

**FRAGILE: HANDLE WITH CARE**

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Good evening. I'll start with the obvious. I'm delighted to have this chance to celebrate the achievements of these amazing, miraculous students. Let's give them yet another round of applause. Now, you might consider the word "miraculous" a bit overblown. But I don't think so.

First of all, it is literally *miraculous* that some of you managed to cross the finish line. I know, I've been watching. More than a few of you were frantically running all over campus last week finishing papers, studying for exams, and preparing for senior honors theses defenses. I was relieved to note that by Friday most of you were again breathing normally as it became clear that you would indeed be graduating this weekend and that your honors designation was secure as well!

But I don't mean the word miracle to be taken only in that ironic way. When you step back and consider the cosmic odds, the fact that each one of you exists as living, breathing, individual human beings *is* truly miraculous. How do I know? Well, as a religion scholar I could cite the many mythic stories that are designed to get across the point that we are all lucky to be here. But, rather than produce yet one more C&E lecture for you, I decided to do what any of you would do. I googled the question. And as you would expect, I found someone who calculated the likelihood that your parents, and their parents, and their parents' parents, going all the way back to the original homo sapiens would line up in just such a way as to produce the unique individual that you happen to be. Would you like to know the

odds? He puts them at 1 in  $10^{2,685,000}$  power.<sup>1</sup> I have absolutely no idea what that number represents. I checked with Honors Mentor and Math Professor Ray Greenwell and he told me that it is a 1 with 2,685,000 zeroes after it. Apparently, that's a number so big, there is no name for it. Now, to be honest, the person who did the calculations was mostly having fun speculating rather than conducting anything like a scientific calculation. The point, however, is that *cosmically speaking*, the odds are vanishingly small that you would find yourself in this room tonight, eating Lackmann's chicken and on the verge of receiving a bachelor degree. The odds are so small it really is *beyond our ability to understand* just how lucky we are to be sitting here tonight.

And that brings me to the second point in this graduation speech. Not only are we lucky to be here, we have almost no hope of ever really understanding *why* we're here. There is just so much about the cosmos that outstrips our powers of understanding. Think about it, if we can't get our minds around a simple number like  $10^{2,685,000}$  power how much else is beyond our ken?

Let me demonstrate my point with an example. I take it as a fact that no one can really explain what led your particular set of parents to meet and bring you into the world. Sure, sociologists, can give you part of the picture. They'll do a class/income analysis, and tell you precisely why your mom and your dad were nudged by sociological circumstances to come together at a particular time. Then the psychologists will get working on the case, and they'll explain in complicated

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Binazir, Meanderings over heaven, earth and mind, <https://blogs.law.harvard.edu/abinazir/2011/06/15/what-are-chances-you-would-be-born/>, May 15, 2013.

scientific language that “opposites attract” and that’s why your mom and your dad noticed one another. Of course, economists think they can explain the relationship too. They’d point out that all relationships are usually about assets and would describe your parents’ situation as akin to a business merger. And, let’s not even get started on the chemists and the biologists who will begin talking about pheromones and other ways evolution has prepared us to tempt other human beings aromatically.

Anyway, you see my point. All of these experts are like the proverbial blind-folded men with their hands on different parts of an elephant that represents life itself. Each has a piece of useful information about our lives, but none are comprehensive and we don’t really have a clue how to puzzle all of their reports together into anything like a single coherent story that explains to ourselves who we are and what our lives are really all about.

Now, I know that most of our soon to be graduates left for college hoping that by earning a bachelors degree they would finally command a body of knowledge, perhaps even in one of the disciplines I just mentioned. And it was reasonable for them to expect that gaining such knowledge would put them in control of their lives. I really wish I could say that’s how it works. It would be so encouraging. And I like to be encouraging, especially when giving a graduation speech. But in fact (and this is something I know will be confirmed by those in the room with more experience than one can gain in just 22 years), while it may be true that you’ve gotten a handle on a little corner of the universe, that corner is still so small relative to what there is to know, that it’s only just this side of absolute ignorance. I’ve heard it said that half

of wisdom comes from knowing what you don't know. I tend to believe that what little wisdom we have comes from knowing that we don't know hardly anything, no matter how well educated we may be.

At this point some of you must be puzzling over my approach to this graduation speech. So far I've pointed out how unlikely it is that you would be graduating this week and that even if you have a degree from a prestigious university (with an Honors Designation) you probably are incapable of understanding life's significance. This is clearly a very odd way to congratulate students. Now, I hope you believe me, when I say I really do want to leave you with a smile and warm feelings. It seems only fair, you've worked very hard and we are after all celebrating the miracle that you've finished. So let me explain why I think these two observations are important.

First of all, you don't have to be a prophet to predict that despite all the promise made manifest by what you've achieved, despite the likelihood that you will be enjoying extraordinary successes in the future, the lives that will be unfolding for each of you will include hard times. Why is that? Why does it have to be that way? Well, the simplest explanation is that without the hard times you wouldn't be able to tell the good times when they came. I know, that sounds flippant. But it expresses a powerful and undeniable truth about our lives. For reasons *beyond our ken*, in *our* lives the good and bad are always intertwined; success is success in part because failure is always lurking around the next corner; life is precious because it doesn't last forever. Failure, disappointment and the terrible experience of having to let go of someone you love, there is no doubt that such things await all of us. And when we

find ourselves caught up in the pain and emotions associated with such moments, when we want more than anything not to have to face something, that's when I think it helps to remember how extraordinary, rare, and lucky it is to be living breathing beings capable of experiencing life's great joys and its almost unbearable agonies. I know, this sounds extreme. Some could legitimately ask, why embrace a life that includes such pain? What I am suggesting is that regardless of our individual circumstances we wake each day winners in a cosmic lottery whose odds are so astonishingly large as to be beyond our ability to understand or make sense of them. It doesn't matter *what* is happening at any given moment. Just to *be* at all is a cosmic gift. Cultivating a continuing awareness of this fact will not, of course, make the hard times go away. I just think it is part of what makes them bearable.

OK, so that explains why I wanted to remind you of how lucky you are to be here (or anywhere) tonight. But why am I also intent on pointing out that you know less than you think you know? After all, you are about to receive a diploma – something only 1/3 of Americans manage to achieve. Doesn't that count? Well, of course it does. I am hugely impressed by what you've learned, and by how much more civilized you are now as opposed to when you first walked through our doors. But this new mastery sets you up like the great tragic heroes in ancient Greece to make a mistake so common that almost no one avoids it.

You see, each and every one of us seems programmed to assume we know more than we actually know. It's hard to understand why that is. Perhaps evolutionarily it makes sense because without some basic confidence we'd be too afraid to get out of bed in the morning. But the down side of being programmed to

think we know more than we do know is that this tendency quite naturally shuts down our investigative and our thinking powers.

Consider this question for just a moment and you'll see what I mean. When do you find yourself really thinking about something? It *ONLY* happens when you feel as if you don't understand a question or have a problem of some kind. That's when you "put your thinking cap on." The great American philosopher John Dewey made this point when he explained that thinking happens only in *problematic situations*. When you are uncertain what the right answer is you can be open to inquiring and listening to what the world has to tell you.

OK, so that's a simple point, but why make it during a graduation speech? Well, I've been worrying (a lot) these days about the future of American democracy. You see, our founders established a system that was based on the notion that we would all engage in "*deliberative democracy*." I want you to focus for a moment on that one word *deliberation*. Deliberation happens when two people share a problematic situation and agree to investigate it in a way that might lead toward a solution.

Now, does that sound at all like what's going on in Washington DC or your state houses these days? Somehow, our representatives, from both parties, and at virtually all levels of government have substituted the word *advocacy* for *deliberation*. They tend to think our democracy works best when people on opposite sides of a question scream at one another until one manages to get at least 1 vote more than the minimum needed to achieve their unquestioned,

uninvestigated, ideologically protected view. It's pathetic, of course. And it is depressing and demoralizing to witness day after day, year in and year out.

And yet, today I'm hopeful. Why? Well how could I not be? Standing where I stand I see in you a generation of students primed not for advocacy but for deliberation. You have the intellectual tools. I know you have them because we helped you acquire them. But more importantly you have a kind of quiet openness to one another and the world. The key is hanging onto the two things I've been discussing today.

Always remember how lucky you are. I don't just mean in the sense of how lucky you are to be living in a world where your basic needs are provided. I'm not just speaking about the gift of knowing that you have family and friends who are there for you (though you should thank them regularly). I'm talking about luck on a much bigger more cosmic level. By something just this side of pure chance you have been given an opportunity to be in the world. What are you doing with your chance? I hope that if you allow a sense of this massive good fortune to permeate your heart and mind that you'll be ready to face whatever the world throws at you.

And remember, that no matter how far you go, you know less than you think you know. Humility comes in many forms, but the truest and most fruitful form is the one that enables you to believe that someone else might actually know better how to move forward. It is via deliberation that we achieve the compromises our founders assumed would be necessary for this great democratic tradition to continue.

I really can see both of these things in your faces tonight. Hold on to them and you will do fine. I'll end by saying, I'm grateful you were willing to share these last four years with us, and look forward to hearing back from you as your lives unfold in exciting and mysterious ways. Thank you.