

STUDENT GRADUATION ADDRESS GRADUATION 2003

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An Idea

The beauty of human thought is the reason we all sit here today. We came for many different reasons, and while no two may be the same, there is one common bond. We want to think.

The ability of an individual mind to discern and create independent and creative thought is one of the greatest gifts and responsibilities we are given as human beings. We have had the privilege of attending a university that is dedicated to the mission of learning lives forever. We have been nurtured, stretched, and taught. We came here to learn, and we received what we were willing to invest. Inside or outside the classroom, every experience has allowed us to use our minds.

We can, will and should continue in our quest for answers. British poet and critic Matthew Arnold said, "I do not believe today everything I believed yesterday; I wonder, will believe tomorrow everything I believe today?"

The ideas we formulate now, influence how we see tomorrow. This one moment, cannot and should not be the end-all, the best moment in our lives, or the brightest memory in our minds. It is merely one day, one in honor of the hundreds of collective days that have come before. The sum is greater than its individual parts. We cannot sit here today without honoring, and appreciating yesterday.

The great American play, *Inherit the Wind*, follows the experience of an ordinary man who is put on trial for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution in a Tennessee high school. While defending his client, the defense lawyer states,

"An idea is a greater monument than a cathedral, and the advance of man's knowledge is more of a miracle than any sticks turned into snakes, or the parting of waters! Ladies and Gentleman, progress has never been a bargain. You've got to pay for it. All right, you can have a telephone; but you'll have to give up privacy, the charm of distance. Madam, you may have the right to vote, but at a price. You lose the right to retreat behind a powder-puff or a petticoat. Mister, you may conquer the air; but the birds will lose their wonder, and the clouds will smell of gasoline.

If we are not allowed to freely think, what other merit have we? The elephant is larger, the horse is stronger and swifter, the butterfly more beautiful, the mosquito more prolific, even the sponge is more durable! We cannot deny the one faculty which lifts man above all other creatures of the earth; the power of his brain to reason. We wish to think!"

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world," said South African statesman and president, Nelson Mandela. We are responsible for this gift of knowledge; how we use it, who we share it with, what we feel about it, and if we allow it to change us.

For every action there is a reaction. We cannot be completely unaffected by an idea because the ability to take in thoughts, the power to distinguish its meaning, and the freedom to express, accept or reject a concept is what makes us independent individuals as well as unites us as people.

In life there are no guarantees except that change is inevitable; adjustment is an everyday skill. Even at this new crossroad, problems, lives, and the world will not magically become better. We will not suddenly have enough money. Our time will still be filled to the brink. People will not become more bearable or kind, and decisions will still be uncertain. Although this moment in time will pass, our thoughts will remain and continue to shape our character.

Look to your left. Now, look to your right, in front, and in back. Take in all you can in this one, pure moment. It will quickly end, but the ideas we formulate today become the dreams of tomorrow. It is our duty to use our minds. This capacity is our most powerful tool and the most precious gift any individual can be given. If our education here has taught us one thing I hope it would be to value an idea and the ability of our minds. Instead of building monuments that time will erode, let's create minds that are not afraid to utilize the freedom to think. Happy is the man, and happy he alone. He who can call today his own: He who securely within can say: Tomorrow do their worst, for I have lived today. Let us live, and allow us to think.