

WINTER COMMENCEMENT

Cornell Students Graduating in January 2005

Jeffrey S. Lehman

December 18, 2004

January 2005 Graduates of Cornell University. Relatives. Friends.

On behalf of my colleagues on the faculty, it is my privilege to welcome you to Barton Hall for this morning's celebration of those students who are completing their degree requirements here at Cornell University.

This is indeed a thrilling moment. For you, the graduates, all those years of stress and anxiety, worrying about class assignments, papers, projects, and exams, are finally behind you. The pressure is off.

Or, should I say, it's off you. I, of course, still have to perform for you this morning. And I must confess that I am very worried that I am going to disappoint you. For I am not going to do what you are expecting me to do.

You are expecting me to beg you to stay. We've only had three semesters to get to know one another. And so you are expecting me to call out to you, "No, no, don't go. I can't bear the thought of your leaving!"

Well, I am not going to do that. I know that disappoints you. And I understand why. It is because that's how YOU are feeling. You don't want to leave. And you are projecting your own emotional state onto me.

I must say that I have been impressed by how well you have concealed your emotional turmoil over the past few weeks. An untrained eye might have been deceived by the spring in your step and might not have discerned just how distraught you really are.

But you don't fool me. I am a professor. I have been trained to see beneath the surface of things. To recognize the subtle clues that suggest you really do not want to graduate. The clearest sign is the set of exams you handed in this past week.

But, devoutly though you may wish it, you may not stay. It is time for you to move on to new challenges. And so we assemble in this majestic space to celebrate you.

Now the laws of the State of New York require that I admonish you that you are not quite graduates yet. You will not be receiving a diploma this morning. We are required to withhold that piece of paper until we have graded the aforementioned examinations and have confirmed with the Deputy Associate Dean of Swimming that you have, in fact, satisfied all of the requirements for a Cornell degree.

Nonetheless, we have enough confidence that you have done everything you need to do that we have gone ahead and scheduled this ceremony to celebrate what might be described as a certain level of maturation in your status as Cornellians. You might not quite be graduates yet, but at least we can think of you as fully ripened Cornellians.

What does it mean to be a fully ripened Cornellian? It means that you are now prepared to join an extraordinary community of 200,000 women and men around the world who share with you the experience of an education at Cornell University.

For even as you leave Ithaca, you will find that you do not fully leave Cornell. Part of this incredible University will travel with you, assimilated into your very being, wherever you may go. And you will be amazed at how many of your experiences in adult life will bring you a startling recollection of just how much this revolutionary and beloved university has insinuated itself into your soul.

You will feel it whenever you go to public sporting events, at that moment during the playing of the National Anthem, when you come to the verse about the rockets' glare and you catch yourself looking around to see who else in the crowd wants to emphasize one word more than the others.

You will feel it when someone's cellphone goes off in public, and you notice that the ringtone sounds a lot like the Cornell alma mater.

You might feel your Cornell roots when you go to a 3-star restaurant and you find yourself saying that you agree with Gourmet Magazine that the entrée is quite good, but still lacks some of the subtle flavor balance of a PMP from the Hot Truck.

Well, perhaps not. But you get my point. During your time on the Hill you have acquired a set of experiential and cultural references that, in part, define who you are, and that connect you with others who share that vocabulary, even if they were at Cornell decades before you, or decades after.

But the connection goes much deeper than a shared set of rituals and landmarks. For your identity as Cornellians means that you share certain intellectual qualities. And none of those qualities will be more important to your future lives than your curiosity.

During the Call to Engagement process, I received comments from many Cornell graduates about what one needs to prepare oneself for a life of satisfaction and contribution. For a surprisingly large number of those comments, the first word was "curiosity." One comment used two terms to expand on what he meant by curiosity: "an inquiring mind" and "an open mind." This morning, I thought I would borrow those terms and spend a few minutes reflecting with you about what your Cornell experience might have to say about those two aspects of curiosity.

Let me begin with the "inquiring mind." I am using the term in a slightly different sense from the way it is used by a popular tabloid. But maybe not entirely different. For what I want you to remember today is that having an inquiring mind implies that you must be determined to cherish your ignorance.

Think back, if you will, to the day you first set foot on the Cornell campus. Recall how ignorant you were, relative to your current state of knowledge. You knew so much less about science and literature and economics. And you knew so little about Cornell.

Remember your psychological state. Everything was new and fresh. It was at least a little bit frightening. But you were excited. You felt thrill that we all feel when we sense the possibility that we are about to escape ignorance. And that feeling motivated your behavior. You seized on every bit of information or advice or wisdom that you could get, from anywhere you could get it. Strangers became acquaintances and friends. And your ignorance receded. And now, at the end of your time as a Cornell student, you have acquired expertise.

So here is my first point. As valuable as your expertise is, it has come at a price. When you know something, when it is familiar, you experience it differently. More comfortably. With less fear. But there is a risk that you will also experience it with less excitement, and with less focused attention.

To have an inquiring mind is to remember the thrill of your beginnings at Cornell. It is to recognize your ignorance and appreciate its potential. Appreciating your ignorance does not mean working to preserve it. Rather it means being grateful for the unique opportunities that are only yours when you understand yourself to be in a state of ignorance.

In your adult lives, you will find that it takes more and more work to keep putting yourself back into an ignorant frame of mind. Social pressures, both subtle and not-so-subtle, conspire to tell you that you should be more expert and less ignorant every year. Your goal must be to allow yourself to become more expert, without allowing that process to diminish your opportunities to appreciate your ignorance.

How to do that? You will need to find your own balance between breadth and depth. One dimension of your need to inquire will be satisfied by broadening your horizons – meeting new people, taking up new hobbies, reading in new areas. And a second dimension will be satisfied by recognizing the limits of your expertise – how the knowledge you have can always be extended, and how the answers you have accumulated over time enable you to ask new and more challenging questions.

So an appreciation for ignorance is essential to the inquiring mind. It will take work to maintain that appreciation. But it will take even more work to maintain the second aspect of curiosity: an open mind.

A moment ago, I said that having an inquiring mind means that you should not allow your growing expertise in some areas to diminish your opportunities to appreciate your ignorance. Well having an open mind means that, even in those areas where you are expert, you should not develop too great an emotional attachment to your knowledge. Your knowledge is important to you. It is hard earned. But it is not you.

Your open mind entails an active, fervent readiness to change your mind in the face of a new argument or new evidence. And this quality is every bit as vital to your future happiness as your inquiring mind.

Why is that? It is because your intellectual integrity, your sense that you have a well assembled worldview, demands that you be able to tell yourself that you are intellectually fair. Fair in considering all evidence and ideas. And you know that in the long run your sense of your own intellectual fairness will be far more important to your sense of self than whether you win or lose any particular argument.

I know that for each and every one of you, an essential part of the Cornell experience involved cultivating an open minded receptivity to anything and everything you encountered. It manifested itself whenever you revised your opinions in response to comments you heard in class, or changed your hypothesis as your research progressed, or modified your views on current events as the result of a late night discussion with friends. It also manifested itself when you held to your prior views after developing a coherent response to the new evidence or ideas that you just heard. In each case, you saw that defensiveness and complacency are counterproductive, and that serious, open, self-criticism contribute to your sense of power and efficacy.

This fall, the open and inquiring nature of our student body was in full display when the students on the Mock Election Steering Committee brought speakers from across the political and ideological spectrum in the run-up to the November election. They sponsored nearly a score of events during the semester, including debates among political candidates and debates among ideological partisans. Thousands and thousands of students attended the various events, and the atmosphere of civility and

serious engagement was a testament to the genuine intellectual curiosity of this generation of students.

To be sure, that kind of intellectual curiosity did not begin with your generation of students. E. B. White, Cornell Class of 1921, was perhaps the greatest essayist of the twentieth century, and in his New Yorker essays and other writings, he had occasion to write about his experiences at Cornell. He wrote about how much he learned about writing from his English Professor William Strunk. And he wrote about how much he learned about the importance of intellectual freedom from his professor of medieval history, George Lincoln Burr.

And this learning revealed itself in some of E.B. White's fiction as well. *Stuart Little* is the story of the youngest member of the Little family, who in all respects looked remarkably like a mouse. I would like to read to you a few paragraphs from the conclusion of that book.

In the final chapter, Stuart has set off in his car to find the bird Margalo, who had flown away. And in a few elegant, efficient sentences, E.B. White pauses to signal the importance of an open and inquiring mind.

At the edge of the town [Stuart] found a filling station and stopped to take on some gas.

"Five, please," said Stuart to the attendant.

The man looked at the tiny automobile in amazement.

"Five what?" he asked.

"Five drops," said Stuart. But the man shook his head and said that he couldn't sell such a small amount of gas.

"Why can't you?" demanded Stuart. "You need the money and I need the gas. Why can't we work something out between us?"

The filling station man went inside and came back with a medicine dropper. Stewart unscrewed the cap of the tank and the man put in five drops of gasoline. "I've never done anything like this before," he said.

Next Stuart meets a telephone line repairman and explains that he is heading north, a place where he has never been before.

“Following a broken telephone line north, I have come upon some wonderful places,” [said] the repairman. “Swamps where cedars grow and turtles wait on logs but not for anything in particular; fields bordered by crooked fences broken by years of standing still; orchards so old they have forgotten where the farmhouse is. In the north I have eaten my lunch in pastures rank with ferns and junipers, all under fair skies with a wind blowing. My business has taken me into spruce woods on winter nights where the snow lay deep and soft, a perfect place for a carnival of rabbits. ... I know all these places well. They are a long way from here. ... And a person who is looking for something doesn’t travel very fast.”

“That’s perfectly true,” said Stuart. [He] climbed into his car, and started up the road that led toward the north. The sun was just coming up over the hills on his right. As he peered ahead into the great land that stretched before him, the way seemed long. But the sky was bright, and he somehow felt he was headed in the right direction.

The gas station attendant’s open mind. Stuart Little’s inquiring mind. E.B. White’s masterful writing. I know of no better way to celebrate the completion of your Cornell education.

January 2005 graduates of Cornell, you are about to embark on lives of service to a society that desperately needs you. As you go, let me conclude by sharing a few hopes that we, your teachers, hold for you:

May you enjoy the special pleasures of craft — the private satisfaction of doing a task as well as it can be done.

May you enjoy the special pleasures of profession — the added satisfaction of knowing that your efforts promote a larger public good.

May you be blessed with good luck, and also with the wisdom to appreciate when you have been lucky rather than skillful.

May you find ways to help others under circumstances where they cannot possibly know that you have done so.

May you be patient, and gentle, and tolerant, without becoming smug, self-satisfied, and arrogant.

May you know enough bad weather that you never take sunshine for granted, and enough good weather that your faith in the coming of spring is never shaken.

May you always be able to confess ignorance, doubt, vulnerability, and uncertainty.

May you frequently travel beyond the places that are comfortable and familiar, the better to appreciate the miraculous diversity of life.

May you always be curious, inquiring, and open, welcoming the new opportunities for learning that come with expertise, as well as those that come with ignorance.

And may your steps lead you often back to Ithaca. Back to East Hill. For you will always be Cornellians. And we will always be happy to welcome you home.

Congratulations.