Afterword

What Do You Think You're Doing, Dave? Strategies for 2001 and Beyond

Bruce Davis '65

Good afternoon. This is a spectacularly enjoyable occasion for me; I'm honored by the degree and I'm delighted that the trustees have arranged for me to receive it in what almost amounts to an Old Home Week for me. The fellow who just put the hood on me is an old crony of mine; in fact, back in 1982, just a few yards away, over on Roundtop, he married me.

Married my wife to me, maybe I should say. I was touched to find out that in the years since then some local astronomers have erected a very pagan-looking structure on the precise spot, to memorialize the occasion.

I first met my fellow honorees Drs. Doyle and Kaylor in my student days, and later served with them on the faculty for a dozen years, and came to know them as friends. Earl and I spent a lot of time and effort blowing our knees out on the back roads hereabouts, and Esther helped me develop my interest in theater. We even became fellow cast members in a production or two.

(I have to say though, and you wouldn't guess it to look at her,

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Commencement Address, May 13, 2001

Esther has a brutal side. When I was a sophomore English major, she once gave me a grade of 16 out of 100 on an exam. It was a course that met on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at 8 in the morning – yes indeed we had Saturday classes in the good old days – and this test had been scheduled for 8:00 A.M. on the Saturday. That in itself seemed a little hard.

As it happened a couple of fellow students from my dorm and I had some important business scheduled on Friday night at a campus about four hours away, and I only arrived back in Huntingdon a half hour before the test started. I hadn't reviewed my notes much during the ride, and I had been told that it was important to keep your fluid levels up while traveling, and, all things considered, a case could probably be made that a 16 was a pretty merciful grade, but I'm just saying: don't assume that kindly demeanor of hers is the whole story.)

I realize as I stand here this afternoon that I've now touched all the bases at these ceremonies. I sat over there in the spring of 1965, sweltering and wondering why such a medieval way of doing things hadn't been improved on over the years, and when I came back to Juniata three years later, I began sitting over here with the faculty. (I had become a medievalist in graduate school, so I was more tolerant of the trappings of the ceremonies, but believe me: the distinguished academicians on this side of the lawn are just as interested as you are in getting out of their gowns and on with their days.)

In the years since I left teaching I've had two daughters graduate from college, so I've also been a parent in the bleachers, checking his watch and wondering how many more loads it's going to take to finally get that dorm room emptied out. And now, finally, I'm the guy up here holding everybody up. This is OK.

Let me at least offer all of you a note of reassurance here at the outset: first, nobody spends twenty-odd years watching Academy Award ceremonies at close range without developing a fervent appreciation of the virtues of a short speech. And second, I've been living in Los Angeles for the past 20 years, so there's not much danger that my remarks will be too intellectually rigorous for anybody.

OK: members of the class of 2001. You sit there today, as you are heartily sick of hearing, I imagine, as the first wave of college graduates released into a bright new century; into, in fact, a squeaky-clean new millennium. That part is invigorating. Unfortunately the

planet we've been holding in trust for you has been around the block a few times. It has accumulated a few dings and scratches. We, the generations ahead of you, apologize for that. And in the spirit of full disclosure, let me brace you for a couple of things.

First, if there is one piece of absolutely practical advice I could give you this afternoon, it might be this: do NOT, at any time during your lives, buy any coastal property in Florida. There's a good chance that there won't BE a Florida much longer. In case you've been so busy with your studies that you haven't been reading the newspapers as regularly as you like to, we've pretty well established now that this global warming thing is really happening, although the jury is still out on how fast and whether it's our fault or not. Probably we've helped at least. Certainly we've had a hand in developing the hole, or holes, in the ozone layer, and although so far that has only had the effect of parboiling a lot of plankton, stick around and see where it leads later in your half of this century.

In a related story, as they say on the TV news, there are predictions that gasoline prices in the U.S. will reach $3 a gallon this summer. It's worse than that though; the truth is that during your lives gas will cost more than $3.00 more often than it will cost less than that. We've pretty much used it all up, and we feel badly about that. We've been pretending to work on alternative ways to move people around, but our real plan was to consume virtually all of the fossil fuels we could find, then have some nasty international disputes about the rest, and let the subsequent, gasoline-less generations (meaning you) get serious about a Plan B.

There are just a couple of other things I should mention in the way of a heads-up. There are more than six billion of us on the planet now, which is way more than it can comfortably support. Our cities are facing near-term and potentially devastating crises having to do with water supplies – unless you can figure out a way to tow big chunks of those melting polar ice caps into a lot of metropolitan areas. The "biotics," so to speak, are mutating faster than we can develop new antibiotics, so you might want to pencil in some interesting plagues around the time you hit your mid-forties. And we just may let you start that first job search of your life in the teeth of a major recession. We haven't quite decided yet. We're still mulling that one over.

In the face of that many demoralizing facts it seems fair to ask,

why even have a commencement address? The most honest thing for me to do might be just to stand up and say, "Run away; run away" and sit back down. The commencement address has historically functioned, or aspired to function, like a football halftime speech. It's different in that, with any luck, it's not being addressed to you at the midpoint of your life, but it has the same largely unrealistic objectives of firing you up for what's ahead and recommending a better set of strategies from here on out than you've employed up to this point.

I'm too intimidated by the opponents you're facing to do a convincing job with the rah-rah stuff, so my plan is to concentrate on the strategy side of things. Guys my age really enjoy giving younger people advice.

The good news is that I have distilled my vast stores of accumulated wisdom down to just two pieces of advice today (if you don't count that earlier real estate thing), and the first one is: for at least the next decade of your life, try to stay supple. (Or, if you've already developed a certain rigidity, try to get supple.)

There's a strong tendency coming out of college to think of yourself as having a set trajectory. You're about to be discharged, in two senses, and it's understandable that you might assume that your job is to streak to some target as rapidly as possible, with no pitching or yawing en route.

"I need to be a corporate lawyer by the time I'm 26."
"I need to teach history."
"I need to get married and have 2.4 children."
"I need a 3-bedroom house in McKee's Rocks."

There's not a thing wrong with any of those objectives, so long as you arrive at them after genuinely considering a lot of other ones. And considering them over a period of time. You of the class of 2001, listen: it's OK to set your life objectives gradually. Take your time. It's a good idea to regard the next eight to ten years of your life as experimental. I'm not suggesting that you change jobs every six months. And if you're going to be coming up here in a few minutes to pick up a degree in a subject, pre-medicine, say, that implies further study, I'm not suggesting that you take two years off and tramp around Tibet instead. Just stay supple. Even for you pre-meds, noth-

ing is set in stone yet about what kind of medicine you might practice, or where you might do it. And if your subconscious mind should start dropping clues over the next few years that you might find more satisfaction in life doing something else entirely, try to be intellectually flexible enough to consider those clues carefully.

History is replete with examples of people who have stepped away from some pre-set career path to their own benefit, but we don't need to comb through history; we can just look around this lawn. There's Jack Troy over there. I hope that a hefty percentage of you have, at some point in your time here, had a chance to get to know Professor Troy. On a faculty rich in resources, he is a seam of pure platinum. When he made his climb to the stage to claim his undergraduate degree, it was a degree in physical education. Yes. Phys. Ed. You can't even do that here. And it's not as easy as you may imagine. When a P.E. major gets to the far edge of his graduation platform, he has to do a double flip off the side and down to the ground. And stick the landing. Which, in a cap and gown….

I should be clear though that I'm talking about more of a metaphorical suppleness here this afternoon. At some point between receiving his degree and the time I met Jack, he had decided that he was getting a lot more satisfaction out of literature than deep knee bends, and he had had a limber enough view of the options open to him to retool himself into a college English professor. But he still wasn't done reconsidering his options. In a few years more he decided that it might be, for him, even more satisfying to make art than to talk about it, so he began to reconfigure himself as a potter. That turned out to be the sweet spot. He had had a clear idea at age 20 of what kind of work he might find satisfying, but because he saw no reason to regard that idea, or even his next one, as his final answer, Juniata has been able to brag, genteelly of course, about an artist on its faculty with what can genuinely be referred to as a world-wide and first-rank reputation.

And the life Jack has thrown for himself has been well wrought and, from all appearances, deeply enjoyable. Or take another of my former colleagues here today, Paul Heberling. Paul retired just before most of you arrived here, so you may only know him as sort of a legend. When I first met him, he taught psychology and held a post we used to have here called "Dean of Mean." That meant that from time to time something would happen and he would have to

go to his staff and say something like, "Round up the usual suspects," and then pretty soon I would have to say something like, "But Dean Heberling, that campus is four hours away. Does it seem likely that I was there, doing that, at 3 o'clock in the morning when I was here taking my English mid-term at 8 A.M.?"

It wasn't an ennobling exercise for either of us, but Paul had stayed supple enough that he didn't feel locked into being a psychologist or a dean of men, and so when a whole new field began to croon its siren song in his direction, he was able to hear the music. He went back to school, wove a sort of cocoon for himself, and when it split open, there stood a brand new archaeologist, pumping its wings into a Nabokovian splendor and harboring a suspicion that there were things just as interesting to be learned about early native American cultures as about those of ancient Greece or Egypt. But again, the fact that he soon became a very distinguished archaeologist isn't quite the point I'm making. The key thing is that he became a happy archaeologist.

So long as you define it in a way Aristotle would approve of, happiness isn't a frivolous thing to work toward in your life. And just so there's not misunderstanding, let me be clear. The parables we've just examined are not examples of people moving from unworthy disciplines into respectable ones. The archaeologist who one day admitted to himself that he'd always hated getting muddy and really enjoyed handling rats would have been ripe for an equally satisfying epiphany in the other direction. The "satisfying" part is the key here. It may turn out that, as diligently as you keep yourself open to other options, the passion you developed at age nine for physics or cinematography or actuarial tables is the one that fires you up all your life. That's OK too.

There's a lot of life left for most of you as you sit here today, probably more than fifty years of it if the plague doesn't get you, and one of the most important things for you is to find something to do in it that is genuinely and steadily satisfying. You won't believe this for another ten or fifteen years, but financial rewards really are secondary. Not unimportant, but not as important as the difference between dragging yourself out of bed day after day to do something that's sucking the soul out of you, and getting up, reflecting on the day ahead and thinking "this should be interesting."

I'm going to mention one other area of life where a certain sup-

pleness of approach pays dividends, even though I realize I'm howling into the darkness on this one. Those same eight or ten years when you're keeping your options open about your life's work are also a good period to avoid locking yourself into a life partner. You are not the person you're going to be yet, and with marriage partners as with careers, it's a good idea to keep looking around long enough to give yourself a chance of finding one that provides you with a nifty combination of challenge and profound satisfaction. Unless your mother has already sent out invitations and all. In that case, just ignore what I'm saying; I don't want any of us to get in trouble with anybody's mom. Especially not on Mother's Day. We'll just agree to think of this one as a "starter" marriage and move on to the more important piece of counsel in this section, which is to see if you can hold off a bit with the whole "be fruitful and multiply" business.

That's advice that's a lot easier to dispense than to follow, I realize. The great, central, *basso profundo* commandment that biology intones to everything from human beings to mayflies to asparagus stalks is MAKE MORE OF US. There are infinitely stronger forces than commencement speakers herding you very firmly in the direction of fecundity. Children are great, and you ought to have some if you're so inclined, but they increase your responsibilities and limit your options, which are not good things for people in their early twenties. Kids are every bit as wonderful if they arrive a little later in your life, and, man or woman, you're likely to be better prepared for them in a couple of crucial respects.

All right, I've talked about some areas where it might be worth your while to stay a little loose for a while. My last piece of advice involves an area of your lives where you might want to work on becoming a little less flexible. In the catalogue of gloomy 21st-century conditions with which I began these remarks, I neglected to mention that one of the other things we're passing on to you is an American culture that has become something close to an ethical wasteland.

I realize how pathetically commonplace it is for men and women who reach a late point in their lives to look out at the world and begin bellowing, with Cicero, *"0 tempora, 0 mores."* On the other hand not all of them have been wrong, and the Roman Empire did eventually fester and die once it lost its moral bearings.

You're entering a world where everyone has become exquisitely skilled at identifying his or her own personal best interest, and at quickly improvising a moral tenet that supports pursuing that interest. The justifications don't have to fit into any sort of broad, coherent ethical code; self-interest is theory enough: it allows you to justify stiffing a waitress, lying on your tax returns, walking off with that computer printer that seems underused at the office and, a few years from now, carpet-bombing small middle-Eastern nations who resist coughing up their oil supplies.

The Academy didn't quite see its way to including the movie "Cast Away" as one of last year's Best Picture nominees, but that movie contained one of the most remarkable scenes that I've seen in a film in recent years, and I've yet to run across a single writer who remarked on it. It occurs not in the long central section of the picture, when the Tom Hanks character is alone on the island, but in the short section after he returns to civilization. He's been away for four years. When he left he was on the verge of marrying Helen Hunt – which was OK; they were both out of their twenties; they'd kept their options open, thought about what they really wanted in a spouse – and in fact while he was on the island a small photo of her had been an important part of what kept him going.

But when he gets back he learns that his fiancée has, after a long refusal to give up hope, and then another long period of grieving, given in to the insistence of family and friends that she get on with her life. She's married someone else. She has a daughter. She can't bring herself to see him when he arrives at the airport, but late that night Tom takes a cab to her house. Her husband and her daughter are asleep upstairs. In a nice, low-key scene, they awkwardly reconnect a bit, he catching up on things he's missed and she filling in details and giving him back the car he'd left with her.

They share a chaste kiss and he drives off through the rain, very, very slowly, down the driveway and out of sight.

Just out of sight though, because when she suddenly shouts his name he immediately backs up into the frame again. He jumps out and she runs to him and now they have a real kiss, oblivious to the downpour, and she tells him she loves him. "You're the love of my life." They get in the car. Their hearts are thundering; she can't get enough air in her lungs. They look hard at each other. And then they both agree that she has to go home. He drives her back up her

driveway through the rain. Very slowly.

What makes that such an extraordinary scene is that it's one of only a tiny number of instances in recent memory where characters in a movie have acted on the basis of something other than self-interest. It is completely unexpected. We've been waiting for Tom and Helen to get back together for three quarters of the picture. We have no daughter. We would certainly have set aside our puny, ill-developed ethical standards and let them ride off in that SUV to the glorious, happy-ever-after ending that they'd been robbed of four years earlier. We'd have cheered that finale.

But the movie denies us the easy, expected outcome. Without any whining about how it's just not fair and this wasn't their fault, the two characters agree without discussion that the only possible course for both of them is to play out the hands that fate has dealt them. That was, as I've said, a surprising scene to me, but between the mid-1930's and around 1960 characters in movies practiced self-denial of one sort or another all the time. Nearly everybody went to the movies pretty regularly during most of that period, and what they gradually acquired was an idea of what constituted honorable behavior in a wide variety of situations.

It wasn't preachy usually; people in movies didn't talk about why they were doing the right thing, they just did it. And audiences picked it up: these were the social standards. Bad guys looked out only for number one; decent people often subordinated personal gratification to a concern for the best interests of family, friends, the platoon or the nation. We don't have that anymore in our popular art forms, and I miss it. I think it's part of why we're a less admirable people than we once were. And I'm standing here with a straight face and recommending that you spend some real time at this early and busy part of your life finding a set of rules for yourself. Put together a set of personal ethical standards from somewhere. Second only to advising you to invest heavily in dot-com stocks, that's about as unfashionable a piece of advice as I can conceive of anyone tossing out in this commencement season, but I'm serious about it.

It isn't necessary of course. I've already suggested that relatively few people in our society are fretting about how they behave, and we've all noticed that conduct that would have made you a social outcast fifty years ago now gets you a long ride on the talk-

show circuit. So why put the time in, especially on something that could lead you to walk away from Helen Hunt or Tom Hanks? For the same reasons you want to keep your Life Options open. Maximize that satisfaction quotient. Know you're steering instead of being steered. Go through life like a liberally educated woman or man.

You already have a leg up on this assignment. You are graduating today from a school with a distinguished history of acquainting its students with the ethical and moral issues that confront thinking men and women, as well as with the responses to them that have been offered by the most accomplished philosophers, theologians and artists in the centuries prior to yours. It may have all seemed a little theoretical up to this point. From now on it won't be. You'll encounter situations on a regular basis, often when you least expect them, that you'll handle more comfortably if you've worked out your values ahead of time.

What's your obligation when you're having a social dinner and someone else at the table begins denigrating people of another race? If your car insurance is sky-high because everybody cheats the system, are you being a patsy if you don't cry "whiplash" when somebody taps your bumper? The pharmaceutical company you work for has asked you to write a report seriously underplaying the side effects of a new drug they've developed. Is your highest obligation to your family or to the strangers who might take the drug? It may well be that I'm nagging you about this today because I've spent my last twenty-odd years in the film industry, and I've spent a demoralizing amount of that time explaining baby ethics to people who seem mystified by the concept. I once had to tell a studio executive that, yes, it would be wonderful to have that generous contribution to our Film Archive, but you've got a major picture in contention this year and if we accept it, and your movie were to pull down a few nominations at the end of the year, people might think they sniff the gamy scent of quid pro quo in the air. "Oh." "So we can't take your money." "Really?" He's a man with a degree from some college or other, but it clearly hasn't burdened him with a lot of tricky moral considerations.

Very few of you today will be receiving degrees in the areas of philosophy or religion or ethical studies. You've more likely been focusing on accumulating factual information in one field or

another, and you've tended, maybe, to regard those 'values' courses that the college has asked you to jump through as fringe stuff. It's not though. You're moving out into a rapidly changing world with a lot of slippery slopes. Keep working on developing a set of standards that will allow you to keep your footing and your self-respect. Most of your courses are over now, but this one goes on for the rest of your life.

And they never stop giving the tests.

Congratulations to you all. I wish you long, productive and profoundly satisfying lives.