

Charge to the Class of 1997**Baccalaureate Service, May 17, 1997****Nannerl O. Keohane**

Dean Willimon has advised you to enjoy yourselves fully this Commencement weekend. That's good advice, even though you probably didn't need the dean's permission to throw a big party. Keeping with the theme of humor for the moment, let me begin with a story from this state of hogs and barbeque, for which many of you will soon be nostalgic.

Not too long ago, a man traveling through Eastern North Carolina got lost, and stopped by a farmhouse to ask directions. His eye was caught by a pig with a wooden leg. So he said to the farmer -- an old-fashioned family farmer, not the head of an agricultural conglomerate -- "I don't think I've ever seen a pig with a wooden leg. What happened to it?"

"Well," said the farmer, "this is a truly remarkable animal. A few years back, it was rooting around under the oak trees near the house and discovered truffles. This new crop has brought us a tidy income, I can assure you."

"Fascinating," said the visitor. "I never heard of truffles in North Carolina. But -- why does it have a wooden leg?"

"Well," said the farmer, "just last year, on the north forty, the pig discovered oil, and the proceeds from that oil well are going to make us set for life, including even being able to send all our kids to college."

"A truly incredible animal," said the guy. "I am sure that you are the envy of all your neighbors. But why does he have a wooden leg?"

"About six months ago, the farmhouse caught on fire," said the farmer, "and this pig saved our lives. He rushed upstairs, woke us all up, carried my baby daughter down the stairs by the hair, and made sure we were all safe outside."

"Wow," said the visitor. "You are very fortunate, indeed. But I'm still curious about the wooden leg."

"Oh," said the farmer, "if you have a pig that valuable, you don't eat it all at once."

In that spirit, I advise you to savor your graduation, enjoy it slowly, step by step.

If this baccalaureate could be a conversation or a dialogue rather than a formal service, we could share rich and complex memories of the four years since we assembled here for our first official day at Duke. There would be a lot of overlap in these stories, since many of the most vivid memories would be of shared events -- Octoberfest, homecoming, the Final Four your freshman year, the victory over Carolina this winter, the best bands, the vigils, the great lectures by big-name visitors, spring breaks.

But many of the memories would be more individual, more intimate -- of a particular conversation or friendship, of moments in class when something intrigued you or excited your imagination, a great personal triumph on the playing field or the stage, a story or photo that got published, a love affair. These memories are now the stuff of your college years, which you will carry away with you along with the incredible assortment of paraphernalia you have assembled, which you and your families are even now trying to pack into a space much too small for all you have accumulated.

These memories and accumulations add up to your Duke education. To get that education, to become a certified graduate of Duke, you have worked hard, played hard, and only rarely had time to stop and reflect on what was happening to you.

One of the most striking things about the class of 1997 is that there seem to be two quite different sets of you at Duke. To say there are only two sets is of course an exaggeration, since each of the almost 1400 candidates for the baccalaureate degree is an individual different from all the others. But in my interactions with your class, you divide into two groups.

One set includes those who believe Duke was almost perfect when you came, and has gone downhill ever since. Your view of Duke includes a firm conviction that "the administration," that faceless mass that runs this place behind closed doors, and especially the president, have been working intensively for four years to ruin the Duke you chose to attend, mainly by misunderstanding what "work hard/play hard" is all about.

For the other set, your initial reactions to Duke may also have been positive, but your memories will include your disappointment somewhere along the way when Duke didn't quite live up to your expectations, and your subsequent efforts to make it more like the place you hoped that it could be. This set includes those who have tried in one way or another to make Duke more inclusive, more fun, more intellectual, more religious, more politically conscious, more relaxed, more equitable, more diverse, more whatever you wanted it to be.

From my conversations and from what I read in the *Chronicle* about your views, I sometimes wonder whether people from these two different sets ever sit down and talk with one another.

I would guess that you chose to come to Duke for many of the same reasons. You expected it to be a very special place, a place where you would learn a lot, make a lot of friends, have fun, get involved, and earn a degree that would help pave your way for life. I hope that Duke has brought you what you hoped for in all these respects. However, I am sure each of you would say that there were ways in which you would like your Duke experience to have been different.

Some measure Duke by a standard that you experienced in your freshman year: kegs at least three nights a week, most of the fraternities on the front benches on Main West, the bonfire after the basketball team made the Final Four, freshmen living on East, North and West. For members of this set, Duke is a place to be cherished for its distinctiveness among fine universities, a place where all members of the community are bonded together by certain traditions and by our fierce support for the Blue Devils. When the new alcohol policies and the new residential policies were adopted in your sophomore year, and when the fortunes of the basketball team went through a roller-coaster phase, you felt that something unique and distinctive was taken out of the heart of Duke.

For others among you, kegs may have had their fascination, at least for awhile, but you weren't so happy when you had to confront the vomit in the hallways every Sunday morning. Walking along the gauntlet of the fraternity benches on Main West wasn't always a pleasant experience if you were a woman, and if you were a member of a minority group, you questioned why almost all the people living in that prized space on Main West were white. You questioned why Duke seemed so much more welcoming to some folks than to others, depending in part on your social class or the color of your skin, and you tried to find other students who wanted sometimes to take ideas seriously, to think deeply and talk about things that matter.

Today I ask that, when you think back on these four years, you will consider the possibility that the folks in the other set of Dukies in your class, whichever that set might be, have a point. Duke has indeed had an historically distinctive character that alumni recognize and treasure across the years, a way of approaching life that is different from most of our peers, something worth understanding and striving to maintain. But Duke has never been stagnant, never stood still, frozen in one shining moment and conveyed intact to future generations.

Duke has always changed, as any great institution must, with the changes in our country and our world, with changing opportunities and moral understandings, changing demographics, changing laws and regulations, changing fields of knowledge and understanding of the best ways to get an education, changing awareness of the rights of folks who have previously been excluded or ignored. This has been true from the very beginning of this institution 150 years ago; and if it ever ceases to be true, Duke no longer will be Duke.

At Convocation almost four years ago, I used an image that many of you tell me you found arresting: the image, drawn from Michel de Montaigne's book of *Essais*, of the "back room of your mind." I suggested that you might think of your education as a way of furnishing the back room of your mind, the place where you are most truly yourself, both in solitude and in what you draw upon to share with others.

The past four years or so have been spent by each of you here at Duke in furnishing that back room of your mind, filling it with the sturdy furniture of facts and the graceful embellishments of art, the bracing air of theory and the solid and beautiful ornaments of friendship. Your mental back rooms are hung about with memories that serve as trophies, memorabilia, enriching your lives and providing the major tools and skills with which you now confront the future.

Among the furnishings most resonant for many of you are surely memories of particular spaces -- Cameron Indoor Stadium, the Gothic Reading Room, Gross Chem, and of course this very Chapel, both its external prominence as the heart and soul of this campus architecturally, and its intricate internal play of light, stone and shadow. Other adornments of the back room of your mind will surely include memories of the beauty of the campus, from the first blur of soft pinks and whites in the Gardens in spring, through the lush green heaviness of early summer, into the crisp fall afternoons and the clear lamp-lit silence of a winter evening.

As you leave Duke, I urge you to keep a firm grasp on the best pieces of that furniture you have assembled in the back room of your mind. Work hard/play hard is not a bad guideline for the world outside the Gothic Wonderland, as long as you balance it with some other bits of mental readiness that you will also need. Working hard and playing hard will not, alone, bring you happiness and fulfillment in the years ahead. You will also need to love well, think clearly, and serve some principles and interests that are larger than you, in order to have a rewarding life over many decades.

And as important as anything else will be retaining the habits of mental nimbleness, curiosity, and flexibility which we hope Duke has also implanted in that back room of your mind. I know of no better way to make that point than a quote that two of your classmates, Brian Harris and Takcus Nesbit, used in their valedictory "Gin and tonic" in the *Chronicle* a few weeks ago.

According to Edith Wharton, "In spite of illness, in spite of even the archenemy sorrow, one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things and happy in small ways."

As you leave Duke to explore the next chapter of your lives, you will take Duke with you in your memories, and in the shaping of your mind and spirit that has occurred here. In this sense, Duke will be with you wherever

you may go, for the rest of your lives, just as the alma mater says. In the years ahead, your university will be defined and judged by your accomplishments and your character -- by your well-known deeds, of course, but also by how you handle the smaller and less visible parts of life. Those who become part of your own life will, when they think of Duke, think first of you.

That may seem a daunting responsibility, but we are confident that you will represent this university very well. I urge you to use the skills and mental habits that you have acquired at Duke both to preserve those things in the world that you believe are worth preserving, and to work boldly and passionately to change those that you think need to be changed for the better.

You go with our blessings, our affectionate and ardent hopes, and our warmest best wishes for a bright future.

###

Comments? Problems? Contact the [WebMaster](#).

[Back to the DukeNews Home Page](#)