

2012 Honors Convocation Keynote Address
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Today, when we assess the value of a college education, we look mainly at ROI—return on investment. We fret over grad rates, preen over graduates’ starting salaries.

We are, after all, a culture that links happiness to GDP, and success to net worth and the resale price of one’s home.

We are all like Madonna’s material girl, reaching for the key to the material life.

But that can’t be all that there is to college; surely college does more than license us to grab and get, equips us for more than gambles on Wall Street and gambits on Main Street.

What else do we learn? We learn about the relation between ourselves and knowledge itself. Here are some examples.

We learn method and perspective. The academic disciplines show us that how we know affects what we know.

We learn that knowing grows out of doubting, because doubting leads to questioning.

We learn the civility of dialogue. We learn that often there are as many interpretations as there are cultures and personalities. We respect different speakers even if we reject what they say.

We learn that truth does not drop from the sky into our minds. Rather, it is like an ore that experienced miners agree to sieve from impurities, convinced that its utility will win wider assent someday.

We learn, in humility, that our confidence in what we know often far exceeds what can be proved. Science and systematic thinking take us only so far. Poetry and religion point the way to that farther field.

College can be a place for such learning. It is a part of but also apart from a busy world that is too much with us. Here we can think together about the basic questions that the material life has set aside. I hope that college—this college—was such a place for you.

And I encourage you to find other communities for broad reflection in the years ahead. A reading group, extension classes, a shared journey. They unmoor us. We shed our barnacles; we head to open seas, again. We, too, then can say, Call me Ishmael.

There are signs that the material life is wearing thin, that we as a society are in need of the broad reflection of liberal learning, not just specialization. Here are four:

1. For a democratic people to decide well, it must be well informed. But the public sphere for vigorous debate has been usurped by a culture of media channels that esteems loyalty to ideology more than facts and logic. We suffer the yammering yahoos of Fox and CNBC. We are hip deep in a bog of bigoted blogs.
2. Governments are at internal impasse. Assertion and monied influence have usurped deliberation and moral conviction. Nancy and Newt gnaw on the public good as if they were Cujo and it a T-bone.

- 3. Trust, the glue of a free society, is in short supply. Institutions pursue their own interests. Banks bet against their customers' investments with them. Churches shelter ordained miscreants. Pete Rose was run out of baseball for betting on the game. But morally bankrupt brokers still play on Wall Street.**
- 4. Our sense that, as a nation, we are uniquely righteous blinds us to the foibles of power and the unpredictability of events. It leads us to excuse our toxic effects. Three Mile Island, Exxon Valdez, BP oil spill are not one in a thousand years events. They are metaphors and prophecies.**

The work ahead of you is hard indeed, to engineer a more balanced approach to the pursuit of happiness so that it is more than chasing after commodities.

It requires you to harness your liberal learning, to integrate it into now. You must be the non-conformist who uses doubt constructively to challenge assumptions and query consequences.

You must insist on, and then exemplify, open deliberation; reasoning is a collective enterprise that humbles us individually but elevates us collectively.

And you must help society detach value from price and cost, and pin it to higher moral purpose.

A century and a half ago, after the industrial revolution, Ralph Waldo Emerson mused that our economic lives were topsy-turvy. Things were in the saddle and rode mankind. Had we revolted against kingship, only to surrender our blood and treasure to a tyranny of commodities?

Since then things have tightened the reins. Imagine, life without Facebook, Twitter, and I-pads.

It is time for human kind to remount. Honors graduates, saddle up! Occupy your lives! Re-occupy America!