

“An Apology from the Class of 1982 to the Class of 2014,

Or, Commencement Without Clichés”

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Commencement Address

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President Drake, Provost Steinmetz, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished guests and colleagues, parents and loved ones of our graduating students, and soon-to-be Ohio State alumni, thank you for inviting me today.

If the key to public speaking is to know your audience, then I should be in good shape. Even though there are three audiences here, I’ve been a part of each. As a long-time faculty member, I’ve attended many commencements. I’ve also had the immense pleasure of watching both our children graduate from **The** Ohio State University. And way back in another century, in 1982, back when we were just Ohio State, I got to sit in the good seats as I received my Bachelor’s degree.

For my family, the university has been like those cathedrals that lord over the old European villages. It’s been the foreground of work and play; its majesty has shaded much of our lives. Memories flood back on me: The snowball fight on the Oval with my wife during Winter break, when it seemed like we had the whole campus to ourselves; Our teenaged son collapsing in despair outside the ‘Shoe

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after Michigan State beat us in 1997 and cost us a national championship (Some guy named Saban was their coach then; What ever happened to him? Last I heard he was in Miami or something. Sure be nice to give some payback some time. But what do I know? I'm just a History prof.). Who knew the kid lying spread eagle on the ground would be on Student Council and help design the new union; my gym-rat daughter who used to hang out in JO North with me, becoming president of Ohio Staters service organization, then making Homecoming Court.

Here's the thing: I know this is a commencement address, but it's profoundly personal to me. I feel like I've won some Scarlet and Grey lottery I didn't even know existed. If you can imagine yourself, 32 years from now, addressing the Class of 2046, you know how I feel.

It's pretty overwhelming, and I'm not sure what the right thing to say is. I read through dozens of previous addresses. The best ones are by OSU faculty, some of whom are sitting behind me now, not least Martha Garland, whom we are rightly honoring today for her long dedication to OSU students. But it seemed to me that one thing was missing from even the best addresses. They all seemed *aimed at students*, rather than *drawn from you*. I'm a teacher, first and foremost, and I find that students are well worth listening to. So that's what I did.

I have an advantage over a lot of commencement speakers in this regard because I have the good fortune to work closely, and in depth, with some of the university's very best students in our World War II study program. One of them, Kelsey Mullen, from Sugarcreek, Ohio, is graduating today, and it will be my delight to hand her the diploma. It made sense to ask these students what they would say in a commencement address—What's on your minds? What's in your hearts? As usual, they were generous with their advice. It was interesting that many of them began with what they *didn't* want to

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hear. One of them, already an alumnae, told me to forget “the ‘you . . . will change the world’” speech because those are “patronizing and to be honest, a lie for 99 percent of the students listening.” Others said: “No platitudes.” “No clichés.” I had to remind them that this is a commencement speech after all. They didn’t leave me with much to work with.

But this got me thinking. What would an address sound like that put into words what many of you actually have on your minds, one that gave voice to your aspirations and anxieties?

Just think, after all, of what you will miss if I were to avoid the usual commencement clichés. I wouldn’t be able to urge you to “get out of your comfort zone.” I couldn’t reassure you that “the future lies ahead.” And of course, I won’t be able to tell you that “today is the first day of the rest of your life.” While I doubt you’ll be too broken up about not hearing those, we’ve all got to remember that clichés carry with them a bit of comfort, if only as self-delusions. Give up the clichés, and you have to forgo their stale reassurances.

You know what? You’re past clichés. Many of you look uneasily at the world you’re about to inherit. Sometimes I think the Class of 1982 owes you an apology. Mine was a generation that was given two historic gifts: the end of the Cold War, and the advent of the computer age. We had a precious opportunity to bolster and widen the commonweal, and we failed. Instead, we’re leaving a legacy of international turmoil and economic bubbles; and we’re handing you a public sphere that has much more noise than knowledge. The growth model of political economy that in place since World War II appears exhausted. You don’t see the guarantees, the straight lines to success that many of your parents and grandparents enjoyed. It’s not that your future is ominous. It is the uncertainty that stands out, and knowing this gives you more than just a case of post-commencement jitters. As one thoughtful

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student wrote me, “we see the flaws in the cultural, economic, and political systems, but we aren’t trusted to fix them, so we are forced to find a way to live in them.”

Although your way ahead may be choppy than it was for your parents and grandparents, I don’t believe it will be uniquely so. As my colleague Geoffrey Parker told graduates in 2003, education means perspective, and some perspective is warranted. As educated people, you know that the world has always been messy and violent and will probably stay that way, but you also know that this remains an immensely prosperous society. If your future seems uncertain, consider my own parents, who grew up during the Great Depression. My father served in Italy for the duration of World War II. Imagine living for 2 ½ years not knowing whether you’d ever see your spouse again. In the long run, they managed to patch together a modest but decent life, and I think they were very happy. I don’t mean to say “they were tougher than you back then.” I mean to imply something very different: that you might have more in common with the so-called Greatest Generation than with your parents. Your challenges certainly are not of that magnitude, but you may have to summon up similar reserves of strength. Your way ahead won’t be straight. But don’t think about it as crooked. Think about it as wonderfully varied.

Besides, who wants the straight road? If all we did here was train you in one skill for one job in one place for the rest of your lives, we’d be a trade school, not a university. You haven’t been *trained* here. You’ve been *educated*, and those are different things. Well aware that you will need to be nimble and well-rounded, you’ve made the most of your education. You mastered new languages and helped develop new research techniques. You double-majored. You double-majored and double minored. You worked in lab sciences and the humanities. You familiarized yourselves with what a global economy looks like and how it works. You studied abroad and dipped your toes in the world’s waters. In all these ways, you’ve been learning what you’ll need to get on with life.

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Perhaps because of this preparation, you are an admirably optimistic bunch. The Pew Research Center's 2014 study of millennials concluded that you are "the nation's most dogged optimists." The notes I received from students bear this out. One of them, another alum, wants me to assure you that "Everything will be ok." Still another alum urged me to say that "the world is open to you. Don't sell yourself short and don't allow anyone else to sell you short. You're a pretty amazing person." Somehow, they aren't clichés when students say them.

I hear some people describe you as an "entitled" generation, but that's not my experience. My impression is that you've taken a hard look at the world and decided to define success much differently from the Class of 1982. Some of our national dogmas insist that there is a direct connection between education and material success, and they equate material success with happiness. As with all dogmas, there is a grain of truth in these. But many of you imagine happiness as a product of personal relationships and meaningful work. It's not that you frown on making a living; you definitely aren't hippies, and I know hippies because I write about them. You want a good roof over your head and to be fairly paid. But you also seek outlets for your creative will; you're unwilling to be stifled just for the sake of comfort. Sure, the "follow your bliss" theme is a commencement cliché. But in your hands, it's not a cliché at all. It's a necessary career strategy, and a lively, if meandering, path forward.

I sense that you are in the process of reworking the nation's values, which are reflected in your public spirit. Far more than the Class of 1982, you are community- and service-oriented. Last year, more than 33,000 OSU students collectively performed over 1, 269, 000 hours of community service. In spite of crushing schedules, you've volunteered at local food banks, served at church camps, gone on medical missions, and provided potable water to villages in underdeveloped societies. You've counseled victims of abuse, and volunteered at suicide hot lines. You've ridden in Pelatonia, and used scholarship money from that ride to further cancer research. Yesterday, ten members of the Class of

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2014 received their officers' commissions and will leave this ceremony to begin their service in the Armed Forces. To you we are particularly grateful.

Let me return to those thoughtful conversations with students. One summed up her perspective this way: Older folks, she wrote me, "have a very specific idea in their heads of what constitutes success. . . . They expect our desires to be the same and our lives to look like theirs. . . . To me at least, it is hard trying to reconcile the[ir] vision of the future . . . with the vision of the future I can see. This world looks different; our futures might look different too. And I want to be told that's not a bad thing."

I'm telling you, it's not a bad thing. Far from it: It's a very good thing to commit yourselves to defining your futures the way you see fit and shaping the values that make sense for you, especially when they so clearly reflect generosity and great human decency. I'm not going to tell you that you will change the world. I won't patronize. But I'm still pretty sure that the world will be a better place when the Class of 1982 steps aside and yields to the Class of 2014. I very much hope that I'll be around when one of you steps forward, 32 years from now, as a representative of the Next Greatest Generation, to tell the Class of 2046, unapologetically, how much good you've done for them.

Please accept my warmest congratulations and my very best wishes. Good luck.

Step forward now Buckeyes. Thank you.