

**Commencement Address
California State University, Chico
May 21, 1999**

DRAFT

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I am honored by the invitation of California State University, Chico to be your speaker today. I want to congratulate those of you who are graduating on reaching this new milestone in your education and in your career path. And for those of you who are wondering why your commencement speaker is a 79 year old Congressman, and one from Southern California, no less, I'll tell you that my grandson is among the graduates here today and I couldn't resist the opportunity to be a part of this occasion. I'll try to do a decent job and not embarrass him too much.

It seems to be the mark of commencement speeches to attempt to both entertain you and to impart a few of life's lessons in the hopes that you may remember them beyond your graduation celebrations. It is also

common for the speaker to reminisce about how he or she felt, long ago sitting through the graduation ceremony, in cap and gown, contemplating an uncertain future. I can skip that, because I never attended my graduation ceremony, and I cannot really say that I missed it all that much. I can tell you, however, that you do face an uncertain future, as we all do at some point in time, but certainly a challenging and exciting one.

Last year, I had the occasion to deliver a commencement address to one of your sister campuses - California State University, San Bernardino. I chose the topics of that address to be sex and old age. Two subjects I know at least a little about. On the subject of sex, I did some research in the Washington Post, LA Times, and the local San Bernardino paper and found them littered with articles on sex: sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, sexual orientation, etc. On the basis of that admittedly minimal research, I was prepared to confirm that the American public

was more interested in sex than any other single subject, and particularly in the connection between sexual performance and old age.

If I were to conduct a similar experiment today, I am reasonably confident that the results would be very similar. Namely because concern about such subjects is far from a new phenomena in human society. Reaching back more than 2000 years ago, in the introduction to Plato's Republic, Socrates speaks to his old friend Cephalus about old age "I would like to find out from you what you can tell us. Is it a difficult time of life, or not?"

Cephalus replies

"...some of us old men often meet together ... And when we do meet, most of them are full of woes; they hanker for the pleasures of their youth, remembering how they used to make love and drink and go to parties... Life was good then, they think, whereas now they can hardly be said to live at all... But in fact I have met many whose feelings are

quite different. For example, I was once present when someone was asking the Poet Sophocles about sex, and whether he was still able to make love to a woman; to which he replied “Don’t talk about that; I have left it behind me and escaped from the madness and slavery of passion.”

Cephalus goes on

“...in old age you become quite free of passions of this sort and they leave you in peace. ---In all of this---there is only one thing to blame; and that is not their old age, Socrates, but their character. For if men are sensible and good tempered, old age is easy enough to bear; if not, youth as well as age is a burden.”

This dialog between Socrates and Cephalus probably occurred shortly before Socrates was put to death in the year 399 BC on charges of impiety and corrupting the young.

Aside from sex and old age, there are many common threads of obsession that have permeated our culture and society over the centuries. Just as our baser instincts lead us to sex, and hopefully love, they also lead to us war and violence and constant struggles for power. Just as Hellenic culture, which dominated during the time of the great philosophers I mentioned and many years afterwards, was racked by wars between the forces of tyranny and democracy, so has been the 20th century modern industrial world.

As each generation seeks to advance and succeed upon the next, we have seen modest progress in preserving democracy and slowly improving the quality of life among most, but not all, the countries of the world. Even in the United States, however, the greatest economic, military, and political power of the world, we have intractable problems, including ever growing disparities in economic well-being and continued instances of racism and intolerance.

With the advent of new technologies in this century, human culture has been advancing at an extremely rapid rate. Yet in many ways we have not truly advanced beyond the Golden Age of Greece. We have the technology to eliminate distance as a barrier to education and health care, yet we are not much better at understanding and implementing the conditions for a just society. Instead of using technology to bring us together, we allow a growing digital divide to further separate the haves from the have nots. We do not value men and women for their character. We do not accept the rational order of the universe and seek to broaden the understanding of all people of that rational order. We do not dream of ideal communities, as Plato did, or seek to create a class of philosopher-statesmen who could serve those communities.

Instead, we are obsessed with sex, violence, and domination in our families and communities through power and money, and cheap, materialistic, thrills.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to seek to create a new world in the 21st century. Only you can do it. We are approaching an interesting time, designated as Y2K, and in all likelihood the dawn of a new millennium will, in contrast to ordinary graduations, bring great challenges for you to overcome, such as all of your computers shutting down at the same time.

Once you've fixed that problem, you can get back to the larger task at hand.

Your contribution to your generation's legacy for the future may be large, and it may well be small. Some of us seek to alter the big picture and help usher in enormous change, be it for the better or the worse.

Others affect change in more incremental means and focus more on improving their immediate world than the larger one which surrounds them. Whichever you choose, always seek wisdom and truth over false and narrow paths. Always seek to expand your knowledge and vision of

the world and understand that while what you have to add to the common store may be small, make sure it is significant. The re-occurrences of human frailty that appear in each successive generation, from the earliest civilizations to today, will likely never be completely eradicated, yet this is not a reason to simply complacently accept the world as it is.

For those of you who can barely see beyond tonight's graduation party - more or less grasp the immediate concept of creating a new world - I can assure you that much of what I have to offer you in terms of wisdom or advice are words that I must often remind myself of. Whether you are at the beginning of your career or well ensconced, I am sure you know that we are a society of many puzzling contradictions. Today, we have more knowledge than any previous generation, but seemingly no greater wisdom.

My staff suggested I leave you with a short line from a Grateful Dead song, as sung by late Jerry Garcia, who reminds us that there are “so many roads to ease my soul.” They seemed to think that there may be a few students here at Chico State who might appreciate the reference to this legendary band. The words do hold a certain resonance for life. Many of us spend years searching for the perfect road and the perfect path to follow. Many of you today may be desperately searching your mind even as we sit here. In my experience there is no one perfect way, but many which you can find joy and peace and worth in following.

So, for those of you still searching for your way - don't worry, it will come, though it may not be in the form you expect. And in the meantime, you might as well try taking incremental steps towards helping your generation leave an indelible imprint on human culture. For those of you who think you already have your life figured out - you have no excuse to procrastinate. Do not become complacent in the

smallness of your world, however grand it may seem to you. Always view life from its widest vantage point.

Once again, congratulations, good luck, and I expect great things from each of you.