



President Nannerl O. Keohane's
Durham Academy Commencement Speech
June 7, 2002

Thank you, Sterly, for your generous introduction, and thank you all for your warm welcome. I am honored to have been invited; the ties between our institutions are close in many ways. I note with special pleasure that eight of you who will shortly become Durham Academy alumni will grace this fall's entering class at Duke University; this will bring our current total to over 40 undergraduates.

Many, many folks have made the transition since 1975, and it flows both ways: there are ten Duke alumni on your faculty of whom we are extremely proud. And then, of course, so many sons and daughters of Duke people attend Durham Academy. At least 165 current DA students have a family tie to Duke, so I am particularly glad to join the ranks of Duke presidents who have spoken at your commencement. Whatever your preferences in basketball, thank you for making me feel at home.

I understand that the class of 2002 is an unusually close one, and not just because of the extraordinary number of "lifers" in it. You've survived everything from bus breakdowns to hurricanes, undertaking ambitious service projects along the way both for the school community and beyond. You are doers: rather than whining after your aborted trips to Turtle Island and Washington, D.C., I'm told that you miraculously talked the administration into Colonial Williamsburg, linking that little jaunt to the history curriculum. That argues favorably for your future as a group of imaginative leaders to be reckoned with.

I'm also told you helped create a sense of caring community for your schoolmates with gifts from enchiladas to candy canes, and that you looked beyond your walls as well, launching, for instance, an incredibly successful Rent-a-Junior program to benefit Head Start. What a great idea; I could use a few juniors next time that program comes around.

On the playing fields and courts, the Cavaliers proved their mettle; you cheered the women's field hockey team and, more recently, the dynastic men's lacrosse team, to state championships. I also gather that a couple of the guys were named Biscuit-Eating Champions at Bo's, but that one may not go down in history.

Academically, I read that you trounced Science and Math (and a lot of others) in the Science Olympiads, again taking this year's state championship. No wonder they say that if you visit the Barnes and Noble study hall on a Saturday night, it looks like a miniature version of Durham Academy! You are a highly motivated group, curious about the world, full of questions, many of which you are ready and eager to investigate on your own in the coming years.

I know something about curious young people, not only as a university president, but as a mother and grandmother as well. I'll never forget a formative moment many years ago, when my youngest son Nathaniel was two and a half, riding behind me on his bike seat, on the way to his day care center at Stanford -- a very California scene. He peppered me with non-stop questions throughout the trip, and finally, as I was trying to navigate a particularly tricky intersection, I said distractedly, "I don't know, Nat!" He retorted, with considerable irritation, "I don't want to live in a family where the mommy doesn't know things." Nat finished his Ph.D. a year ago -- so now *he* knows; and he's about to have his first kid, so he'll also learn what it's like *not* to know.

Congratulations on being the kind of people who want to know things, and on all your collective achievements. Your intelligence, talent and ambition are inspiring, and all of us here today -- parents, grandparents, siblings, all manner of family members, friends, dotting faculty, supportive staff, proud alumni -- are delighted to be here to honor and salute you.

The last time I addressed the graduating class of a distinguished private secondary school was when that same son Nathaniel graduated from Milton Academy about a dozen years ago. I asked his advice before the speech, and he told me, as I'm sure you would have, to make it short, make it sweet, say something memorable -- and "Mom, please don't say anything that will embarrass me." I tried to follow his advice then, and I'll do so again today.

In the coming decades, each of you will spend a lot of time with many different people—but the person you will spend most time with is yourself. One of your major purposes in college should be preparing yourself to be an interesting person to spend time with. This has a double advantage: first, that you will enjoy your own company in solitude, when you choose to be alone or find yourself in circumstances where you are alone. And secondly, that you will be a more interesting person for other people to spend time with, so that friends will seek you out for your wit and conversation, not avoid you as an airhead or a pompous bore.

One of my favorite authors has an interesting perspective on this matter. Michel de Montaigne, a sixteenth-century Frenchman, coined a book title that has now become a common noun — *Essais*. The French root of this word means to try, to experiment, to give things a chance and see what happens. Maybe some of the essays you have written fall into an experimental category, too—especially the ones composed between midnight and 2:00 am the day they were due; if it didn't happen at DA, let me assure you that it will happen when you get to college!

Montaigne wrote candid and idiosyncratic accounts of his explorations of the world, both the world outside (he was an inveterate traveler) and the world within himself. His favorite workplace was the tower library on his rural estate, to which he climbed by a series of narrow stairs reaching the very top of his domain, with a view of vineyards and fields, a ceiling carved with his favorite quotations, and lines of books around the shelves. If you go to France today you can still see that library and understand vividly what his life was like more than four hundred years ago. Here Montaigne would retreat to think and write.

He hit upon a lovely image that I commend to you: the "back room of the mind"—literally an "arrière-boutique," a workshop out back. He thought of his own mind as a kind of tower library to which he could retreat even when he was far from home, filled with quotations from wise people and experimental thoughts and jokes and anecdotes, where he could keep company with himself.

He described it this way:

We must reserve a back shop all our own, entirely free, in which to establish our real liberty and our principal retreat and solitude. Here our ordinary conversation must be between us and ourselves. . . We have a soul that can be turned upon itself; it can keep itself company; it has the means to attack and the means to defend, the means to receive and the means to give.

We all have such back shops in our minds; and the most valuable and attractive people we know have rich and fascinating intellectual furniture in those spaces. Montaigne made clear that he would rather *fashion* his mind than *furnish* it—would rather develop his own ideas after handling and

examining and trying on other people's, than to blindly accept another's stock in trade, however handsome.

In that workshop, the one filled with scraps and ideas and half-finished projects, *you* are all and only you, free to improvise, free to play, free to debate with your most demanding, irascible, and harsh critic—yourself. "What you must seek," says Montaigne, "is no longer that the world should speak of you, but how you should speak to yourself." And he added this warning: "Retire into yourself, but first prepare to receive yourself there. . . . There are ways to fail in solitude as well as in company."

You set the stage for your own critical thinking through what you might call informed solitude. This is quite different from the public displays of your learning, such as the formal essays you submit. "It is not enough to have gotten away from the crowd," writes Montaigne. "We must get away from the love of crowds that is within us, we must sequester ourselves and regain possession of ourselves."

Montaigne was not advocating a life of isolation, but a life in which you are finally answerable to yourself. Informed solitude is not antisocial; it's just that Montaigne's multiple companions included voices from 2,500 years of recorded history. He kept the company of historical figures, saints and sages from throughout the ages—and didn't have to worry that his back-room might start to get too crowded!

At the same time, Montaigne also held ongoing discussions with real, living people, and placed an extremely high value on friendship. Virginia Woolf, who praised Montaigne with the words, "Blessed are those who chat easily with their neighbors," summed it up, recognizing that our neighbors include everyone from the janitor to Socrates: "To communicate is our chief business," said Virginia Woolf, "society and friendship our chief delights; and reading, not to acquire knowledge, not to earn a living, but to extend our intercourse beyond our own time and province."

Think of your education, then, as a way of furnishing the back room of the mind. We all know people whose favorite piece of mental furniture is a wide-screen television set, permanently tuned to MTV or Buffy. But this is why Montaigne says, "First prepare to receive yourself." It's important to note that you don't have to complete the job by the time you get your college degree.

In fact, a worthwhile education, unlike most consumer goods, gets better the more you use it, improving with age like a Stradivarius cello. If you employ your time in college wisely, you will not just complete the requisite number of courses, but you will prepare yourself for a lifelong odyssey of learning, experiment, and adventure. You will continually redecorate the back room of your mind—perhaps the most important space of all.

In my own experience as a wet-behind-the-ears college student attending Wellesley on financial aid, having come from a small high school in Arkansas, it was my interaction with wonderful faculty members that challenged me most deeply and broadened my perspectives on the world. Those relationships were essential to forming who I am and what I believed I could do. I was changed forever by the excitement of the college classroom; by the "Aha!" moments in the laboratory and seminars and the library stacks; by exposure to students from around the world; by heady late-night discussions in the dormitories. All this awakened my mind and set it spinning for the rest of my life.

Maybe you already know you want to be a photonics engineer or a pediatric cardiologist, a genetics researcher with a million-dollar lab, or the alpha quadrant's first manufacturer of nanoprobes. But whatever your calling, educated people entertain thoughts without necessarily accepting them. It is in the back room that weird and wonderful ideas surface, where you try them on for size.

If nothing else, the ability to entertain an idea you don't subscribe to—belief in reincarnation, or that the shortest distance between two points is the curve that light follows, or that UNC will win the next NCAA title in men's basketball—can serve as a stepping stone to help you get past your biases, to anticipate the counter-arguments of an intellectual opponent.

In college, as you continue to fashion that back room of your mind, cherish and seek out diversity among your companions, because difference—whether a difference of opinion or language or geography or skin color—is a source of wisdom. In choosing your courses, be bold enough to be adventurous and challenged; but also remember the value of sheer play, because playfulness is the source of the exuberant, freewheeling, unfettered *interplay* of ideas. And remember that your words can travel thousands of miles in an instant, and can cross generations to influence the course of history, as Montaigne's have.

Furnish your mental workshop as a place where you can refine your raw ideas in the fire of your intellect before you share them with the world. Whether you become an Americorps worker in an impoverished rural county or the head of mergers and acquisitions in a major Wall Street firm, use the back room of your mind to make your words -- and your life -- more meaningful, and more enduring.

Good luck, and God speed.