Duke President Nannerl O. Keohane Delivers Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 2003

Text of the address delivered by President Keohane during weekend Baccalaureate services in Duke Chapel

Monday, May 12, 2003  |  First, congratulations to all those who are receiving graduate and professional degrees, and a warm welcome to all the parents, family, and friends listening from Page Auditorium. My charge today is primarily to the graduating seniors, but we know that this is a crucial moment for all of you as well, and we are pleased that you can all be here.

Members of the Class of 2003: return with me in memory to that hot day in August 1999 when you were all gathered here in the Chapel for Opening Convocation. The year 2000 was only months away, so part of my talk focused on what the new millennium might mean for all of us. That was the mood we were in during the last days of 1999, like folks at the turn of every century before us.

I noted then -- and would say now, with even more certainty -- that it is very hard to predict the future. As Woody Allen once said: "Never make predictions -- especially about the future." Just think about what things were like in August 1999. We were in the middle of the dot-com bubble and the new economy; jobs were dropping into the laps of the graduates just before you like ripe plums, and some pundits assured us that the laws of economics had been repealed, and the boom would last forever. The world was for the most part at peace; the U.S. felt secure in Fortress America, with our great oceans and friendly borders and strong armed forces. The news was dominated by celebrity tidbits, and the biggest threat we could foresee was Y2K.

Think what we did not foresee in the first four years of the new millennium: 9/11 ... the war on terrorism ... SARS ... the corporate ethics scandals ... an international economic downturn that refuses to go away. No wonder several of you have told me that you now feel, as seniors, a much stronger sense of the power and movement of history than you did as first-year students, knowing that the times we have lived through together are indeed world-historic moments.

Of course, back on that hot August day in 1999, most of your thoughts were not about Y2K or Fortress America but about your own future as a Duke student. What will college be like? Will I...
fit in? Will I make the grade? Will my roommate and I get along? What color bedspread? And how will I ever find my way around this place?! Etc.

Fortunately, today you can relax, as you all gather again in the Chapel. You did find your way around and make the grade, and all those other things. And I’m sure you now feel that your expectations and predictions about your future as a Duke student were just as much off-balance and off-base as our expectations of what the new century might be like. In fact, most of the important things in your life at Duke would not have been conceivable to you as a first-year student in August 1999.

Collectively, your class has lived through not only some major earth-shaking international and national events, but also some really serious weather here in the mild climate of North Carolina that you came to enjoy. In your first year, right after winter vacation, most of state shut down for an entire week because of a record-breaking blizzard. People who hadn’t been out of bed before 10 am in months appeared outdoors at 7:30 in the morning to build snowmen -- and you couldn’t find a tray in any dining hall, because they had been pressed into service as toboggans. And in your senior year, December saw the worst ice storm most people could remember, and more than half the Triangle was without power for a week.

And yet, the most important elements of your time here were much more low-key than storms or global crises. Think back: the biggest, most important moments of college -- the events and relationships that help define who you are as a person -- rarely appear on your resume. They may include a sudden awareness that you had understood something for the first time; the moment when you suddenly felt responsible for what you knew was true; or an uncomfortable epiphany when a lifelong prejudice was shaken. Those moments may include falling in love, making a friend, finding your voice, feeling empowered.

The tradition of bookending your Duke career by gathering in this place as a class when you arrive as an undergraduate, and again when you are preparing to leave, says a good deal about this university. Only at Duke do people actually scalp tickets for baccalaureate services, and only here do we most of the guests have to watch the ceremony on TV.

In reflecting on how I might offer the most meaningful message to this class, when you have lived through so much and will undoubtedly face daunting challenges in the years ahead, I turned to see what my predecessor, President John Kilgo, had said when he delivered the baccalaureate exactly 100 years ago in graduation ceremonies at what was then Trinity College, on what is now East Campus.
The class of 1903 had lived through some fairly interesting times during their Duke years, with several international ventures by the U.S. in the Philippines and the Caribbean; but in general they may well have thought of history as seniors the way you probably thought of it August 1999, as something moving along pretty slowly, not really that relevant to them. Yet we all know now what they did not know then, what awaited them and their children in the years ahead -- the First and Second World Wars, the Great Depression. And President Kilgo was cautiously aware that the 20th century might not turn out to be quite as bright or as boring as lots of people thought in 1903.

So he told his listeners, the hopeful, bright-faced seniors of 1903, that a century has a conscience, and that what could dignify and define a century would not be intellectual change nor material change but moral change. From a people’s moral center, he said, and only from there, comes grace, poise, strength, and influence. Our ability to take collective action to heal the ills of the world, to harness the spirit of service, to search for truth, to find in our hearts the willingness to sacrifice for others, comes from what he called the right use of moral force.

With such moral force, Kilgo told the graduates, they were more powerful together than alone, and he assigned them the tasks of extinguishing the flames of national hatreds, increasing commercial integrity, ending election fraud, keeping the courts free of partisan politics, using legislation to help the needy rather than protect the powerful, and applying wealth to the highest ends they knew.

The members of the class of 1903 are dead, but their hopes and dreams and best accomplishments live on in you and me. And most of those goals are still relevant today.

After you leave here with a Duke degree, people are going to expect you to lead. And you will find that you already know how to do this, and that you’ve learned a lot of what you know about leadership at Duke. As we sit here, Duke people are advising our national leaders with intelligence and foresight, and doing with dedication and aplomb the sometimes thankless work of government. Duke men and women fought among the troops in Iraq; Duke men and women assembled to protest the war, others to support it, and many wrote and spoke and taught simply to help others understand it. Students emerge from Duke as better intellectual risk-takers than when they entered, people who in one way or another will set about their life’s work of transforming first yourselves and then the world. You do it with determination, honor, and a zest for understanding.

It has been said, often and wrongly, that your generation is apathetic and selfish. That is not what I see. I see four-fifths of
your class having volunteered in the Durham community during your time here. I see selfless devotion to causes from environmental activism to social justice. I see energy, leadership, compassion from many of you, as individuals.

As you graduate, I invite you to remember that together you are even greater, more unstoppable than as single individuals. I would echo the guidance of President Kilgo a century ago: Think about how to develop your collective skills and your political and social power as a people. That, it seems to me, is what has too often been missing in your approach to moral power. Yet there are signs that this is changing, in the movements for various worthy purposes that you have created and launched during these years.

To return to Dean Willimon’s theatrical metaphor, let me tell you a story about actor Michael Caine. Once when he was still a very young actor, rehearsing for a stage play, the script called for him to open a door, enter, and say his line. But someone had got the blocking mixed up, and another actor already on stage had shoved a chair against the door through which Caine was to come. The moment came; he pushed; nothing happened. Again; nothing happened.

The director stopped the action and approached him. "Use the obstacle," he said.

"What?"

"Use the obstacle! If you’re doing comedy and the chair is in your way, fall over it. If you’re doing drama, break it. Just use it. Don’t ever just not enter." And that, according to Caine, became his leitmotif, his slogan, both on and off stage. Use the obstacle.

In speeches like this, people in my generation like to tell people in your generation that you are about to inherit a complex, messy and imperfect world. And that it will be your job to fix it. Somehow, in such speeches, the point gets lost that every graduating generation has been told the same thing, and the mess remains. Yet there is indeed a renewed sense of hope and optimism every time a graduating class sets forth.

Because of what has happened during your Duke years, much more so than for many of the preceding classes, you are already aware of the awesome power and responsibility that await you as a generation preparing for leadership. You will bring to the challenge your own sense of justice, your care for the earth and its peoples, your patriotism and ambition.

And we hope for you that you may perform your role at least as
well as some of the generations that have risen nobly to the
challenge -- your grandparents’ generation, who fought the
Second World War and then helped rebuild western Europe and
Japan with great generosity and at times even humility -- or your
parents’ generation, who fought hard for what they believed in,
as a civil rights or anti-war activists, or in the military or the
courts or the government, in whatever way they labored for
peace and justice. If the world after the ’60s reverted to
something like business as usual, sooner and much more than we
ever expected, nonetheless that generation made a difference.
And so can you.

I cannot say just how you will shape the world you will inherit,
but I know some of you well enough to be confident that as a
generation you will do much good.

One last story, told by Toni Morrison when she accepted the
Nobel Prize: A blind woman renowned for her powers of
prophecy is confronted by a sneering detractor who plans to
humiliate her with a trick. He says, "I’m holding a bird in my
hand. If you’re so good, tell me whether it’s alive or dead."

The bird is, in fact, alive, and if she says it’s dead, he will
produce the living bird and discredit her; on the other hand, if
she says it’s alive, he need only twist its neck and quickly open
his hands to show that it is, in fact, dead -- either way proving
that she is no kind of prophet. The wise woman thinks awhile
and confounds him with her answer: "I don’t know whether it’s
alive or dead," she says. "All I know is that it is in your hands."

Dear class of 2003: I don’t know what the future looks like, but I
know that it is in your hands. And that gives me -- and I’m sure
everyone who has been fortunate enough to know you, teach
you, support you and care for you here at Duke -- a great deal of
confidence. You go with our blessings and our most heartfelt
best wishes for your lives and your leadership in the decades
ahead.

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