

Kettering University Commencement Address

December 13, 2008

S. R. Liberty

Chairman Coventry and other Members of the Board of Trustees, Members of the Kettering Faculty and Staff, Father Firestone, Ms. Strahka, my Colleagues on the platform, Graduates, Proud Family members, and Friends. It is a pleasure to not only preside over these exercises today, but to also deliver the commencement address.

Why am I pleased? Because nearly all of the baccalaureate graduates here today began their Kettering experience before I joined this institution as its sixth president in July of 2005. So - I did not have the opportunity to speak to them, their family members, and friends as they began the journey that has culminated in the accomplishments we celebrate today. Nor did such an opportunity exist for our master's graduates.

Ladies and Gentlemen, these graduates have experienced a lot of change over the past few years – both within this institution and in the world

around them. During their time here, Kettering has had two president's, three provosts, three student affairs officers, three vice presidents for advancement, three vice presidents for enrollment services, and two information technology officers. New majors, new minors, and new concentrations have been introduced. New academic departments have been created. The university has rearticulated its mission and has added capabilities that support regional socio-economic development. An entrepreneur society has been formed and entrepreneurship programming has been added to the curriculum.

These graduates have seen an increasing emphasis on alternative energies and sustainability, and on civic engagement. They have been generous with their time and talents, and while attending to their busy lives as students, they have made significant contributions external to the University both locally and far away. They have also influenced positive change at the University and they have made it a better place. They have helped us recruit new students and through all of their good works they have enhanced the reputation of their University and have been outstanding ambassadors for it. They have also formed

professional and social networks that will serve them well for the rest of their lives.

In the world around them they are seeing new and troubling economic realities, interesting and historical times politically, and a continuing persistent evil in the world that is intent on destroying our culture and our way of life.

Are they prepared to deal with the challenges ahead? I think they are. I see before me some of the most capable, mature, articulate, self-confident, and focused college graduates in our nation. But, let's ask them.

Are you ready?

Repeat after me (forcefully so everyone can hear you).

We are prepared.

We are confident.

We will do good things.

We will do the right things.

We will succeed.

We will help build a better world.

(Applaud them.)

Now, back to the task at hand. Many question the need for commencement speeches, but they are part of a tradition just like the garments we wear today and this ceremony in general. The well known Doonesberry cartoonist, Gary Trudeau, said that the primary role of a commencement speaker is to prevent graduates “from being released into the real world before they have been sedated.” Indeed, few graduates recall much if anything that was said at their commencement; yet commencement speakers continue to try to say something inspirational or at least memorable - or they dole out advice. I don’t think you need a lot of advice, but I will provide some even though you may forget it.

The well known humorist, Art Buchwald spoke to Vassar graduates in the 70s and told them, “Now we of the older generation have given you a perfect world – don’t louse it up.” We all know what Mr. Buchwald meant, and despite the fact that the world is much different now than it was a little more than three decades ago, it’s still loused up.

There is a myth that great Britain’s Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, gave the shortest ever. The speech was not a commencement address

but a speech delivered to the students of Harrow School on October 29, 1941, and it was probably about four to five minutes long. This was at a point during World War II after terrible, devastating German air attacks, when Churchill sensed that his country would prevail in the long struggle, and his speech was encouraging to the Harrow students. It is interesting that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was nearly six weeks later on December 7, 1941 and Hitler declared war on the United States four days after that. So, the United States had not yet entered the war on the date of the Harrow School speech.

Churchill had attended Harrow School as a youth. Harrow school was a secondary boarding school for boys – a prep school - and according to the school-for-champions.com website, he had returned (and I am now quoting from the website) “to hear the traditional songs he had sung there as a youth, as well as to speak to the students. This became one of his most quoted speeches, due to the distortions that evolved about what he actually said.

The myth is that Churchill stood before the students and said, ‘Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, give in. Never give in. Never give in. Never give in.’ Then he sat down.”

The actual line was “Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never--in nothing, great or small, large or petty--never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”

There is so much to be learned from history – learning that can inspire us as we face today’s challenges. Some of the challenges of today don’t seem so enormous when compared to some of those of the past. In times like these we should look back – back to our roots and back in time – to draw strength and perspective from past experiences of our own and of others. Then we should look forward with the conviction, “I will never give in to adversity.”

Family is critically important - not only to you - but to society as a whole. When family relations and units break down there is a cost for everyone. The last thing you should ever do is give up on family members or the family unit. Don’t leave damaged family relationships unattended. You will have deep regret if you do and find that the opportunity to repair the damage has slipped away.

My mother, who is exactly 89-1/2 years old today, is here to celebrate with us. Wave Mom. Mom was unable to come to my graduation in 1965. So - you are very special.

My mother did a great job of keeping a family scrapbook. I'll bet that most of you have family scrapbooks. When you get a little older you will really enjoy looking back at newspaper clippings, photos and other things from your youth.

A few years ago I did just that (with my Mom) and I found some really neat stuff. Guess what Mr. Coventry? There was a letter in there addressed to me from Chrysler Corporation! You see, in the early to mid 1950s I had an interest in designing automobiles. I would spend many hours drawing what I thought were futuristic looking cars. Well, I felt pretty good about one particular drawing. So, I sent it to Chrysler Corporation to see what they might think of it. And, they actually wrote back!

As I recall, they said they didn't see anything remarkable about the design, but they suggested that if I were interested in a career in automotive I might attend one of a handful of universities that they listed. I don't think in the mid 50s they would have listed GMI!

Interestingly, Notre Dame was on that list, but I found my way to Notre Dame because of other factors.

Bruce, even though they didn't particularly care for my design they didn't send the drawing back. And, you know(?), the 1965 Plymouth Sport Fury (a beautiful automobile) that Angie and I purchased as I was graduating from Notre Dame that year looked suspiciously familiar to me. (ha! ha!)

Now for the record, and for you GM and Ford fans, I want you to know that over the years I have owned a number of different brands as well as having operated three employer provided cars that I selected. The list includes 2 Fords, 2 Plymouths, 2 Chryslers, 3 Mazdas, 4 Chevrolets, 1 Cadillac, 1 Buick, and a Fiat Bianchina (which stalled on a railroad crossing in Granger, Indiana and nearly ended my days on this earth – fortunately the high speed freight train was on the other track).

Kids tend to be partial to the brands of automobiles that their parents own and my Dad owned a Plymouth and a couple of very nice DeSotos in the 50s including a 1955 Desoto with push-button automatic transmission, and power everything – a great car in its day. So, I did have strong Chrysler leanings from the early 50s through the 70s.

As I was completing my undergraduate studies, I interviewed with Chrysler, but much to my dismay they didn't offer me a position. That year was a year of very high electrical engineering degree production and unless you really stood out, it was a little tough finding the exact job you wanted. Also, my resume looked like that of a professional musician, who at the last minute decided to become an engineer – which is pretty much the truth.

Here's another piece of advice. When you set a direction and goals, be mindful that they will probably change in the future. We all encounter opportunities that we cannot anticipate. My whole life has been that way. So, as you move down that corridor with the goal being to reach and open the door at its end, be mindful of all of the doors along both walls of that corridor. Open as many of those as you can to see what is inside, and if it's something that will broaden your experience in a positive way – even though you can't see how it fits into your future – sample it. It is very unlikely that you will move through life without drawing on nearly all of those experiences, and each of them will

enhance your ability to contribute. I call this “preparing for unexpected opportunity.”

Not getting the Chrysler offer, I decided to accept a civilian power systems design engineering position in the Department of Defense. At that time the thought of going to graduate school had never crossed my mind. But the Department of Defense told me that if I took the Graduate Record Exam and scored well, I could get a higher starting salary than their original offer. So, before I left Notre Dame I took the exam. What the heck? - nothing to lose other than the fee! The results came back and I was shocked at how good they were. I had never thought that I might have the stuff for advanced study.

Anyway, I got the higher starting salary and my first assignment was in the engineering design division of the World’s largest Naval Base in Norfolk, VA. I was one of four electrical engineers in the electrical design department. I knew practically nothing about power systems (because that hadn’t been a component of my undergraduate coursework); and, unlike you, I had never worked in an engineering setting, so I lacked both competence in and self-confidence about my

work. But I was eager to learn and succeed. So I studied in the evenings (even more intensely than I had in college). It was in this job that I discovered my undergraduate experience had prepared me to be a self-learner – a capability I am sure you have developed while at Kettering.

And I had a wonderful boss – a true friend and mentor - someone who was eager to teach me everything I wanted to know. And even though I wasn't sure that I wanted to spend my electrical engineering career in power systems design, I was exhilarated by my sense of intellectual growth.

Design projects came in the form of work orders initiated by various military officers and civilian administrators on the base – work orders that were prioritized and placed in a large stack in a basket on my boss' desk. After a couple of months, my confidence and my competence had both increased to the point where my boss told me to dig into this huge backlog of work orders on my own whenever ready. I did, and over a period of a few months, the backlog dwindled to just a few work orders. At that point my boss came to me and said, “I need to tell you

something. I don't want you to work on those few remaining low priority projects in the basket. Those are projects that we don't really want to do, and the folks who requested the work will eventually move on and the projects will go away." That made sense to me. He also told me that he had another really big project that he and I would work on together.

So he and I began working on a very large and interesting project - conducting a system load projection and fault analysis study for the entire Naval Base and Naval Air Station. Little did I know that just a few months later in Saigon, South Vietnam, I would draw on this unexpected learning experience. I walked into the Saigon headquarters of Naval Facilities Engineering Command, as a civilian in June of 1966, and was greeted with, "We've been waiting anxiously for you to arrive for weeks now. Do you know how to do a fault analysis study of a power distribution system?" "Well yes," I said. "Where's your system simulator (like the one I've used at the Pentagon)?" I received a blank stare, and my new boss said, "we have to determine the settings on circuit breakers in the switchgear of a new diesel power plant at Tan San Nhut Airbase and we have only a few weeks to do it."

So, with only pencil, paper, a slide rule, the Westinghouse and GE Transmission manuals, and little to no documentation of the distribution system, I spent a full month, all by myself in the field and in the office , modeling the distribution system and doing the analysis, and the relays were set. After a six-month stay in South Vietnam, two letters of commendation for my work, and a promotion, I recalled those excellent GRE scores that I had unexpectedly obtained. I decided to go back to graduate school at Notre Dame and take my career in new directions – a direction that branched off into more unexpected opportunity and ultimately led me to Kettering.

My last piece of advice – always strive to produce more than you consume, not only in your work but as a member of society. If you don't satisfy this inequality (with some margin to spare) then you probably won't be able to hold a job and the world will not be a better place because of you. Periodically assess how well you are doing at this, and if that production over consumption margin isn't good, either make a change in yourself or move in a new direction.

Yes, you should be loyal to your employer or organization, but sometimes the company or organization will constrain you from achieving your full potential and you have to move on. I've had that happen to me a couple of times.

Finally - to set up my closing - there was another letter in my Mom's scrapbook. On April 19, 1951, General Douglas MacArthur delivered a farewell address to Congress after being fired on April 11th as Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Japan and Commander of the United Nations forces in Korea.

In the next to last paragraph of that historic speech General MacArthur said, "The world has turned over many times since I took the oath on the plain at West Point, and the hopes and dreams have long since vanished, but I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barracks ballads of that day, which proclaimed most proudly that *old soldiers never die; they just fade away.*"

I was eight years old at the time, and I remember listening to that speech on the radio. I was so emotionally struck by that speech that I

wrote a letter to him – something I do not recall doing – and that letter, like many letters to Santa Claus, had never been mailed but placed in my Mom’s family scrapbook.

I hope this isn’t your farewell to Kettering. This is a special place and as Kettering graduates you are special people. I hope you will come back to campus from time to time and stay engaged with the University.

I hope you will visit the my.kettering website and read Perspective Magazine. I will look forward to seeing you at alumni events at various locations in the country and back here on campus. I will be here for a while longer physically, and I assure you that I will be here in spirit for the rest of my life. You see, “Old University presidents never die, they just lose their faculties.”

Bon voyage. All of us here wish you well on your new journey.