

You're on Your Own Now

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President Kepple, Provost Lakso, members of the platform party, students, guests, and members of the Class of 2007: I should begin by pointing out that I am not here today because of any merit of my own. I am here because Judy Katz, who by rights should be giving this speech, wisely arranged a sabbatical for this semester. So I congratulate Judy not only for deserving an award for Distinguished Teaching, but also for her exceptional foresight.

Last year at this convocation I received the award for Distinguished Academic Service, for which I am indeed honored. But I am also conscious of the fact that there are others whose services are far greater than mine, who have never won an award for it. My father, who died less than a week after I received the award, was just such a person. This is his doctoral gown I'm wearing—as a reminder of the model of service that he provided.

In 84 very full years, my father was a sailor, a minister, and an educator, who lived above all to serve others. He subscribed to that version of the social gospel which holds that we best serve God by serving other people, and he did so without reservation or hesitation; he never asked someone to prove themselves worthy of his help before he offered it. And he never shrank from his duty. In 1968 we were living in a rural backwater town in North Carolina. When Martin Luther King died, my dad was the only white man at a public memorial service for him.

My father was my role model. He had a sense of mission and a talent for helping others through the crises of their lives. Me? I show up every day and improvise, and the only talent—if you could call it that—that I have ever displayed is a talent for sending tart memoranda to administrators and colleagues. What I do is not so impressive when you have seen the real thing. And though he never won an award, the services and the kindnesses that my dad did for others will live on for a very long time. At his memorial services, again and again people would come up to me to share things that my father had done for them years or decades before, usually without any sort of recognition or acknowledgment. So my first

message to the Class of 2007 is that the things you do for others do make a difference, and will be remembered, whether you get an award or not.

So, Class of '07, you are about to leave the nest. My second message for you begins with a story—probably some of you have heard it already—about the late President Lyndon Johnson. From the very beginning of his political career, Johnson disliked speaking extemporaneously, or just with notes. He had to have an entire speech written out for him. But Johnson was also very hard on his staff. And the story is that one day his speechwriter decided he was fed up and would quit. But before he did so, he handed Johnson one last speech, as LBJ was rushing out the door to deliver it. The first three pages were the beginning of a speech; the last five pages were blank. On page four was just one sentence: “You’re on your own now, you s.o.b.”

Well, Class of '07, a week from Saturday, the extemporaneous part of your life begins. Up to this point your parents and social pressures have made it more or less a given that you would graduate from high school and go to college. For most of you, things have gone pretty much according to the script. From this point on, your paths will diverge in 300 different ways. You will go to graduate or professional school, you will become a volunteer, you will go to work. You will become a doctor, a professor, an executive; a gardener, a plumber, a painter; you will have friends, families—and on and on. Sometimes things will go as you hope and plan; sometimes life will take you by surprise.

There is, however, one thing I am sure you will all be. You will all be citizens. Most of you will be citizens of the United States, of course—though I keep having this vision running through my head of you returning for your thirty year reunion to find that Steve Rensi [a Juniata senior] has become a citizen of France. Whether you like it or not, your citizenship will affect your lives in countless ways. And whether you like it or not, whether you have planned for it or not, if you are a citizen of the US you will be involved in some way in politics. If you are not involved, you certainly will be affected. At a minimum, you should, and most probably will, vote—we know that college graduates are much more likely to be voters than those without degrees. But college graduates are also more likely to be involved in their communities and in politics at all levels, from contributing money to organizing campaigns to holding office. And it is not a matter of what field your degree is in—to take just one local example, one of the current members of the Huntingdon school board is a medical doctor.

My question to the Class of 2007 is: how will you use this citizenship, this thing that you all have in common? Are you prepared for it?

I don’t mean by this have you had a civics class or a class in American government. Those are important and necessary things, and they have great value in imparting the accumulated experience of the

past, which may or may not add up to wisdom. But one of the things you learn from the past—certainly one of the things I have learned from studying the framing and ratification of the Constitution—is that those who created our governments considered them to be “experiments.” They were not tied down by the experience, or the supposed wisdom, of the past. When one thing did not work, they tried another. I suspect that the Founders would be a bit put off to find people today arguing that we ought to hold their work in great reverence as something unchangeable and perhaps sacred, because they did it and their “intentions” somehow matter more than anything else. Do not misunderstand me—I think what they did is very important and worthy of our great respect, and that it repays endless study. But I think the Founders would respond that this reverence is very flattering, but that in a constitutional republic the past has no more right to control our decisions than any other claim of authority, except one. The only claim that matters is the consent of the governed. So how do you get ready to take part in this great experiment in self-government?

I like to think the best way is to do just what you have done, and that is get a liberal education. But what does that mean? The Czech (now French) dissident and novelist Milan Kundera, in the course of reflecting on the art of the novel, said that one of the purposes of the novel was to provide a counter to what he called the “innate and irrepressible desire” that human beings have “to judge before [they] understand.”¹ According to Kundera, the novel opposes this desire with a type of wisdom, “the wisdom of uncertainty.” By this he means that the novel embraces “the world as ambiguity,” in the knowledge that we “face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths.”² Kundera’s identification of wisdom with the knowledge of our own uncertainty about the most important things is the heart of liberal education going all the way back to Socrates. It seems to me that democratic citizenship works best when it is informed by a liberal education in Kundera’s sense, an education that puts understanding before judging.

The desire to which liberal education is opposed, the desire to judge without understanding, is the great temptation of citizenship in a democracy, and also its great danger. We want to judge before we understand because, again in Kundera’s words, “[m]an desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished.”³ We are busy people, after all. Life is much simpler if we just pick a side and adopt its position as our own. It is possible then to distinguish good and bad very easily: what comes from their team is bad, and what comes from our team is good. We do not have to waste our time listening to the arguments, much less reaching an independent judgment.

I think this is at least a kind of civic stupidity; at its worst it is dangerously irresponsible. Democracy is not a game of follow the leader. Successful self-government depends on our ability to keep

a critical distance from the claims and proposals of parties, including our own, and evaluate those proposals and claims in the light of the evidence and of our own convictions. That is, it requires just those qualities that a liberal education is designed to develop. It is fundamental that in politics, if you want to be successful for long, or if you want your country to survive for long, you must constantly re-evaluate your position in light of new evidence and new circumstances. The world is not static—and as Donald Rumsfeld might have reminded us, you have to deal with the world you've got, not the one you wish you had. Having a liberal education gives you the skills that you need to exercise, and to exercise well, this fundamental task of citizenship.

It also makes us—we who have been liberally educated—a sort of defensive line against that even more fundamental fact of politics, lying. Lying is by no means unique to democratic politics—by 1789 the French under their monarchy had developed the art of lying to a degree of sophistication and elegance that is unlikely ever to be surpassed—but it has a more deeply corrosive and potentially much more dangerous effect in a democracy. I do not mean by this that it is a bad thing when politicians say things that are not true. It is bad, but these are not the dangerous lies. Some kinds of lies are even useful, in fact, and can save us a great deal of trouble or embarrassment. The question, “how do I look?” for example, is one that cannot and should not always be answered with total honesty. When this convocation is over I assure you I will not want an honest answer to the question “how was my speech?” No one—and I speak with the experience born of growing up as a preacher’s kid—really expects honest answers to most everyday questions. Likewise in politics, lies—if you want to substitute a politer word, like “fibs,” or “evasions,” or something, that’s fine—often have a salutary effect, and sometimes even make good things possible.

But there are more dangerous lies, too. These are the ones that seize on our human tendency to judge before we understand, our desire to have clear distinctions between good and evil, and claim to provide us with a complete system or method of dividing the political world between the good guys and the bad guys. In the twentieth century, of course, the two great systemizing lies were Communism and Fascism. It was because Kundera had lived under a Communist government, I think, that he saw with particular clarity the need for some force—artistic, intellectual, political, or moral—that would undermine the claims that a particular party had a monopoly on the truth. The possession of the truth, if one actually had it, would be a wonderful and precious thing. But the certainty of one’s own possession of the truth—and worse, the certainty that *others* do *not* possess the truth but need to—makes for tyranny and oppression. People who believe that their opinions are not open to doubt or question or testing are the true enemies of democracy.

In the light of Kundera's, and Socrates', understanding of wisdom, we might reflect on Juniata's motto, "Veritas Liberat" in a somewhat different way. In politics, it is not so much the possession of the truth that frees. What makes for free politics is rather the *search* for the truth, grounded in a lively sense that our political truths are always provisional, hypothetical, testable. Testing your own certainties, or your convictions, does not mean abandoning them; indeed it might even make them stronger. But if Kundera is right this testing is not a one-time event, after which you can rest. The liberating value of the search for the truth comes from understanding that the process is continuous. This understanding generates a politics of seeing with our own eyes, and of keeping our eyes open. When Dorothy gets to the great door in the Emerald City and asks to see the Wizard, the Doorman says: "... but nobody can see the Great Oz! Nobody's ever seen the Great Oz! Even *I've* never seen him!" Dorothy's response is that of the liberally educated citizen: "Well, then, how do you know there is one?" The Doorman's reply is the reply of unchecked or irresponsible power in all ages: "You're wasting my time!"

As citizens in a democracy we know that the Doorman's answer is unsatisfactory; as people with liberal educations we know that asking questions about supposedly authoritative things is rarely a waste of time. But we also know, or should know, that we cannot spend all our time asking questions. Sooner or later we must make decisions, and your generation will face some very challenging ones. The Founding generation also faced many challenging issues, and we are the beneficiaries of their work. They did their work well not because they got everything right on the first try, but because they were willing to keep trying until they devised something that was workable, and flexible enough to be adapted in light of further experience. They knew that there are lots of perfect governments—but that all of them exist only on paper. In any actual government, we are doing well if we get something that is pretty good; our job as citizens is to apply our own critical intelligence to making it better. After all, this is what the Founders themselves did. They took a critical distance from their first effort, evaluated whether it was working, and when they found it had come up short they tried again.

The Founders used the same tools that you have acquired here at Juniata. Like them, you have learned to see and think for yourselves, and to make judgments based on your understanding and experience. Use those tools to be better citizens. That is my second message to the Class of '07.

My third and final message is a bit shorter and simpler. In fact, I'll let you decide it for yourselves. You are on your own now, you....

NOTES

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. from French by Linda Asher (New York: Harper and Row, 1988 of 1986 orig.), 7.

² Kundera, 6.

³ Kundera, 7.