the messes we've made, again.

Part Two: The Sentimental Section or What You are Going to Miss

This past year, for the first time in 35 years, I was not at Westminster. I missed it. And I think you're going to miss some of the same things I did.

I miss the neighborhood. Not Sugarhouse (although it has become quite fashionable as neighborhoods go), but the campus itself. In a four square block sanctuary was everything I ever needed...friends; coffee; experts; books; pizza; nationally recognized sports teams; fresh fruit; a stream; new buildings; old buildings; entertainment; construction; comedians; burritos; the second best ethics bowl team in the nation; a carillon; internet access; candy machines; leaf blowers; fake grass; xeri-scaped moments; librarians; bench sitters; authors; sun-worshippers; flowers; fountains; statues; a gym; fashion; young people; young people's fashion; basketball courts; climbing walls; old people; old trees; a few dogs: even fewer children; a swimming pool; and at least every other year, plenty of parking.

I miss reading and thinking about things that I didn't always want to read and think about, many of which I assigned to students myself; others were assigned to me. They made me uncomfortable, they were too difficult or they were too long. But having to consider difficult and strange possibilities is something I miss. Out here, not that many people are telling me what to read and when to read it. And the very few organizing syllabi and reading schedules I have found, tend to reaffirm who I am and what I already know and believe.

I miss being around those for whom being smart includes learning about what they do not know. And who think that acknowledging what you don't know is better than assuming that you know everything. The individual and collective search for understanding and the energy in diverse people coming together to study, think, write, read, listen, speak and learn is not particularly well-organized here on the outside.

I also miss the humor with which students, faculty and staff softened their very serious efforts to teach and to learn at Westminster. Because of the kind of people who choose to study and work at the College, it is, by any standard measure in higher education, an amusing place. And while there are occasional light moments out here in the checkout lines at Costco, thirty pounds of bacon is just not that funny.

Most of all, though, I miss the people. I miss Popich's vocabulary; Diane Van Os' tough optimism; Brian Avery and Lesa Ellis' bringing disciplines and students together; I miss Susan Gunter's writing, Bridget Newell's passion, Mike Kraus' knowledge and Liz

Herrick's patience. I miss Ty Harrison's commitment to the environment, Jerry Van Os' to management information systems, Dan Taylor's to the history of aviation and Bonnie Baxter's to the Great Salt Lake. I miss Carolyn Connell's standards, Kay Kuzminski's thirty years of disappointment in administrators, Chuck Tripp's protests, Aric Kraus' energy, Bill Bynum's grace, and Greg Gagne's self-effacing ways. I miss Panos Schmitt's four somethings, Watkins' friendly Marxism, Badenhausen's office...building, Dick Chapman's laugh, Cottler's stories and clothes; Quinn and Bond's music; Baddley's deep voice: LeCleuse's better voice; the Vought family and Forster-Burke and Wrotniak's dancing.

I could go on, as could you, naming dozens of other faculty...and there are also dozens of staff members I miss as well. Susan Heath's smart caring, Mindy's uncompromising helpfulness, Bev Christy's optimism, Craig Green's surety, Steve Morgan's frugality, Mark Ferne's youthful directness...you get the idea. After all is said and done, Westminster is the people who teach and work and study there. And you will miss them the most.

The challenge is to re-create the pieces of Westminster we value the most. So rather than just closing the door on your time at the College and celebrating the freedom of no more papers and no more books, rather than sealing up what you have learned and vowing never to write a lesson plan, care plan again or term paper again, you should try and nurture Westminster's values for inquiry, community, respect, humor and learning in the neighborhoods of your futures.

On the west side of the Giovale Library (motion to the right)...well, I guess we're not on campus.

Really, what are we doing in this climate controlled E Center with its acres of parking? This is not the pain we've come to know and love. We should be out in the broiling sun with the carillon playing, a fountain of soapsuds and no bathrooms or parking places in sight. The E-Center may be where Westminster University students might graduate but Westminster College students...they belong in the old neighborhood.

Anyway, on the west side of the Giovale Library there is a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt etched into the upper façade of the building, which says: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

You may never have actually seen it in its entirety because the quote outlegs the ribbon of granite where it was to be inscribed and so the last few words end in a kind of nook and crevice of the building. At the time the Library was being built, we actually held a contest to select a quote. One, in Latin, submitted by a faculty member no longer teaching at the College, would have fit nicely: "*Legite Vos Nophi Legite.*" Not quite as eloquent when translated into English (cover up the children's ears), it says: "Read, you bastards, read." And there was another entry in Latin: "*Carpe Pecunia*" submitted by an MBA student: "Seize the Money."

I can remember sitting in the audience at several commencements and thinking how nicely organized and well-fitted the lives and careers of the honorees seemed. They had earned degrees, held important positions and became influential, some even hovering between beloved and revered. It all seemed so predictable and logical, as if when the honorees were young they had imagined their lives like neatly organized resumes, moving single-spaced and properly bolded and indented, from dream to accomplishment.

But I think that most of what you see in the people up here and around you in the audience, to include your families and friends, and most of what we've all done, is as much the result of adjustments to surprises as it is the result of believing in dreams.

Many of you are first generation college graduates or first graduate degree holders in your families. And every one of you has an official transcript showing that your college experience was organized and purposeful. But let's be frank—only nursing, aviation and accounting students knew what they were doing, and that's only because we told them. Many of the rest of you, lurching from semester to semester and requirement to requirement, changing majors, trying to take 13 hours in May Term, buying an older edition of a textbook after the midterm, lobbying just last week for equivalent transfer credit, each new registration period plagued by not remembering what it was you took the semester before...for many of you, college was just not as organized as your transcript suggests. And that's not any different than most everyone's life. It's not only that we make it up as we go along; it's that later, we make it look straighter.

So while I hope you will have the courage and passion to dream your futures and not to be dissuaded from what you know to be the right thing to do in this world, you should also be ready to make sense of where it is you end up. If I could slightly edit Eleanor Roosevelt's line, although there really is no more room on that building, it would read, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams and who have back-up plans."

Edited or unedited, the quote speaks to the kind of possibility and commitment we hope you have as you graduate from Westminster. For some of you, today is actually one of those future moments when you've accomplished something you once only dreamed would happen. Others of you have just begun to imagine and dream futures you still hope to achieve. And some of you, like me, may be fortunate enough to find yourself inside of someone else's dream. For that I thank my students, my friends and my colleagues at Westminster.

Congratulations.