

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT BOSTON

James Gustave Speth

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What a great honor to be your commencement speaker today, at this unique and important university. The administrators and faculty that I know here are truly inspiring. And I hear the students are pretty special too! Congratulations to you all. And thanks to the parents.

I suspect many of you have heard Woody Allen's commencement quip. "Two paths lie ahead of you," he said to the eager graduates, "one leads to utter despair and the other to extinction. May you have the wisdom to choose wisely."

When I told my son I'd be here today, I quoted Woody to him, and he said, "Don't go too negative on them, Dad." I'm afraid I have a minor reputation for doing that. But I'm not going there!

Somehow, I've become an old man. Surely, old man, you've got something useful to impart to the younger generation. In fact, I have thought hard about what I have learned that might be truly helpful to you, something positive.

So let me say upfront what is the most important thing I've learned over the years. What we've got, mainly, to get us through life, with a maximum of happiness and a minimum of suffering, is each other. In the end, I think it is just that simple. The main thing that gives meaning to our lives is caring for others. We impart meaning to our lives and, indeed, to the world by caring so much for others that

we act to create for them as much joy and as little suffering as possible. As the philosopher George Santayana said, “There is no cure for birth and death, save to enjoy the interval.” And that enjoyment of life, above all, requires companionship, affection, support—things that we can only receive from each other.

I say it’s just that simple, but, of course, we all too often seek to impart meaning to our lives in other ways. Almost universal is the tendency to try to find meaning at the Mall. Here I refer to our consumerism, our affluenza. How wrongheaded to think that we can satisfy our non-material needs with more materialism—more stuff! You are probably familiar with Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs. At the bottom of the pyramid are the material things we really do need to buy—or, even better, make ourselves—food, water, shelter, health care, education—the basics. But as we move up the pyramid, we encounter the non-material needs—friendship, belonging, intimacy, self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment. Advertisers seduce us to try to meet these higher needs by buying stuff—cars, clothing, jewelry, beer, and so much more. Madison Avenue and its clients love it precisely because it doesn’t work. There is no meaning to be found at the Mall. But somehow that doesn’t stop us. We keep buying, shop ‘til we drop.

But, at some level, more and more people sense that this consumerism involves a great misdirection of life’s energy. We know we’re slighting the precious things that no market can provide—that truly make life worthwhile.

So, here’s a revolutionary new product that is trying to make it at the Mall. Recently, a group of young women set up a stand in the Mall to sell Nothing. They promised it was “Guaranteed not to put you in debt . . . 100 percent nontoxic . . . sweatshop-free . . . doesn’t contribute to global warming . . .

family-friendly . . . fun and creative!” When they refused to leave, they were arrested! Good for them. Humor is a powerful way to challenge the system—intelligent, irreverent debunking.

So what makes us truly happy? That’s the question addressed by the new field of positive psychology. When a founder of this new field was asked to identify the roots of human happiness, his answer was simple: “Other people.” We flourish in a setting of warm, nurturing, and rewarding interpersonal relationships, and within that context we flourish best when we are giving, not getting.

Graduates and friends, I have spoken of caring mainly at the personal level—our families, friends, neighbors. But caring for others is an opportunity that opens up in many spheres. Let me mention three.

- First, care for your place, your community, wherever you live. In America, we’ve had enough of throwaway cities and runaway businesses. So build the future locally. Create intentional communities. Transition towns. Launch new enterprises that are rooted, sustainable—that have a higher social purpose than profit. There is no Washington-style gridlock stopping us where we live. Follow the food.

- Second, care for your country, wherever it is. Listen to this: Here is what Thomas Jefferson wrote at the end of his presidency, “The care of human life and happiness . . . is the first and only legitimate object of good government.” Goodness! What if everyone in Washington took that seriously.

We Americans had another wonderful, caring president in Franklin Roosevelt. In his last State of the Union Address in 1944, he called on America to accept, and I quote, “a second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all—regardless of station, race, or creed.”

And Roosevelt then listed these rights:

The right to a good job;

The right to earn enough to provide adequate food and clothing and recreation;

The right of every family to a decent home;

The right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health;

The right to adequate protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment;

The right to a good education.

Imagine these as rights! That’s what the International Declaration of Human Rights in fact does.

Whatever the sad craziness of U.S. politics in the current moment, the proposition that we should have these rights is not radical. They are the rights—not the hopes, not the promises, but the rights—sought for all people by a great American president. Just yesterday, when I was two!

To secure these rights, and others, we all need to escape the clutches of the reigning neo-liberal orthodoxy. In America and elsewhere, we need to build an economy and a politics that give priority to people, place and planet rather than profit, product, and power. Some have called it the caring economy. Others have called it the solidarity economy. Still others, the sharing economy. At the New

Economy Coalition based here in Boston, we are just calling it the new economy. Join with us and help us build it. Rebecca Solnit has written that “the grounds for hope are . . . in the people who are inventing the world while no one looks.” Join us.

George Bernard Shaw famously remarked that all progress depends on being unreasonable. My friends, it’s time for a large amount of civic unreasonableness. It is time for a deeper critique of why our economies aren’t working for people, place, or planet. Remember: to protest because you care for your country is an act of high patriotism. As Frederick Douglass observed in the fight against slavery, “Power concedes nothing without a demand.”

- And lastly, care for our planet, and care for our children and grandchildren and all future generations who will inhabit it. The poet Drew Dellinger said it well about future generations:

“it’s 3:23 in the morning
and I’m awake
because my great great grandchildren
won’t let me sleep
my great great grandchildren
ask me in dreams
what did you do while the planet was plundered?
What did you do when the earth was unraveling?”

The brilliant Senator from Illinois Adlai Stevenson spoke to our planetary future in his last speech in 1965: “We travel together, passengers in a little spaceship, . . . preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft.” Today we know that

caring for our fragile craft requires much deeper change than we imagined a few decades ago. Today's environmentalism will not save the environment. Environmental action has got to dig deeper and challenge the root causes of our problems—consumerism, misguided values, the ascendancy of money power over people power, worship of GDP, neglect of social justice, and more.

When we think about caring for this earth, let's always remember that that caring must extend to all the life that evolved here with us. It does not matter, for example, whether we think a particular species is important or unimportant. We did not create it and we do not own it. It has intrinsic value. Nature has rights. The cultural historian and visionary Thomas Berry observed that humans had created the concept of rights—and then given them all to themselves. Aldo Leopold saw plainly and wrote beautifully that the ethics by which we live must extend to caring for the land and all the life on it. As Terry Tempest Williams has noted, "We can no longer say, 'Let nature take care of itself.'"

As you leave here and go forward, will your caring succeed? I believe that your generation can and will succeed in many, many ways.

Remember that there's tremendous power in having a dream. Dream of a new place—a place where the pursuit of happiness is sought not in more getting and spending but in the growth of human solidarity, real democracy, and devotion to the public good; where the average person is empowered to achieve his or her human potential; where the benefits of economic activity are widely and equitably shared; where the environment is sustained for current and future generations; and where the virtues of simple living, community self-reliance, good fellowship, and respect for nature predominate. We can build this future if we join together and fight for it.

Of course, there are bound to be setbacks, and times when our efforts at caring do not seem to be working. But giving up is not an option. You know that.

Consider the principal thing I've done in the public arena—that is, to work in every way over 35 years to hold back the onslaught of climate change. I certainly haven't succeeded well, have I? But I have, at least, succeeded at trying, and, if that is not enough, it is still a lot. Moreover, this fight is not over, and with your help we will win it. We simply must.

Bill McKibben and 350.org are surely correct that there are real villains in the climate story—the fossil fuel executives who are determined to maximize profits and to defeat regulation, most of them knowing full well that they are ruining the planet but not caring. That's why it's vital for all colleges and universities to divest, not because it will bring Big Oil and Big Coal to their knees, but because it is right.

The climate struggle has been like rolling the rock up the hill only to see it roll to the bottom again. So let me close with a remarkable interpretation of Sisyphus and his rock, that given to us by Albert Camus in his "The Myth of Sisyphus."

Camus says that Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to the dreadful punishment of futile and hopeless labor, forever rolling a rock to the top of the mountain only to have the stone always fall back of its own weight. Camus says that Sisyphus' crime was "his hatred of death, and his passion for life." But Camus finds Sisyphus "superior to his fate, . . . stronger than his rock." "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain." Camus writes. "[But] the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a person's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." The struggle itself, Camus concludes, is full of meaning.

So, here is my advice: find your rock. Find *your* rock. You never know. It might just stay up there one day.

Good luck to each of you.

Take care of each other.

Take care of your community.

Take care of your country.

Take care of the planet.

Thank you.