



UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH CAROLINA

Tom Brokaw commencement remarks



Commencement address as prepared for delivery by Tom Brokaw:

How I wish the rest of you could share my perspective as I stand on this stage and look out over what is a portrait of the American dream.

The eager young faces of the graduates, representing a welcome and rich diversity that would not have been present in this setting not so long ago.

Parents and grandparents, siblings and friends looking on with pride – and in some cases, astonishment – that you've achieved this great goal.

Nowhere else in the world are there as many of these ceremonies reflecting all of the many layers of our immigrant nation.

Savor the moment.

After all, you occupy a special place in the history of this institution and in the history of your country.

Your college years have steeled you for the unexpected turns of history and the consequences that we now invite you to help us all work through.

In the past four years you have been witness to and in too many case, felt the pain of, the most devastating economic recession since the Great Depression. Some of you may have parents who lost jobs or homes.

While you were here, preparing to take your place in a society that values and rewards higher education, others your age were in uniform and in harms way in the two longest wars in our history, wars that are not yet over and every week bring painful news of loss of life or limbs to too many American families. We owe them more than a yellow ribbon on our cars or trucks, more than a singing of God Bless America.

You have been witness to a startling turn in the Middle East with millions of people saying to their autocratic leaders, "Enough!" Enough economic corruption and political and physical oppression. We demand our rights – and they make those demands by risking their lives.

You have seen the cruelties of natural disasters in the American South, Haiti and in Japan, a critically important ally deeply wounded by earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown.

You are leaving this sanctuary of learning and innocence in a season of uncertainty and anxiety. Daily there are painful reminders that the economic model that has defined your lives was a house of cards.

Indeed, it is a shambles that will not be easily repaired, and even then, it will have a far different shape and evoke far different expectations.

We lost our way and allowed greed and excess to become the twin pillars of too much of the financial culture. We became a society utterly absorbed in consumption and dismissive of moderation. A friend, a very successful businessman who nonetheless lives a temperate life, says appropriately we have to replace want with need. It's not what we want that should rule our lives but what we need. And, it goes without saying, what we can afford.

Something fundamental has happened and there will be long-term consequences when it comes to risk and debt and economic assumptions. That does not mean you will be consigned to a life of deprivation and struggle. America remains a land of unparalleled economic opportunities with a standard of living that even in these constricted circumstances is well beyond the hope of hundreds of millions in less developed countries.

It is not a perfect world well beyond the economic conditions, of course.

Rogue nations with nuclear arms, or the potential for acquiring them, show no signs of good behavior.

The vital signs of your mother – Mother Earth – have taken a turn for the worse and the prescribed treatment is complex and controversial.

How we fuel our appetite for energy – for consumer, industrial and technological electrical power, for vehicular power – without exacerbating global climate change is an urgent question for your time.

In short, how we live on a smaller planet with many more people is a reality that will test your generation for the rest of your lives.

What more could a generation ask?

We may not have given you a perfect world but we have given you dynamic opportunities for leaving a lasting legacy as a generation fearless and imaginative, tireless and selfless in pursuit of solutions to these monumental problems, a generation that emerged from this financial tsunami and re-built the landscape of their lives with an underpinning of sound values and an eye for proportion, knowing that in fact less can be more.

It will not be easy but I promise you it will be rewarding in ways that a Wall Street bonus or a shot on American Idol cannot compete.

These are the tests that imprint generations for the long curve of history's judgment.

Those who take an inventory of our time a hundred years from now or a thousand will not measure success or failure by the actions of President Obama alone. We're all on the scorecard, and we cannot escape that judgment by evasion or prevarication.

Where to begin?

That is a decision you are best prepared to make. And it will be the most rewarding if it is rooted in a personal passion and carried out with purpose even when the first steps are small.

You have an assortment of nimble and powerful tools that can assist you – the Internet with its vast universe of information and capacity for research and communication played out on ever smaller devices across an ever wider spectrum of choices.

But those are tools not oracles; they complement your mind and your heart. They do not replace them.

You'll not solve global warming by hitting the delete button; you'll not eliminate reckless avarice by hitting backspace; you'll not make society more just by cutting and pasting.

And do not surrender the essence of the human experience to 146 characters on a

Twitter or a Facebook, however seductive the temptation.

You'll not get a Google alert when you fall in love. You may be guided by the unending effort of poets and artists, biologists and psychiatrists to describe that irreplaceable and still mysterious emotion so essential to the human condition but all the search engines in the universe cannot compete with the first kiss.

It will do us little good to wire the world if we short circuit our souls.

Remember, too, that somehow before BlackBerries and I-phones, laptops and video games, great and welcome change was achieved.

In the lifetime of many in this audience, there have been trials, tragedies and triumphs that go well beyond anything we're experiencing at the moment.

In so many ways, we owe so much to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who, when he was just a few years older than you began a historic moral crusade against racial injustice armed with eloquence and passion, a deeply held belief and in the rule of law. He moved the nation and liberated it, black and white, from the unconscionable weight of segregation.

Somehow he managed without a cell phone or laptop or website.

In 1989, a lone and still anonymous Chinese student stood unarmed in front of a Chinese tank and gave the world an enduring image of the determination of

China's young to change their nation. He didn't text message the tank or share a YouTube.

He put his feet on the ground and his life on the line.

In my travels in this country and abroad, to the inner cities and rural backwaters, to the worst neighborhoods in the most impoverished countries, to war zones and sites of natural disasters the most impressive people I meet are not the mayors and governors, the warlords and prime ministers, the generals and ambassadors.

The people I remember are the idealistic young, the courageous and gifted members of your age group who are the foot soldiers in the long march to ease human suffering. They put their boots on the ground and their hands in the dirt; they spend their nights in scary places and they are never more alive than when they are doing this work not for riches or personal glory but because it is the right thing to do.

Those kinds of commitments need not consume every day of your life but they will enrich it if you make a conscientious effort to dedicate some of your time on this precious planet to helping your fellow men and women who are not as fortunate.

Most of all, remember – you cannot get through this world alone.

You need each other – and we need you to celebrate one another in a common cause of restoring economic justice and true value, advancing racial and religious tolerance, creating a healthier planet.

We do that by listening and reasoning not by shouting and fighting.

Beware of ideological tyranny and uncompromising certainty. Do not become hostage to the orthodoxy of others.

This country was built on big, bold ideas that served the common welfare. We're a democratic republic, not a collection of fiefdoms changing the fundamental rules of governance with every election cycle.

No remarks of mine or parental advice will be adequate substitute for your own determination and commitment to excellence. We're not your GPS system; at best, as commentators and parents, we're road signs.

You must find your own way and I have little doubt you will.

On these occasions in the past I've said, "It's easy to make a buck; it's tough to make difference." Then a parent suggested a re-wording: "It's tough to make a buck but if you make a lot of bucks, you can make a big difference." So for a time I offered both observations as a final word.

This year and these times required still another revision:

"It's a lot tougher to make a make a buck but making a difference has its own rich reward."

Go forth and make a difference.

God knows, we need your help.

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