

Respect For Our Parents, and Thinking For Our Selves

First, congratulations to all the graduates, and thank you for the privilege of speaking to you today.

Today's a pretty important day---like I said, a lot of you are graduating, all your friends and relatives are here to wish you well, and we're all dressed up to mark the occasion. Faculty like me are dressed up in this Halloween-like academic regalia. I'm supposed to stand here and say something that's light and funny, a little thoughtful and provocative and maybe a little sentimental or tearful, without talking too long---pomp and circumstance, sound and fury, and maybe all too forgettable.

So what's this regalia for, and where did I get it? I'll start with the first question. Do you know why banks look like Greek temples, with massive stone walls and pillars? Because---so goes the mythology---there are priests inside whose job is to take worthless pieces of paper called money, and imbue them with indisputable value. We professors, we secular rabbis don a similarly priestly garb, and do the same thing, I think only with your diplomas. We're here to say to you that the real work you did as students at Brandeis was worth doing.

Now where did I get these robes? About a dozen years ago I went to a commencement at another university, and when I saw the academic procession, I thought to myself, "I am gonna get me some of those." So I phoned the campus bookstore at Stanford University (that's where I did my Ph.D.), and they told me the regalia cost \$600. Six hundred bucks---can you believe it? I told my parents this story, and they too gasped at the number---I said, "Yeah, I decided it was a waste of my money."

And then, in a moment of inspiration, I added, "But I haven't decided yet whether it would be a waste of *your* money!"

They exploded in outrage: "Are you kidding? Over our dead bodies! Don't even think about it!" So I didn't. Except when they would phone me, and my mom would say in that typical parental way, "We're so proud of you and your brother..."---I would always respond, "Look, if you were really proud of me, you know what you'd do." To that they would say, "We're not buying it!", and hang up.

Anyways, this went on for a while. About a year later, they called me on the phone, in tears. My mother was all choked up: "We want to get it for you." I thanked them profusely, and I felt compelled to add, "You should realize that I'll always think of you---at least once a year." Believe me---I think of them a lot more often than that.

What's to be learned from this story? First, the obvious, even more so to me now that I am the father of two boys---and what goes around, comes around: their pecuniary interest in my credit card is a thing in itself---you can *always* get more stuff from your parents, even if they sacrificed to send you to college. I mean, I was around 40 when this took place---it's never too late to have a remunerative childhood. But I can see both sides now: that's what I like to call "apparent contradiction".

More seriously, we have an obligation to honor our parents by what we do and how we do it. *I speak not merely of the parents* who raised us, but also of all those---teachers, friends, relatives---who have encouraged us and prayed for our well being. We feel the strength of those who have loved us when we are tested, and their warmth and good spirits when we

succeed. To the graduates, I'd like to say: some of those people are around you today.

I speak also of the parents who built this academic institution only sixty years ago---an act of both tremendous risk and tremendous generosity---in order to make their own honorable contribution to American education.

I speak also of the intellectual parents who created the subjects we study and who literally gave us food for thought, and inspired us to have thoughts of our own. The philosopher Bertrand Russell, who was an atheist, once said that the Ten Commandments was like a final exam---don't attempt any more than six. But I would be absolutely sure to put honoring your parents on the list.

It may sound embarrassing or redundant or obvious to say that your parents love you and are proud of you, but I hope and expect that they do love you and that they are proud of you. (But is it really about graduation? They'd probably be proud of you crossing the street.) They (or should I say, we?) are jealous of your thick, wavy hair, which is why you are told---their personal Samsons---to get haircuts. They take pride in your youth and your strength---which they no longer have in the same way---and in the luxury you have that life can be about you 24 hours a day, in a way you don't feel when you're a parent. They celebrate your freedom to choose among so many options and possibilities in a life that's stretched out before you. And they vicariously celebrate the immortality of your youth, with all the powers, rights and responsibilities appertaining thereto (as they say at graduation), because that's the way it ought to be.

As my younger son used to respond when I said, "Do me a favor, and make me five years old just like you," "Daddy---you had your chance." Well, congratulations, because this chance is yours and yours alone---to celebrate, to savor, to drink to, and to make something of.

When college presidents say in that canonical, oratorical way at graduation, "You can make a difference", what they're really saying is, "You'd *better* make a difference---because we're getting too old to make a lot of difference any more, and pretty soon, it's really and truly going to be up to you."

The University is a special place, and your time at it is equally special. It's both a personal and intellectual oasis from many pressures of the everyday world---there's a reason that the humorist and musician Tom Lehrer wrote a song called "Bright College Days" with the words "Soon we'll be out, amidst the cold world's strife/ Soon we'll be sliding down the razor blade of life."

A university is a living repository of human culture, devoted to answering a thinking person's fundamental questions about who we are, and where we're from, what the world is around us, and how we got here. Where else are questions like this going to be discussed, if not at a university? It's a privilege to talk about these things---it's what a famous university president once called "the privilege of doubt".

The professors who work at the University are the mortal, fallible curators of that special repository, whose job it's been to teach you the answers that are known, so you can go out and confront your own unknown. There's no one answer, because there are so many different kinds of people asking the questions. The answers are scientific and technological, literary and historical---

some of it is about what constitutes physical process and *matter*, and other parts are literally about *what matters*---what matters most to us as people.

Great scientists are ones who were able to look at the world in different ways---they took the physical or mathematically conceptual world completely apart, and put the pieces back together in a manner that gave profoundly new perspective. The physicist Richard Feynman's famous, popular memoir, "Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman", talks at great length about how he worked to construct his own version of the physical world that worked for him.

Great intellectuals like Spinoza, Marx, and Freud, among others, taught us to see the non-physical, mental, or spiritual world around us in radically different ways too---the historian Isaac Deutscher wrote about them,

They all looked for ideals and fulfillment beyond... they represent [ed] the sum and substance... of the most profound upheavals that have taken place in philosophy, sociology, economics, and politics in the last three centuries... Each of them was in society and yet not in it, of it and yet not of it. It was this that enabled them to rise in thought above their societies, above their nations, above their times and generations, and to strike out mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future.

Whether you're a scientist or in the humanities, whether you're a professor, a postdoc, grad student, senior or freshman, that's what you're supposed to do---to learn what's known without being indoctrinated, and in Deutscher's words, to "strike out mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future". We are most likely not Spinozas, Freuds, or Feynmans, but we're not

famous movie actors either---and when we see a love scene in a movie, we don't think, "I wish I could experience the emotional feelings of love and longing and attachment the way those beautiful looking people do in the movies!" No---we *identify* with them. We think, "Yeah---I know just how that feels! I've been there!" (Or I want to go there.)

When we have thoughts and discoveries of our own, we get to think and feel just like our intellectual heroes thought and felt. We get to feel like they did, because we're doing the same kind of intellectual work, even if it isn't with an identical momentousness. Even in math class, you're doing what Euler and Gauss and Gödel did, except they didn't have the answers to the even numbered problems in the back of the book. What we experience in doing that work, the work that we celebrate at Commencement, is a mental connection, a union with our other creative and spiritual half.

It is the spirit of Isaac Deutscher's dual respect for heritage, combined with an ability to seek and embrace significant intellectual nonconformity, that is the essential component, the *élan vital* of a university (as Henri Bergson called his "life force" of causation in nature). A word that is heard all too often at a university is diversity, and it's an important word---I don't think that I need to go on about diversity here---but there's another kind of diversity that we shouldn't forget at a university. That's the diversity of opinion.

That diversity comes from you, and you alone. It's the inevitable consequence of *learning to think for yourself*---like a scientist, thinking of intellectual hypotheses, expressing them as clearly as you can, testing them in discussion and in reflection, and revising them accordingly. That's what the USEMs, the

freshman seminars, are for. Free thinking---that's why you went to college! *Thinking---thinking for yourself! For you.*

Even though this is the science commencement, I'd like to say a little bit about the humanities. (If there are general science courses irreverently called "Physics for Poets", there surely must be poetry for physicists too.) Literature and history are about the human experience---your experience---of strategy, success, and failure, greed and graciousness, revenge and reconciliation, how to be equal and excellent too. They're part of the tools you're going to take with you as you go out into the world.

When you read about Basil of Byzantium quarreling with the Duke of Dorset, it's not some dusty dispute, because they honestly and truly hated each other's guts. Their blood pulsed like yours does. Listen to an opera love aria---my favorite, from Massenet's *Manon*, reminds me of a story of my own---filled with feelings like yours: head over heels, imbued with romantic hope, sexuality, fear and exaltation.

Just as Jewish tradition, for example, recounts the history of the Jewish people, read by Jews as a guide to who they are and where they came from, our literary and historical tradition---part of our *University's universal, non-sectarian* repository of human culture---is a stumbling, triumphant, warts-and-all chronicle of who we are and what we feel. Studying it bestows perspective, so we don't clang unconsciously and stupidly through instant replays of challenges that really aren't new. And language has extraordinary power: The Gettysburg Address really is better than "87 years ago, we started a country."

Because I love jokes, I will conclude with one that is very appropriate for today's celebration. A young college graduate is

filling out a job application. When asked to list his strengths, he writes, "I am a hard worker, I am mature, I pick up new things easily, I am self-motivated, I like working with others, I am a good listener, I accept criticism, ..." and so on and so forth. When asked to list his weaknesses, he only writes, "Well, sometimes I am not all of those things." During your undergraduate years at Brandeis, I hope you got to confront those limits to your abilities. I hope you got to find out that you were "not all of those things." It's inevitable, it's part of being human. How you learn to deal with that inevitability will tell what kind of person you become.

Perhaps the greatest shock of that recognition---that we're not all of those things---came when you were freshmen. That must seem a long time ago. When I began university---which really was a long time ago---I had dinner with a family friend who was just beginning his academic career as an assistant professor. I still remember how moved I was when he said to me, "You know, we're really both freshmen." He was a professor, and I was a kid! And for that moment, we were equals.

I don't think the be-all and the end-all of our place in the world is to be smart, even though that's what's prized at a university. We're probably better off being decent than being smart. But to feel like a freshman, as you say goodbye to being undergraduates, might not be such a bad idea to take with you. Our language abounds in poetic phrases like "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for"---and in reaching for what's just beyond our grasp, no matter at what level of achievement, we can't help but feel like freshmen. If we all can remember what that feeling is like, maybe---just maybe---we learned something in college after all. Thank you.

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I taught a USEM last year called "Where the Idea of the Computer Came From," an informal intellectual history of computer science. While studying computer chess playing algorithms, we read a novella by Stefan Zweig called "The Royal Game". An Austrian banking official, under Gestapo interrogation to divulge privileged information about the monarchy, is confined with nothing to do and no one to talk to, in the hope that in this mental void, he'll blurt out everything. Desperate for food for thought, he steals a book, but to his disappointment, it's a book of chess games. He memorizes them, plays fantasized chess in his head, and learns to see moves ahead---gaining mental acuity, he outwits his interrogators. A lot more happens too. The education that a liberal arts university like Brandeis provides you does the same thing---by thinking for yourself, by using your head, you learn how to see moves ahead.