

History's X-Factor

A Faculty Chair Graduation Address
Sussex County Community College
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When you're invited to give a graduation address, you mentally go through a roster of inspirational themes—themes like "The future is yours, grab the helm!" or "Just do it!" or "*Carpe diem!*"

Carpe diem! Seize the day! It *sounds* inspirational, but let's face it: that's what we say in the morning when we first wake up. But by day's end, we usually discover that the *day* has seized *us*--sometimes with the unwanted, and even the tragic; sometimes, mercifully, with the beautiful and the precious; but more often than not with the unexpected, the unplanned for, the unintended.

It's a proper instinct to want to seize the day, to shape it with our hard work and our wisdom. There's something ingrained in the American character "to be captain of my ship and master of my fate." But let's be realistic. So many things that happen in life come as a surprise.

Life has two sides (like the two-faced Roman god Janus): the side that faces the past, and the side that faces the future. There is no time when you look to the future more than you do at graduation time. Your work here is finished and you're facing the future. And so, on this graduation evening, I'd like to offer you some thoughts about the future.

In a way it's true to say that everything in your past has led you to this point. You stand here today because of all your yesterdays, all the things you did, and maybe also the things you didn't do.

We tend to think that our future is a function of our past actions, don't we? It's as if to say: you add up the past and you get the future—like an equation. Or maybe like baking a cake—you throw in certain ingredients and stick it in the oven and before long you have your cake. I'd like to suggest that the relationship between our plans and the future isn't exactly like that.

The equation for the future isn't like a recipe for a cake (if you will) for the simple reason that in any formula for the future there has to be room for

an x factor, room for the unknown. And it's that unknown—that X factor—that which is going to happen—which will be unforeseen, which won't be planned for, which wasn't in the recipe, which will become all-decisive when the future turns into our present some years down the road.

I predict that all of us, some years from now when we look at the cake we have set before us, will find things in it that were never part of the recipe we had in mind. Somewhere, somehow, someone put something else into the mix. The cake we have to eat is never entirely of our own making.

Nor do I mean to suggest that that's necessarily bad. We can see many examples in history where the unplanned for happened, where the unforeseen event changed everything (sometimes for the worse) but ultimately, I would say, always for the better. History is filled with mysterious moments of rebirth, as it were—moments when things were at their worst, moments when no one could see how things could be made better, and suddenly events turned around inexplicably and it was a new day.

For example, who could have foreseen the collapse of the Soviet Union? A few decades ago, no one would have predicted that the Cold War could end any time in the foreseeable future—yet one day the world woke up to learn that the Soviet Union had imploded from within and no longer existed.

The same kind of drama happened at the end of the fourteenth century, a century overcome with anguish—famine, the Black Death, the Hundred Years War. Yet, as historian Barbara Tuchman says, "Amidst the disintegration were sprouting, invisible to contemporaries, the green shoots of the Renaissance to come. In human affairs as in nature, decay is compost for new growth." In the next century appeared Johann Gutenberg, Joan of Arc, Christopher Columbus, Copernicus, and Michaelangelo.

Who could have predicted the events that turned apartheid in South Africa around? That a man of the mindset of President DeClerk should take the helm of state, release and rehabilitate Nelson Mandela, then decide that a general election should determine white or black rule in South Africa. What kept DeClerk from being assassinated during those times? Who can account for the existence of such a leader?

History has shown, time after time, that when things are at their worst, some new unforeseen thing happens, and things get better through something (or someone) people would never have been able to foresee.

And isn't the same pattern true in our own individual lives? If, in our individual lives, we would list all the good and all the bad things that have happened to each one of us, how many of the things that were good came as a surprise in our lives, were unplanned, uncalculated? So many things in our lives come seemingly by chance—a chance meeting. Look at your best friends—no one sits down and calculates who should be a best friend. So many things are the result of serendipity. We're the humble recipients of what some people call fate, others, chance, and still others, like myself, Providence. When things are at their worst, and we say we can't take it any more, we wake up one day and discover that things aren't so bad. A new day has been given to us, a new lease on life.

New theories exist in math and physics today which tend to see matter as self-organizing, that out of chaos comes order, that within the very heart of chaos itself there's a principle of order at work

How could the Big Bang at the beginning of the universe lead to an ordered universe? How could that be? The law of entropy (the second law of thermodynamics) says that everything should dissipate: food spoils and molds, wood rots, iron rusts, universes die. Yet, in all the latest theories, scientists are recognizing that there's a mysterious counter trend *against* disorganization, that the macro processes in nature are constructive, not destructive, settling down into order, not disorder. In biology it's even more profound. In a world that's supposedly cooling off and dying down, new life is appearing every Spring, indeed every day.

And in human culture, new ideas, new inventions, new cures, new wonders keep spouting forth—often as not—unexpected, unplanned and often even undreamed of. And that mysterious process of new beginnings, so discernible in science as well as in history is what we cling to as humans who know how to hope, because that's what the story of our life has been—if we look at it correctly—a series of new beginnings,

In chaos theory, a butterfly in South Carolina flaps its wings and somehow this contributes to a storm in Alaska, which in turn is why the corn has grown so tall this year in Iowa. The events of our lives are always part of some mysterious larger picture that we can never quite understand but can often sense and maybe even learn to trust.

So here you are now, standing before the mystery of the future. My advice to you is to trust this future of yours—even when the chips are down, when times get rough. You are a citizen of the post-modern world, about to graduate and move into that world which is both welcoming and frightening, both wonderful and awful.

In this post-modern world many former realities have been weakened: a belief in reason, a belief in the fairness and goodness of government, a belief in the existence and knowability of truth, a belief in the goodness of human nature. As one philosopher puts it, in the course of the modern era, we have moved from an almost boundless confidence in our own powers to a sense of our insignificance in the universe; from optimism regarding what we can know and understand to profound uncertainty about the meaning of our life, our world; from a mastery over nature to a mutually destructive relationship with nature.

We hear economists say that the children of today will never know the prosperity of their parents, that America is on a downward path, that we will be a Third World nation one day. Are we at the end of the road? Or are we at the point where the road is going to turn?

As we have seen this evening, history, both collectively and personally, is full of these turns, full of surprises, full of the unintended effect. And as with the larger picture of history, so with the events of our personal lives.

I don't mean to be Pollyanna-ish about this, but the future should never frighten, no matter what confronts us. The future beckons to each one of us here tonight with possibilities we haven't even thought of yet, with gifts we've yet to receive. Yes, of course, the future is upcountry. It's not downhill. We'll have to hike it. There'll be lots of difficulties.

But we should believe that in the midst of every difficulty there are always green shoots waiting to bud forth. Why not believe that? Nature, history, and our own individual lives are ample testimony to the mystery of new beginnings, that when things seem to be at their most difficult, suddenly it's all right, and maybe even better than ever.

Your job right now is not so much to *know* the future, not to compute that x-factor, and certainly not to be anxious about it, but to be ready for it. I counsel you not to confront the future with fear and trembling, but with an abundance of hope for the many good things that life has in store for you, the new opportunities, new possibilities, yet to be revealed—those

"green shoots of the Renaissance to come" to each of us individually, as well as to the world.