

## **Duke University Baccalaureate Charge, 2000**

**President Nannerl O. Keohane**

**May 12, 2000**

I would like to welcome and acknowledge those who are receiving graduate and professional degrees, and all parents, family, and friends; my charge, however, is addressed especially to the graduating seniors.

You've had an unusually stormy passage since you arrived at Duke four years ago. In your first month, Hurricane Fran devastated the Triangle, and many of you responded generously to help with the community clean-up. Then last fall, Hurricanes Mitch and Floyd again brought you out by the busload to help. And as if that weren't enough, the state was basically closed down by record snowstorms soon after you came back for your final semester. We've all been hoping for glorious weather for your Commencement, just to make up for all that.

Unlike the hurricanes, the snow was a great experience at first; some people who hadn't been out of bed before 10:00 since freshman year were actually in the Quad at 7:30 a.m building snowmen, throwing snowballs, taking pictures. And it was impossible to find a tray anywhere in our campus eateries. But after a few days we all began to wish we could go back to our normal lives.

In other ways, your four years here have been just as eventful, if less dramatic. You've inaugurated several great new campus buildings -- WilRec, the Sheffield Tennis Center, the Freeman Center for Jewish Life, Schwartz-Butters -- and you settled well into our newly renovated K'ville, with your own ethernet connections in the traditional Duke lampposts. You've helped plan for other things that will affect the lives of future students -- Curriculum 2000, parking policy, social life, the new residence halls between Main West and Edens.

I recall being personally offended when I returned to my alma mater a year after I graduated and discovered that they had re-routed the main road through campus; how dare they set my memories so totally at odds with the new reality? We won't be quite that bold, but it is true that within a shamelessly brief time after you leave campus as a newly minted alum, your cars crammed with all you have kept or accumulated, the bulldozers will sweep in and Wannamaker Drive will become a thing of the past. The Ocean will be plowed under to be replaced with new buildings and grassy quads and patios, the Shelf and Guam will be mightily disrupted, and students will have to invent new names for new parking lots!

But much from your Duke era will stand. After long years of trying to get a hamburger right, after Boyd-Pishko was followed by Burger King which led to Mean Gene's which begat the All-American Grill, it looks like McDonald's may be around for awhile. A group that might seem by its very nature evanescent -- the Duke University Improvisation Troupe -- has become a Duke institution, along with Students against Sweatshops, the Self-Knowledge Symposium, and bonfires, of course. Fortunately, you've left a few things for other generations to get right; maybe when the Class of 2020 finally settles on the best use for what used to be the Kudzu Tavern, then Devil's Den, you can enjoy it at your twentieth reunion.

It may seem strange that we will welcome a new class of freshmen in the fall. But you can be confident that your legacy at Duke will not disappear; you've made the place your own and made it better in many ways. And even if you haven't yet driven backwards around the traffic circle or discovered an entrance to the tunnels, or hooked up in some unlikely places, you will still get your diploma.

You may recall the day almost four years ago when we welcomed your class to Duke. By now we've all gotten used to the sound of the year 2000, but back then, your class banners hanging along Chapel Drive were almost the first tangible evidence that a new millennium was ready to roll around. And you did help usher in the new millennium, though with a lot less fuss and bother than folks predicted.

In any case, as I reminded you at Convocation, in the Muslim calendar you are the class of 1420, in the Chinese calendar the class of 4698; in Judaism it's 5761. Thanks to your Duke education, I hope each of you now has a deeper sense of at least one of the cultures that produced these calendars -- and many other things besides.

On that hot August morning in 1996 here in this Chapel at Opening Convocation, I focused on that theme of time -- in history, in science fiction, in your own lives. I offered you some counsel on how to use, spend, shape, give, and even occasionally, waste your time at Duke. Now that you can look back on those years, I hope that you will find that despite some regrets about things you haven't done -- and a few others about some things you *have* done -- you will feel that on balance, you have used your time here wisely.

Commencement provides a special time for such reflections as well as for looking forward. But first and foremost, this is a day to savor this moment, this place, the people who share this present time with you, a time of major significance that will not come again. Like that two-headed god Janus, we can at this moment look forward and back, and for once rest in the present.

When you look at an hourglass, you notice that the sand slips through the neck one grain at a time, regardless of how much or how little sand is above or below. That narrow defile is the *now* you carry with you, and being occasionally able to focus on that *now* will be a skill that serves you well throughout your life.

Consider the Zen story of the man being chased by a tiger through rugged country. He comes charging up to a sheer cliff two hundred feet above a rocky gorge, loses his footing, and tumbles over. As he falls he grabs at a bush growing out of the cliff face and clutches at it for dear life. It holds, though the roots start to strain under his weight. Looking down, he sees a long, long fall onto the rocks; looking up, he sees the hungry tiger. Just then he notices that the bush he's clinging to is a wild strawberry bush; he carefully plucks the most succulent strawberry he has ever seen, and he eats it slowly, savoring it fully. It is the most delicious thing he has ever tasted, and he achieves enlightenment.

Now, in the interests of full disclosure, I must tell you that I cannot imagine in my wildest dreams actually having the serenity to *do* such a thing at such a moment, but it's still a good story, and may occasionally remind you to take a deep breath and collect yourself in times of crisis.

As Jorge Luis Borges phrased it in a passage I read at your convocation: "Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire." You are not *in* the river of time, you *are* the river; you are your own time.

In the weeks and months and years ahead, as the hourglass continues its inexorable drift, I hope you do not take too seriously the ancient axiom that time is money. It turns out that time is far more precious than money, especially for people who have enough money, which most of you will, as the world measures these things. As several great religions tell us, the best way you can use your time is paradoxically, sometimes, to **give it away**, both to enrich your friends' lives and in service to your community, whether that community be local or global. Be generous with your time.

During your years at Duke, the explosion of the internet and the World Wide Web, the incredible variety and opportunity of the dot-coms have given you a new handle on the world, a peculiar sense of urgency. This

dynamic, this excitement and the sense of possibility should remain with you.

Doonesbury last week featured President King's annual address to the graduating class of Walden (looks more like Duke). This is one of the best barometers of the evolution of higher education. This year, as always, President King tells the graduates of Walden: "You are the hope of tomorrow, we believe in you, and we believe in your future!" (This is excellent proof that the basic rhetoric of commencement speeches is as durable as anything in the whole world).

But this year President King goes on to say: "In fact, we believe in you so much that the university has decided to forgive student loans in return for modest equity positions in any businesses you may have created here! All interested parties please run your numbers by the dean before leaving. Thank you and good luck."

And the graduates shout back: "You **Wish!** You **Wish!** You **Wish!**"

Proceed with confidence then, with the skills and gifts you've gained at Duke, even if you haven't got a clue what your next step is, whether to found a business, begin a career, join the Peace Corps, get more education, or do something completely different. And proceed with enthusiasm. As the classicists among you discovered long ago, the original of that word--*enthusiasm*--was a Greek noun that described the state of being inspired by or possessed by a divine force. For four years now you have been possessed by the Blue Devil, and we believe on good evidence that that possession will remain with you throughout your lives and you will all be better for it. Recall your Duke enthusiasms when you are daunted or discouraged and the obstacles you overcame while you were here, as proof that you can take on a great many challenges, and succeed. And don't give up too quickly when even greater obstacles appear in the "real world" outside.

There's a story of a coach who was trying to fire up his team at half-time when they were down 20 points. He asks the guys, "When Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team, did he quit?" "No," the team members admit. "When the Wright Brothers' early designs failed again and again to get off the ground, did they quit?" "No, sir!" shout the tired players, getting excited now. "What about Elmer McAllister?" the coach demands. "Did Elmer McAllister ever quit?"

There's a long silence, a shuffling of feet, and finally a freshman clear his throat and says, "Coach, who is Elmer McAllister? I-I never heard of him."

"Of course not," snaps the coach. "He quit."

Let me leave you with one more thought about time. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams says that "time is the longest distance between two places." This may be true in some situations, but it should not be true in your relationship to Duke. In that context, time is the shortest distance between two points -- where you are at any stage in your life, and your alma mater. Whether you intended it or not, your soul has become intertwined with those of the people you met, befriended, studied and played with here in a complex and beautiful linkage like the workings of a jeweled watch. You can and will return to Duke at the speed of thought, in a single tick of the second hand, in your memories and dreams and imagination -- and with a click of your mouse, come back to a virtual Duke, our websites and homepages, any time you wish. We hope you'll will also return often physically to keep tabs on what's happening on campus.

Wherever you go, I charge you to approach your lives, your careers, your families, with enthusiasm. Work well, play well, love well, think clearly. Bring your sense of humor, your sense of fairness, your sense of judgement, your sense of honor, and your sense of compassion to all your interactions. The reputation of this university is now in your hands. What you do next, and what you do always, is how Duke will be judged--not only by your heroic deeds (of which there will be many, sung or unsung) but by your smallest act of charity, grace, or

wisdom. I know you will make us proud; you already have. And we have very much enjoyed spending this time with you.