

CONCORDIA COLLEGE
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
DECEMBER 14, 2002

It is my privilege to be here to give the Concordia Graduating Class of 2002 the advice that I cannot give my sons without offering a bribe - dinner at Peter Luger's. I appreciate that the advice that I am giving you today doesn't cost me a dime.

Robertson Davies said that the usual thing at a commencement, "- - is for the speaker to tell the graduating class that they are going out into a world torn by dissent, racked by problems of unprecedented knottiness and difficulty and that we are headed for the abyss of destruction. Unless, unless you, the graduating class, - - - will shoulder your burden and do something splendid to do it right."

But I am not going to play that note. Each generation moves civilization forward a bit and backwards a bit. Over a long period of history, the tendency is for civilization to advance.

My generation has conquered space, made great medical discoveries, has unified Europe, has brought the Iron Curtain into the fellowship of other nations, prevented another world war, discovered much about the origins of the universe, life on Earth and the human race and has finally, embarrassingly late, decided that men of all races, nationalities, religions and persuasions are created equal with a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

My generation moved civilization quite a bit forward in these ways, but my generation has moved civilization backward by way of serious missteps: uncontrolled world-wide AIDS, the current deep recession and a terrible devaluation of equity values that has destroyed so many retirement savings, starvation in Africa that is beyond comprehension, and a complete lack of understanding between the nations of Islam and the West.

Your generation has the privilege of using today's advancements as your start point. Your generation should push knowledge and a compassionate appreciation of all the peoples of this earth to a greater distance than you found it. You will have to work on the missteps.

I wish to make three points:

1. I will show you why and where your liberal arts education has given you more than you think that you have received. You have learned things that I will show you are the hidden virtues of a good liberal arts education.
2. I will ask you to dedicate part of your energy and trained brainpower to public service, without which a life is solitary, selfish and without true reward.
3. I will ask you to use your education and skills in a lawful, ethical and compassionate manner. Anything less may leave you spiritually bankrupt and at the end you will know that you have failed in the business of life.

Some of you may be concerned that you are not trained for a specific work.

Fear not: many businesses are now prejudiced in favor of a liberal arts education.

I polled people that I know in Bronxville who have run large businesses. Most of them said that the thing that they valued the highest was the ability of new hires to research complex and apparently contradictory facts and reach a reasoned business conclusion that the facts support that is described in a writing that is clear and simple. They said that liberal arts graduates consistently were able to perform in that manner.

Let me say that again: “the ability to research complex and apparently contradictory facts and reach a reasoned business conclusion that the facts support that you can describe in a writing that is clear and simple.” This is the key to competence in all endeavors.

WHAT DID YOU REALLY LEARN AT CONCORDIA?

A lot of the factual information that you memorized for your courses will drift away with time. What remains with you for life is what follows:

You were taught to research and assemble facts and reach reasoned conclusions that are supported by those facts.

This process is how you reach a business decision. This process is how you test the conclusions of politicians and reporters.

You also know by now that there is a good deal of uncertainty in today’s world compared to earlier ages in which a false certainty prevailed in religious, scientific and naturalistic thought. Today’s “in your face” uncertainty is a great advantage to you as it gives you the freedom to test different theses and approaches that were not allowed or tolerated 100 years ago.

You were taught to edit your written documents until they are readable, clear and without grammatical or spelling error.

You will be judged in your careers by your written documents and by the quality of your speech in meetings. Mentally edit your public speech and edit and edit any written document that you distribute. All that red marking on your Concordia papers is what you will do to yourself in the future.

While on this topic, please, please use care with Emails. Microsoft was guilty of an antitrust offense in part due to Bill Gates’ outlandish Emails.

There is a funny but tragic story that was in the news throughout America. A large multinational corporate headquarters set up a corporate network in which all in the company could Email each other.

What you could do was scroll through the names of all employees, highlight the name that you want to Email, double click on the highlighted name and the name, Email address and a salutation would be placed into an Email form for you to fill in with your message.

A young man was in love with a young lady in the company. He scrolled through the names, high lit her name, double clicked on it and wrote her an Email that made it quite clear that they were in for an especially hot date that evening.

Unfortunately, the name of the company CEO was above the young lady's name in the scroll of names of employees. Most unfortunately, Romeo hit the CEO's name by accident and did not notice that the salutation and address and title on the Email were for the CEO. Worse, Romeo did not know that all Emails to the CEO were automatically blind copied to all managers who directly reported to the CEO.

You can imagine the results.

The point of this story: never send an Email that you do not want your boss, your spouse, your Minister, the person that is planning on suing you, the FBI, the CIA, the Justice Department and your toughest professor at Concordia to read.

You have gained a breadth of knowledge that allows you to present, use and internalize lessons from history and literature.

You now have enough understanding of history to think on the lessons of history and bring them to bear on an immediate problem. "He who does not learn from history is doomed to repeat history."

You have gained at Concordia enough exposure to many topics that an Educated Person is supposed to know to start you on a lifetime of interesting things to read and study.

This is one of the greatest gifts of a liberal arts education: it is a start point in a lifetime of study and intellectual exploration of our society and our nature and the universe in which we are immersed. It is called the love of knowledge.

When I was thinking about what I would say to you today I was sitting in my library, surrounded by collections on topics that have interested me for many years. When I looked at the topics that my library is divided into, I realized that each topic was one that I studied at Oklahoma University: Greek and Roman literature, English literature, archeology, modern and ancient history, comparative religion, philosophy and more. Every area for which I have collected books arose from courses and professors that awakened my mind to their topics 40 years ago during my liberal arts education.

I remember little of what I was tested on and studied so hard to memorize at Oklahoma University. But, 40 years later, I have far more knowledge about those topics than I had when I took my exams.

A liberal arts course of study is a process of awakening the mind to the pleasures and necessities of topics and disciplines that you hardly knew existed before you enrolled in Concordia and that will continue to stimulate your interest for the rest of your life.

You have learned not to be afraid to change a valued conclusion or position when the assembled and shaken facts support a different conclusion.

This is a skill that all of us pick up in college and that we use for the rest of our lives.

I have an example of this characteristic. In my Court in Bronxville, during criminal term, I had before me a distinguished elderly man and his two sons who were in their 30s. An attractive young lady accused their father of stalking and staring at her so continuously that she feared attack.

It appeared to be a cut and dried case where the evidence proved that the defendant was a stalker and possibly dangerous.

One of his sons asked to speak. He gave some background to his father's Wall Street career and his good deeds for much of his life. The son explained that his mother had died within a year of the incident and that his father had the illusion that the young lady was his deceased wife. I hear a lot of specious excuses during criminal term and did not believe the story and said so. I was prepared to hold the defendant guilty and to get him into the New York probation system, which would find him psychological help.

But, at that point, the defendant's other son stood up and said that he had a picture of his parents when they were married: I looked at the picture. I had to struggle to find my voice - the defendant's wife in the wedding photograph looked like the identical twin sister of the young woman who was the accusing party.

I asked the accusing woman to come forward and look at the picture. When she saw it, tears ran down her cheeks and she most graciously and charitably withdrew the charges. The defendant's sons agreed to make sure that their father had more supervision.

Point: when all of the facts tell you that the conventional conclusion is wrong – the conventional conclusion is wrong. Trust the facts.

DEDICATION TO PUBLIC SERVICE

You will be enormously enriched if you take the time and trouble to use your new skills to perform acts of public service.

I believe that it is expected of us and fair that we give back to society what society has given to us. Further, I believe and suggest to you that without public service and charity to others, we become narrow little people, selfish and turned inward.

I was recently on the train to New York with a recipient of a Concordia Community Service award, George Vojta. He and I discussed the theme of this Commencement Address.

George said that he was born in modest circumstances in the Midwest. He was recruited to go to Yale with a full scholarship.

The university official that welcomed George to Yale told George that he was very fortunate, as what he was being given would change his life forever.

George was then told that in return for the great privilege George was receiving, he must use what he has been given to give back to society in return.

Today, although George is retired from his investment bank and could be roaming the world on pleasure cruises, he is devoting full time to societal causes and needs. He told me on the train that he had never forgotten the charge placed on him to give back to society.

I ask each of you to accept the same charge of giving back to society what you have here received. The cost of your education has been in part subsidized by contributions to Concordia from all over this country. You have received something here that much of the world's population cannot even hope to have. There are many ways to give back: you can volunteer for service with your community.

When I first moved to New York City, although I was working long hours in a Wall Street law firm, I joined the Jaycees and worked on many civic projects in New York City (it was also great for meeting girls).

I worked on various political campaigns and even went to a Presidential Inaugural Ball (a spectacular approach to meeting girls).

In Bronxville, I have been on the Zoning Board of Appeals, was Village Counsel for three terms and am now Village Justice in my third term. I belong to the Rotary Club whose motto is "service above self." Rotary has many international and domestic projects that aid others and I have the privilege of working on some of them. If I could not have these outbound public service activities, I would shrink.

There are many other ways to offer public service. You can work with your Church and you can go on Midnight Runs. My wife is very involved with Save the Children, a worthwhile organization organized by women that concentrates on improving the lives of children in lesser developed and war torn areas. You ladies who are graduating should look at Save the Children as a part of your public service.

USE YOUR EDUCATION AND SKILLS IN A LAWFUL, ETHICAL AND COMPASSIONATE MANNER

Do not lend your skills to the kind of business behavior that will fake books, fake sales, fake performance of any kind or cook economic records to hide poor earnings performance. When I use the term "ethical" I mean to combine morality and ethics. There are principles of morality that go beyond corporate and statutory codes of ethics.

I was in the US Army twice as an Infantry Officer. I suggest that the code of a US military officer is what you should use in life and business: honor and duty.

- Honor requires that you always tell the truth, no matter how bad the truth may be, and that you not let your and your organization's name or reputation be damaged by immoral or illegal or undignified behavior.
- There is no Nuremberg Defense: following orders is not a defense to illegal or immoral acts in civilian life as well as the military.
- With respect to duty: well, you simply do your duty, no matter how unpleasant, no matter whether it forces you to cancel your vacation or whether your duty requires you to work late when you would rather be home. But, remember, there is no Nuremberg defense to illegal or unethical behavior.

But, there is more to life than honor and duty – there is a need for compassionate behavior. Honorable and compassionate behavior in business is sometimes hard to find and truly harder to practice, but practice it we must.

I have two personal examples of what I mean:

My first example describes a moral mistake that arose out of business behavior that was lawful, was not a corporate ethics violation, was considered to be in the best economic interest of the company and was lauded as a minor triumph. It happened to me.

When I was early in my career as a lawyer in ITT Corporation's Legal Department in New York City, I was asked to join the ITT team that negotiated and closed the sale of the Puerto Rican telephone company, called Ricotelco, to the Government, which was then headed by Governor Colon. I was asked to negotiate a new supply agreement between ITT Caribbean Manufacturing and Ricotelco that would assure continued factory operations in Puerto Rico after the public telephone company was purchased by the government. The ITT's Puerto Rican factory employed around 300 people and many subcontractors and suppliers relied on the factory's purchases.

A team composed of myself and the CFO and CEO of that factory faced a table of 12 NY and San Juan lawyers and very senior retired AT&T executives that Gov. Colon had hired to deal with ITT. When we negotiated price, my CFO created a three page, complex price escalation formula that no member of Gov. Colon's team understood. The price escalation formula was designed to create very high prices that the state owned telephone utility would have been obliged by contract to pay.

When Ricotelco's divestment and my factory agreement closed, my team had a victory celebration in which the management and labor representatives of the factory were triumphant. I was introduced as the hero that got the Governor's formidable negotiating team to agree to the contract that would guarantee the high profitability and continued existence of the factory.

Six months after the closing, I was seated in my New York office at 320 Park Avenue when the phone rang. It was the new CEO of Ricotelco, calling from a telecom convention in Hawaii. His opening statement was, "You have committed a crime on the Puerto Rican people. You want to know what I think of your contract and your price formula? (I heard the sound of paper being ripped to pieces.) Now, Senior McKinnis, try and enforce your contract in a Puerto Rican Court. I will never buy another item of equipment from your factory in Puerto Rico."

After that, the factory closed and 300 people lost their jobs. I felt responsible.

Lesson: it should be your rule of business morality to never take an advantage that the other side does not comprehend and that causes it severe damage – even if the other side ought to know better and is getting the best advice. Use the golden rule, "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you."

Another family story is an example of the unhappy consequences of a perceived failure of compassion under circumstances where the behavior in question was legal, ethical and very much in the best interests of the company. It happened to my paternal Grandfather.

Grandfather McKinnis had to work a farm in Missouri while his father was gone most of the year as a Baptist evangelist who went from town to town, preaching off of the back of a horse drawn wagon.

My Grandfather and one of his brothers ran away from the farm and entered Indian Territory Land Rush for free land in what is now Oklahoma. They did well and my Grandfather, with little education, ended up owning and running a small town bank.

In the late 40s, he used to take me, then a little boy, with him when he would go out to farms in Dust Bowl Oklahoma to see if they qualified for a farm loan. I still remember seeing starved families look with burning need at my Grandfather as their last hope. Their farms and the roads leading to them were covered with sand drifts. We had to shovel sand drifts out of the road in order to get through. Dust storms still blew in periodically and the rain never came. Their current crop was burned and brown – worthless.

Over and over again when we left a Dust Bowl destroyed farm, Grandfather would tell me that he could not approve the loan – that they had no chance of raising a crop and repaying the loan. During the Depression, my Grandmother ran a soup line every day in the back yard of Grandfather's home and the two of them were very generous with contributions to charity. He was a leader in the Southern Baptist Church and helped found a Baptist College. He did more than most people to help others and share his success.

But, when he was dying, I came back from the Army and visited him toward the end. I held his hand. He was shaking like a leaf. I was shocked and told him with the lack of tack of the young, "Granddad, you are so religious, you need not be afraid"

My Grandfather answered in a low voice, "I can see all of their faces."

I asked, "What faces?"

He replied in a low voice, "Those farmers - I could not give them a loan."

Having been with him to look at Dust Bowl farms, to this day I too still see their gaunt faces, full of despair, dirt, failure, and false hope. You who were raised in affluent America cannot imagine what it was like to work the land in the Depression and the Dust Bowl.

He had done what his bank directors praised as the right thing. He did what a banker must. He protected the bank depositors' assets. His bank did not close in the Depression, as others had. He had the comfort of knowing that he had no choice but to deny the bank loans.

But, he had the humanity and compassion to deeply regret that he had not done more to help those poor starving farmers in the Dust Bowl. He had done more than most others to help his fellow man, but his own spiritual code was offended by walking away from those dirt-poor starving farmers during the Dust Bowl without doing more for them. It haunted him at the end.

My point of these two stories is that when you go out from Concordia into your new careers, you should know that you have moral and compassionate as well as business and legal responsibilities.

You were given a small yellow card that contains a summation of what I have told you today printed on it. I want you to take it home with you as a souvenir of your graduation.

When you are not sure of your path, when you are feeling out of touch with success and happiness, when selfish colleagues drag you down, please read it again.

Please look at it while I read it to you:

**A Concordia liberal arts degree,
Coupled with a lifetime
Commitment to:
Knowledge,
Independent thought,
Unselfish public service,
Honor and duty, and
Performance of your work
In a lawful, ethical and compassionate manner,
Creates a successful, respected and
Productive life.**

My final advice to you is something that is commonly attributed to the Maharani of Jaipur; she was a brilliant woman in the later part of the British administration of India; she was known for being outspoken:

**“You should keep an open mind to all new things.
Having an open mind is a good thing,
But not so open that your brains fall out.”**

Thank you and good luck,

George C. McKinnis