

IT IS USEFULLY SAID AT GRADUATION CEREMONIES that such occasions mark not endings, but beginnings. This is true – that is why we call it a commencement ceremony: because we graduates are commencing new and unknown lives. Still, rather than strain our eyes in a futile attempt to glimpse the unborn future, it is fitting and appropriate that we take a moment, while gathered here, to look back from this vista and assess how far we have come.

We have spent several years of our lives studying in a city that is, in many ways, the modern-day Athens: a city of marble temples on hilltops, a center of government, of culture, of learning. We dedicated ourselves to learning while here. With every door in this city open before us, we aspired to learn from all that was around us, grabbing at internships and jobs, rushing to museums and conferences. We spent long days in the library poring over texts. We sat for endless hours in our ergonomically incorrect chairs, squinting at computer monitors until the approach of dawn. In the classroom and in the city, we have succeeded beautifully in matters intellectual.

Our time here has given us countless reasons to feel pride in what we have accomplished. Our two schools graduating this peaceful May morning are the two most practical undergraduate schools at American University. Because we have been trained to understand the vast gears of government and the complex workings of the world of business, we believe in the power of numbers and formulae, of systems and paradigms. We believe problems are solvable, and we revel in the comfortable notion that we can meet all the challenges posed by an uncertain world.

BUT WHAT IF WE CAN'T? What if certain problems cannot be solved with our skills; if, in the words of Ecclesiastes, “What is crooked cannot be made straight and what is lacking cannot be counted”? What if all the practical knowledge we have acquired here at AU is mere wind, an empty comfortable security?

There is a danger that comes with practical knowledge. By filling our minds with practical answers, we have trained ourselves to look only at practical questions, and in so doing we may miss something quite important. We may miss the human face of our world. Plato, who lived in that other great city of learning and power, tells us that “we must not suppose that states are made of oak and rock rather than the human natures which are in them.” In the academic world, where abstractions have life and the real world is only a theory, it is easy to forget this

point, but I think being AU graduates makes us uniquely fit to remember it. We have lived in the real world in a way which graduates of many other universities have not.

OUR TIME AT AU HAS LEFT US WITH TWO ADVANTAGES IN PARTICULAR over the countless other graduates across the country who leave their schools this month with supreme confidence in the methods and techniques they have been steeped in. First, our time here has taught us important lessons beyond the classroom – lessons not about ancient kingdoms or voting patterns or constitutional law, but about ourselves, about our limits. We hurled ourselves, again and again, against the real world, educating not just our heads, but our hearts. The commitments, the deadlines, the impediments and the obstacles we faced in college were all to answer the questions that matter most in this transition from youth to adulthood: What can I do? What can't I do? What are my limits? Where do I end, and where does the world begin?

Second, and even more importantly, we have learned here to look past the transient theories of our time to the underlying essence that shapes our history – not numbers, but ideas; not vast impersonal forces, but people; not grand schemes, but contingencies; not unyielding dogma, but question and doubts. Presidents and policies and economic trends will rise and fall and fade away, and even powerful nations crumble in time and pass into history but the ideas and principles remain immutable and clear, resounding through the ages.

WE LEAVE COLLEGE FULL OF OUTWARD VIM AND VIGOR, but with a keen internal sense of humility about our place in this large world. Someday, we will gather again in reunions, more familiar with Rogaine and Viagra than the more recreational pharmaceuticals we may have come to know in our time here. Our grandchildren will be able to quote every line of the Star Wars prequels, and we will no doubt look at their generation and complain that they just don't have the moral values that ours did. And no matter what else our resumes will say then, they will always reflect that we were together, for a brief time, here in this place. It will be the great task of our successors to judge the broader resume of our whole generation – to consider how we have bettered our world through our exertions. But for now, let us go in peace, not with the brash confidence of crusaders, but with the cool and prudent poise of virtuous citizens.

Congratulations, my friends, be well and good luck.