

Learning from College, after College A Commencement Speech at SUNY New Paltz*

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This is by far and away my *second* favorite degree!

Thanks so much for the introduction. But just so you know when those of us from *here* want to pay Harvard a compliment, we call it “the New Paltz of the Northeast”

First of all, a big congratulations to the Classes of 2009 and 2010!

Let’s also thank those who made all this possible. Let’s hear it for your moms and dads... your brothers and sisters... your aunts and uncles... your friends and classmates... and the New Paltz faculty and staff. Not much would have happened without you all.

Well here you are, in the top few percent of the world’s population with a college degree. Today marks an awesome personal accomplishment — years of your life devoted to education, art, and science — incredibly important for your future, but as important for what you can now do for the rest of society. So this is one small party for you, and one giant leap for mankind.

*On the occasion of receiving an honorary degree at the 182nd commencement exercises at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

OK, but enough about you. . . . Enough about how great you are; mom and dad will take that up again later.

My job is to help you look to the next challenge. And I come with only one message, one that will help you more than any other I can think of: What you learn from New Paltz doesn't end today; as you go *forward*, think *back* to what you experienced here, and this place will become a fountain of lessons and strength to draw upon for the rest of your life.

You'll learn, as I did, how to translate your New Paltz experiences into lessons, discoveries, insights, successes, careers, families, and perspectives. What New Paltz gives you doesn't stop with a degree. I'll give some examples of this from my experience here.

I learned here about government, politics, communications, astronomy, biology, and statistics. I learned how to write, how to think analytically, how science works, and how to program computers. I also learned how to stay in the library and work for more than 20 mins at a time. I eventually figured out, as you all did, how to get passing grades.

And by the way, I hear a few of you actually didn't get straight As. Now, dear parents, this was not because your kids partied too much; it's because budget cuts caused the Registrar's office to make lots of transcription errors. Don't complain to your kids; help out the faculty and staff and write to the state legislature! In fact I'm

pretty sure that's what happened in one class I took that will remain nameless; isn't that right, Professor Brownstein?

Fortunately, I'm authorized to let you in on the big secret: Grades don't matter any more! You've graduated; and no one can take away your degree or what you learned here.

Now I'm sure you learned a ton in your classes, but don't forget what you learned outside of class. I learned about the value of friends and made friends I've had my whole life. Some are even crazy enough to be here today. I hope my daughter, who is also here, and I am *so* proud of by the way, is as lucky when she goes to college. I just wish that my friends don't tell my daughter *all* the things that went on here!

In any event, some of what I learned in New Paltz is that the advice commencement speakers give 22-year-olds is just nuts.

For example, Winston Churchill told some graduates: "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never never – in nothing great or small, large or petty – never give in." Well, if you're fighting a just war, that sounds like great advice. But can you imagine living with this guy? Sure, pursue your dreams; don't let anyone get in your way; and by all means *win*. But you're allowed to learn from those around you too. You're allowed to use judgment and decide to go in a new direction.

I remember when I learned this lesson: As a Freshman, I lived on

the first floor of Scudder Hall. At 3am one morning, noise coming from the hallway woke me up, and I was furious. They were breaking all the rules. I strutted out to the hallway to find an epic water fight, 2 inches of water on the floor, and a friend with a spaghetti pot on his head. After 2 minutes of being indignant, I got drenched and then tackled by my friends who decided not to take me as seriously as I was taking myself. Eventually, I realized no one was getting hurt, everyone was having fun but me, and although by the rules I was completely right and they were totally wrong, this wasn't a war. In those 2 minutes, I saw most of what I now know about the advantage of seeing the world from the perspective of others.

So I'll admit I spent the next 2 hours spraying water everywhere and sliding down the corridor with everyone else. And I learned: Sometimes you stand your ground and never give in; sometimes you learn what others see differently and change your mind; and sometimes you put a spaghetti pot on your head and slide down the hallway. Whenever I have a disagreement back in Cambridge, I remember that water fight.

Let me tell you a different story. Lots of commencement speakers tell the graduates to take big bold risks. This is bizarre because commencement speakers are older and research shows that older folks don't take big risks; it's the young who are too often taking bigger risks than they should. I think commencement speakers are con-

fused because you don't get to be a commencement speaker unless you're lucky a lot of times in a row!

I was an RA in New Paltz, and I remember driving up to the dorm and seeing a friend sitting on his 3rd floor windowsill. He had a rope tied around the bar in his closet and then through his belt and around his back. Like a rock climber, he was planning to rappel down the outside of the building from the 3rd floor!

I admit, It looked like a load of fun, and I still want to try it, but I managed to stop him without killing himself and without killing me. From this experience and others, I learned about managing people, and taking calculated rather than crazy risks; I didn't know the importance of this event until later, but it's been helpful to think about many times.

So go out there and do some great things, and don't delay. Remember what my grandmother said: "one minute you're 16, the next thing you know your 87." So use the time; go do some cool stuff; and come back and teach us all.

But whatever you do, remember what you learned here, remember this place, remember the people, and continually learn from your experiences here. You can forget the commencement speaker (and you will!), but don't forget New Paltz.

Thanks so much for the honor of letting me share this day with you.