

Leaders and Learners

Commencement Speech, Lyon College
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President Roettger, members of the faculty and administration, vice chairman Jacobs, members of the board of trustees, distinguished guests, friends and families of the graduates, and most of all, the Lyon College Class of 2006. I am honored to be here. And I thank you for the privilege of being with you today.

Congratulations to all here who have guided a member of this group of young minds to receiving their diplomas today. I imagine it has been a mixture of joy and hard work; and so you truly deserve to be proud of yourselves. And, of course, congratulations to all the graduating seniors: You have completed a rigorous course of study at Lyon College, and have contributed to the vitality of this campus community.

As any speaker would on such a happy occasion, I feel an irresistible urge to leave the graduates with just one more piece of advice that I hope will contribute to the efforts of your teachers, families, and friends to make your journey from Batesville into the wider world successful and happy. Here it is: Graduating may feel like reading the last page of a suspense-filled novel, with so many story lines and sub-plots concluding today. However, this is merely the end of an early chapter in your lives. No doubt, you worked hard to get the most out of your coursework and extra-curricular activities. But to live up to your potential, to become a respected and effective leader in your future workplace and community, and to lead a rich and happy life, you cannot stop your learning today. Learning at Lyon must be just the beginning of lifelong learning.

When you began your studies as freshmen, your plan probably was to study hard for a few years, then to wake up today at the end of your senior year, fully educated, ready to go, to take on the world. First comes study; then comes life.

But life without continuous learning is boring at best, and meaningless at worst. As much as there is reason to celebrate today that you had the good sense to come to Lyon in the first place, saw the mountain peak, and conquered Lyon's demanding curriculum, let me assure you that you are not finished with learning. Ours is a world of constant and accelerated technological change, you will enter work environments that are increasingly global, and you will be presented with more and more opportunities to explore and interact with other cultures. We are all part of what the great scholar of Elizabethan England E.M.W. Tillyard called "The Great Chain of Being." You need to keep adding to the knowledge that you have acquired over the last few years. We stand

on the shoulders of those who preceded us, and we make possible progress by those who come next.

But relax: You are well prepared for what lies ahead. Lyon College has given you the knowledge and skills to be successful, not only in your first job, but also the second, third, and fourth. The liberal arts are an education for life. You will probably succeed in your chosen profession and as a respected citizen of your community. And Lyon's extraordinary programs that have helped almost half of you to study abroad surely should give you confidence that you are ready for a global, interdependent world.

Those who stop learning, those who believe that they know enough already...they cannot possibly become effective and inspiring leaders in the institutions in which they participate. Think about it: To lead others into a brighter future, you need to inspire them to learn, to become better, more effective, and more capable. You will lead by example. I would contend that all of history's great leaders understood that they had to set the example of continuous learning and create opportunities for others to learn.

Thomas Jefferson, our nation's third president, understood that a successful democracy depends on an educated populace. Jefferson knew that Americans would participate in civic affairs more thoughtfully and vote regularly only if they were well versed in the great works of philosophy, history, literature, and science. And Jefferson knew that he was not exempt from this general truth; and so he had a large library at his home in Monticello (which he donated to become the nucleus of the Library of Congress)—a very large library for an isolated farmer in a remote former colony of the British Empire. Jefferson envisioned the American farmer walking behind the horse that pulled the plow, tilling his fields while thinking about the great issues of civic polity that he had read about the night before in Aristotle's *Ethics* and Plato's *Republic*.

Many great political leaders have understood the connection between wise and informed leadership, on the one hand, and continuous learning on the other. Let me mention three, in addition to Jefferson. Winston Churchill, who led Britain as Prime Minister through the Second World War, also wrote works of history that are still regarded as masterpieces today. (That is the same Winston Churchill who once attended an official dinner where the wife of a political opponent, growing exasperated in her conversation with Churchill, finally blurted out: "If you were my husband, Sir, I'd put poison into your cup of tea," to which Churchill quickly replied: "And if you were my wife, Madam, I would gladly drink it.")

Churchill always saw the big picture. He understood Britain's struggle in World War II as one in a series of conflicts, over a thousand year period, a millennium, between his island nation and other countries.

Closer to home is my second example: James A Garfield, a US President, relatively obscure today, who in the 1880s was viewed as a military hero of the Civil War, and someone who loved to read the classics. He was a graduate of a small college, Williams College, and president of another one, Hiram College. It was said that he could

write Latin with his left hand and Greek with his right hand simultaneously, and he did that for fun! Garfield was a vigorous reformer, much like John F. Kennedy. (Your parents will remember Kennedy's dynamic speaking style and they—and you—may find it curious that Garfield, when speaking at the opening of a new factory for manufacturing railroad locomotives, ended his speech in a rhetorical flourish by saying “Ask not what the locomotive can do for you, but what you can do for the locomotive.”)

And my third example, George Washington, who we think of today primarily as a superior military leader, a man of few words, in fact tried hard during his lifetime to establish a university in Washington, DC, so strongly did he believe in the connection between the success of a democracy and broad access to a college education.

It's not only US Presidents and British Prime Ministers who have understood the interconnections between leading and learning. You have probably heard the term "learning organization". It refers to an organization—a business corporation or a nonprofit service organization—that tries to learn from its experience. Every organization has a brilliant leader from time to time. But what happens when that leader leaves? Does the organization fall apart? Or have other people learned why that leader was so successful and are they ready to run the organization on the basis of what the organization as a whole has learned?

The greatest compliment to leadership effectiveness is to say that if the leader were to be run over by a truck today, the organization would continue to run smoothly tomorrow. That leader has created a learning organization in which everyone has come to understand the strategies and the mission very well.

Lyon College is a learning organization, and has therefore prepared you unusually well. Is there any other college or university, in any of the 50 states, where a member of the faculty has been chosen to be the state's Professor of the Year in 12 out of the 17 years in which the award has been given? The answer is No. This college has on its faculty some of the best teachers in the nation.

In the world of institutions that I know best, colleges and universities, the best leaders understand that learning is constant and is shared with the faculty, students, and staff. Through this approach, great things can be achieved. You have just heard from Steven Trachtenberg, the distinguished president of George Washington University, who has transformed that university into a powerhouse of learning for people of all ages, including many politicians at mid-career. You may not know Steve has been a mentor to literally dozens of young leaders and they are now presidents of colleges and universities throughout the country. Steve knows what a learning organization is and he has created that environment in the universities that he has led. And I bet that Steve would be the first to admit that he could not have achieved half of what he has, had he ever decided that he was finished learning.

You, the members of the Class of 2006, have reached an important milestone today, in completing your studies. You are graduating from college but are not ending

your lives of learning. If, in your first job, you are challenged to complete additional training, accept those challenges. Sometime in your lifetime you will probably contemplate enrolling in additional courses at a college or university. Do it. And like Thomas Jefferson, you will consider reading books on subjects that interest you and even on subjects that don't interest you but you decide you need to know about. Turn those pages.

In the end, these are my suggestions for how to become an effective leader in your workplace and community and how to live a full and happy life: Like Winston Churchill, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James A. Garfield, John F. Kennedy, and Steve Trachtenberg, never lose your love of learning and never forget where you learned to love learning. Congratulations, again, to the members of the Lyon College Class of 2006. I thank you.