

*Commencement Address*

*Brown University Graduate School – May 31, 2004*

*(As prepared for delivery)*

## ***A Few Thoughts on Bees, Fungi and the Importance of Perspective in a Code Orange World.***

Thank you, Dean Newman, for that generous introduction. It's always great to be back at Brown for commencements—and even better to be back with the opportunity of speaking to you. But I must admit that, when I graduated from Brown, I never imagined that I would one day return in this role.

While I've spoken at commencements before, it's generally easier when the audience is composed of graduates in environmental studies, which gives me the luxury of preaching to the converted. But speaking to an audience as diverse as this one poses a bigger challenge.

I therefore figured that a little research on commencement speeches might be in order. So I did what you couldn't do back when I was a newly minted Brown graduate: I did a Google search. And it turned up some interesting facts.

I discovered, for instance, that the longest commencement speech on record was delivered at Harvard University in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It lasted more than six hours and was delivered in Latin. And repeated in Greek. I was unable to discover the name of the speaker, but then it's not clear if anyone outlived the oration long enough to bear witness to it.

There were, perhaps not surprisingly, many more claimants to the title of shortest commencement speech on record. But a strong

contender in this category, it seems to me, has to have been the late Nels Smith, former governor of Wyoming.

When it came his turn to speak, Smith rose slowly from his chair, approached the podium, surveyed the expectant students and said: “You done good.” Then he turned and went back to his seat.

As these extremes illustrate, there are two major schools of thought about giving commencement speeches. One school holds that commencement speeches should be long and studded with pearls of wisdom—and the longer the speech, the wiser the person giving it shall seem. Practitioners of this approach, in the words of cartoonist Gary Trudeau, adhere to “the belief that outgoing college students should never be released into the world until they have been properly sedated.”

At the other end of the spectrum, however, are those who think that, after four long years, students have suffered quite enough and there should be no need to prolong the agony any longer than absolutely necessary. Proponents of this approach take comfort in the counsel of Mario Cuomo, the former governor of New York, who compares the role of a commencement speaker to that of a corpse at an Irish wake. They need you to be there in order to have a party. But no one expects you to say very much.

Now, all of this was interesting—but still not very useful in helping me figure out what to say to a group of graduates as diverse as this one. As head of World Wildlife Fund, my concern is biodiversity and particularly the protection of endangered species and the preservation of the habitats in which they live. But while I certainly hope that there are some among you who are considering conservation as a career, I know that many more of you will be following other equally worthwhile, but different, paths.

What can I say from my experience, as a student of nature, that might be of some value to those of you embarking on different careers? And it came to me, as I pondered the question, that I could perhaps say something briefly about perspective. For putting things into perspective, stepping back far enough to see the interconnectedness of all life, is one of the great gifts of sight that conservation can give you.

You see fairly quickly, for instance, that the human race, for all of its politics, problems and preoccupations with itself, is not the most important species on the planet. Sounds a bit shocking doesn't it? But from a biological perspective it's undeniably true.

Remove us from the picture, and life would go on. In fact, most species—apart from the ones we keep as pets—would no doubt not miss us in the least. Take away bees and other pollinators, however, and everything from the coffee we drink to most of the fruits and vegetables we eat would disappear—unless we very quickly figured out some means to artificially pollinate the world.

Take away phytoplankton from the sea, or mycorrhizal fungi from the soil, and whole ecosystems would collapse. Life, as we know it, would for the most part cease to exist.

I'm not trying to sound apocalyptic here. But I am trying to drive home the point that one of the lessons the observation of nature teaches you is that life on Earth—all life, including ours—depends on diversity. On the myriad ways in which all species, large and small, simple and complex, interact in the grand biotic enterprise we call the web of life.

I hope you will keep that in mind, as you go out into the world, because diversity is important not just to the biotic enterprise, but to the grand social enterprise we call civilization. As you go out into the world, keep your eyes, ears and hearts open to diversity,

not just in nature, but everywhere you find it--in art, culture, thought and society.

One of your teachers, Brown anthropology professor William O. Beeman, wrote an op-ed recently about Margaret Mead and what she would have said about 9-11 and the political polarization that has since divided the country, or so the pollsters tell us, into “red” and “blue” states. Mead, of course, is best remembered as an anthropologist. But she was really a polymath—someone of overarching learning and a breadth of intellect of Renaissance proportions. In other words, she had a broad perspective.

And Beeman wrote, correctly I think, that Mead would have warned us against isolationism in both foreign and cultural affairs because it is diversity—of thought, of culture and of people--that enriches and ensures our intellectual survival, just as biodiversity guarantees our physical existence.

So as you go out there, to face a world that I admit is much scarier than the one I faced upon my graduation, keep an open mind, an open heart, an open soul. Value the opinions of others, particularly those who may disagree with you. Listen to them and you may learn something. Be tolerant, be compassionate, be courageous. Remember: We are all in it together... Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, Christians and Muslims, Buddhists and Jews and, at last count, at least 10 million other species, both large and very, very small.

A second short piece of advice I could perhaps give you is to never be afraid of getting your hands dirty. Conservation biologists, when they go out into the field, spend a lot of time mucking about in, well, muck. Most biodiversity isn't of the cute, cuddly and furry variety, after all.

One thing Margaret Mead did say was that the only way to do field work is to put your head down and “never come up for air until it’s over.” Never be afraid to roll up your sleeves, get down in the dirt, and commit, with passion and persistence, to accomplishing the task, or attaining the goal, you’ve set for yourself. Get involved and take what you’ve learned and use it to help make this a better world than the one that is waiting for you when you leave here today. “We make a living by what we get,” Winston Churchill once said. “But we make a life by what we give.” Give to others. Get involved. And celebrate—never shun—life’s amazing diversity.

Finally, and this is the shortest and most personal piece of advice I am going to give you, whenever you start to feel overwhelmed or overburdened... stop, step back, and try to regain that sense of perspective I spoke about earlier. Nature can help you do that, by the way. Go for a walk in the woods. Stroll on the beach. Visit a national park. Take your time. Open your eyes to the life around you and let Nature teach you what Emerson called “the art of taking a walk.” It can be a good tonic for these tense times. And who knows? You may, as I did, even end up falling in love with the teacher.

Thank you. Congratulations. And the very best of luck to all of you.