

May 9, 2007

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Chancellor bids farewell to the Classes of 2007

(Editor's Note: The following text of Chancellor Gordon Gee's address, as prepared for delivery at the May 11, 2007, Commencement exercises.)

Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of 2007, families and friends: today is a glorious day in the life of the University! Today we celebrate the circle that completes itself every academic year, as our mission is fulfilled, and as it is renewed.

These Commencement Exercises complete the 132nd year of classes at Vanderbilt, the 133rd year since the founding of the University.

Commencement is a great day in Vanderbilt's life. It is that one moment of an academic year during which our whole University – our students and their families, our faculty; our staff; our supporters – generations of our alumni and those who are just friends – comes together to celebrate your achievement and success.

Our entire campus celebrates you – and I do mean our entire campus! If you pay attention long enough, you realize that Vanderbilt's great magnolia trees always bloom the week of Commencement. There always is a moment when you doubt it, when you wonder if this will be the year they miss their cue -- whether or not they will flower in time....

And just at the last possible second, they always do! So even the trees celebrate this day, and put on their best for you! And even if that blooming is merely a co-incidence, it is fitting; for this day embodies Vanderbilt's own fruition and flowering, and the whole meaning of our life as a community.

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One thing this spring's tragedy at Virginia Tech did teach us, or did remind us, is what a deep identity people at a university have with one another. We are affected profoundly by what affects any of us, whether in celebration or in grief.

And that may be a vulnerability of universities, but it is also our great value. It is within that identity, as our own Vanderbilt community that we gather on this day. ...

... Ladies and gentlemen, welcome! By any estimation, this has been a remarkable year for Vanderbilt, for this has been the year of connecting loose wires, of closing circles, of completing stories.

And it has been a year of making new connections, of opening new circles, and of beginning new stories.

This was the year Reverend James Lawson, whom Vanderbilt dismissed from its Divinity School in the 1960s for leading nonviolent sit-ins at the segregated lunch counters downtown, came back to our campus as a Distinguished Professor... and Vanderbilt students began a group to study nonviolence.

This was the year Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate for the year 2006, who first developed his theories of microlending while he was a Ph.D. student in Economics at Vanderbilt, came back to our campus to receive our University's highest honor... and students from Owen and the Divinity School began their social entrepreneurship project in Hyderabad, India.

And this was the year Vanderbilt went on a Freedom Ride. The Freedom Rides were a series of bus trips taken by civil rights activists in the 1960s in nonviolent protest against segregationist transportation policies in Southern states. Some of the Freedom Rides left from Nashville.

Last fall, Vanderbilt's Office of Active Citizenship and Service coordinated with Fisk, American Baptist, and Tennessee State Universities to conduct a "rolling seminar" on the Freedom Rides of 1961. Our plan was to invite some of the original Riders. It was such a brilliant notion that I wanted to come along. I had no idea how much it would affect our students. I had no idea it would turn into a spiritual journey which would define this year at Vanderbilt.

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And since in 1961, I was growing up Mormon in Vernal, Utah, where my main idea of a Freedom Ride consisted of covered wagons and seagulls, I had no idea how much this experience would affect me personally.

We rode buses together to Alabama with the great citizens of the civil rights movement. We sang choruses with Bernard Lafayette, sang the spirituals that the Riders sang while they were in jail, experienced the tales of C.T. Vivian, and heard the quiet, steady voice of Diane Nash.

At the Civil Rights Museum in Birmingham, we were inside a story – faculty and staff and students from TSU and Fisk and American Baptist and Vanderbilt: students like Kristin Van Den Bossche from Arts and Science and Jasmin French from Law and Althea Jack from Peabody as well as many others who graduate today.

We found ourselves inside a story about the ability of good people to resist and overcome villainy. And we were inside that story with the characters of the story, with Reverend Lawson, who was Martin Luther King's great teacher of nonviolence; with Diane Nash; with C.T. Vivian and Bernard Lafayette and John Lewis and John Siegenthaler.

I stood behind Jim Zwerg as he watched 45-year-old video footage of himself in a hospital bed after radicals had broken three of his vertebrae and smashed his ribs and stepped on his face. At the same time I was honored to witness that moment, I was also profoundly humbled. I could not imagine what he might have been thinking, looking at his past self in that much pain but still with that much determination.

Maybe he was thinking that he had nothing to regret. Maybe he was wondering how he was ever able to do what he did. But I think he knows what powered him.

In the great epics of India, there is a hero named Hanuman, who is a monkey and the son of the wind. Hanuman was born with superpowers, called in Sanskrit "siddhis." Hanuman had great strength, the ability to shrink and to grow, to leap and to fly. But Hanuman's siddhis came with this caveat attached: that he would forget all about his powers unless they were needed to help someone else.

Like Hanuman, we all have siddhis. We all have powers that are there for us, that we cannot fathom, that arise when our action is more valuable than even we can know, when our action is the shape of our love for others.

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The Freedom Riders were not a warrior caste. They were just students, just young people, just perfectly, perfectly ordinary people, who raised voices that many did not want to hear. Who felt a weight slung around the neck of America and said, "This is not who we are. We can no longer accept this." Their courage of acting on behalf of others was what powered them.

The night before we embarked on our Freedom Ride, we gathered in a public forum in Fisk Memorial Chapel. One of the Riders said, "People always think we were fearless, but that is not true." He said he was always afraid, but he did what he had to do anyway.

When I remember Jim Zwerg watching that video footage of himself from almost 50 years ago, I think he was able to face the mob because his actions were not for him. He was able to ride into the unknown, to risk his life, to have his back crushed and his face kicked, because at that moment, his powers were activated by an enormous passion of love.

He and the other Riders moved relentlessly into what had to be done, which was that our country had to evolve, had to break through institutionalized hatred.

The Freedom Riders and those activists like James Lawson who held their ground at Nashville's lunch counters where they were spat on, and blown smoke on and were pulled to the floor by radical segregationists, faced a great wall of tradition. But the Freedom Riders also knew that appeals to tradition, invocations of "That's the way we have always done things" are an inoperative argument in America. They are invalid arguments within a liberal democracy.

So the Riders called this up in their hearts: "Freedom and equality are our ideals as Americans. They are our ideals as humans. And we will keep trying until those ideals are realized."

Our country had to catch up with its own vision of itself and we had to catch up with our vision of others as fully human, and even of ourselves as fully human. The promises of America had to be moved, with great effort, from concept to reality, in a way that included every citizen.

That circle had to be closed.

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If you ever doubt that human efforts make a difference, try to imagine that world before the Civil Rights movement, the world before the Freedom Ride. Try to imagine it existing now and you cannot, to try to do that makes you sick and sad; the moment you do, the thought twists your gut with its wrongness.

You cannot go back.

The Reverend C.T. Vivian said, "We can never not know what we know."

When I heard him say that, I knew it was true. We cannot go back because once something in the heart is freed, you cannot shove it back down. It all keeps expanding.

And the reason our siddhis work is because they are in service to that expansion.

You serve the law of the universe that bends toward justice and all of a sudden you can withstand fatigue and nights without sleep. You can withstand spit and flame and every name that villainy can hurl at you. You can do anything.

That is something I learned on Vanderbilt's Freedom Ride.

And from watching you, graduates of the year 2007, from your intense discipline and your imagination and the zeal of your hearts that is something I learn from you, for I see a similar spirit arise in you.

Now, graduates: please allow me to speak for a moment to your families and parents and dear friends who came out to-day to support you.

Ladies and gentlemen: My time with your young people has been a great learning experience for me. These students are capable of so much. Their passion and love astonish me.

Danielle Snyder's health clinic project in Lwala, Kenya astonishes me. Kristina Collins's Shade Tree Free Clinic astonishes me. Rehan Choudry and Alan Hopper's Project Pyramid in Hyderabad; and the many students in the Living Wage campaign who would never relent; the spirit and tenacity of our athletes who overturn expectations again and again; and the intense intellectual discipline of every scholar graduating today, who have not only met but also raised the standards of this academic institution – all of these teach me. Each of these calls my respect by not only the scale of their efforts, but also by their success!

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They amaze me just as James Lawson's living nonviolence at downtown lunch counters amazes me. They awe me just as the thought of millions of human people, women and children and generations within villages brought out of poverty by Muhammad Yunus's bank holds me in awe.

For these acts are siddhis. They are superpowers.

And they become available when there is need; they are revealed when something in the universe is out of joint and we are called upon to put it right: in generosity; in inclusion; through mercy and through justice.

Parents and loved ones: You have given these students your power and you have brought them up to be brilliant, thoughtful, hopeful women and men who have a deep, urgent need to help the world evolve and the universe expand.

I believe firmly in their essential and in their enacted goodness.

Over my years at Vanderbilt, I have seen brilliant achievement in each of our graduating classes. What distinguishes this class is the scope of their attempt.

They imagine and embark on projects on a global scale. And they seem to be utterly unfazed by the hard work and bureaucracy, even the resistance that awaits them. They move through it, seemingly without regard for the limitations of time or space or the fact that humans occasionally need to sleep!

They have the ability to save the world during the day, and then celebrate through the night! I know this because I have seen it firsthand!

They are heroes like Hanuman. They have such imagination and stamina, that they simply leave me breathless.

So, parents and loved ones, if these graduates are ever intent on changing the world in a way that seems odd, too expansive, too inclusive, too accommodating – trust them. If you ever want to ask, "Why do you care so much about that?", trust their hearts. They do not conceive of the same limits that we do.

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But the new world they bring about will be an echo of your belief in them.

They will dissolve limits in the world because they love you, because you have taught them to fight for others. Their elevation of other people will be a tribute to you. Today, Vanderbilt gives them back into your arms not as children, but as powerful and accomplished women and men.

And so, graduates – ladies and gentlemen of the class of 2007: I did not go on the original Freedom Rides. But what our own Ride gave Vanderbilt, and what it gave me, was a jolt to the heart that was a reminder of why we are alive.

So keep your shining hope for the world; keep what is best in your heart; keep what you have shown me; keep your siddhis.

Be in this world, be part of it, give to it. Never let yourself be anesthetized.

Do not become distracted by the zoo full of fabulous beasts: the Lindsays, the Parises, the TomKats, the Britneys; by the pageant of fevered celebrity trainwreck that is paraded in front of you every time you log on to your computer.

Do not let yourself be so seduced by your Mercedes and your barbecue that you forget what is most essential about yourself, that you forget what is worth caring about, that you forget you have powers to help others that you forget you have a heart that wants to help!

And keep, always, your articulate and discerning minds about you, for although it can be assuaging to look at the Freedom Rides in retrospect, from our position in history, in some ways it can be too comfortable.

It should never be.

Constantly check to make certain that you are on the right side of the lunch counter, and that you are the ones riding the bus instead of on the outside trying to stop the ride.

Our history as a nation, including the history of this University, is both informing to us and a heavy hand on us. But we have made enormous progress. And we continue to make it, through acts of compassion, forgiveness and nonviolence as an apparatus for change. We have, and have had, great teachers.

We have seen the power of individuals: the power of graduates of Vanderbilt and the power of those who should have been graduates, and the power of you who graduate today, to overcome poverty, to overcome bombs and steel and to create a world where violence is no longer the way to solve a problem.

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Graduates, today one circle closes for you, but many open, many that are wider.

You have the tumult of war. You have a great continent being depopulated by disease. You have the circle of a planet whose ice is thawing. There is so much. And there are times when it seems that nothing could put the world back on its axis.

You think that nothing could overturn decades of institutional racism but it can and it does.

You think nothing could reverse the momentum of years of grinding poverty in Bangladesh, but it can.

You think that nothing could put a health clinic in Lwala, Kenya, but we did.

You think that the Commodores could never win an NCAA Championship, but we have!

You think that the magnolias will not bloom in time, but they do.

Today you enter a world which offers itself to you. You will have to choose which bus to ride.

So, ladies and gentlemen of the class of 2007: Remember your powers, remember your siddhis. Or rather, in forgetting them, remember at least that they are there. I trust them, and you, as much as I trust these magnolias.

Remember that you need not be extraordinary. Remember that although there is everything to fear, there is nothing to fear.

And this is my promise, and my blessing to you: That, like Hanuman, you always, you will always, have everything you need. ...

... Graduates, I am entrusted by this University with the privilege this morning of sending you forth into this great world. I do so with utter confidence in your powers.

So, be what is necessary when it is necessary. Be big when it is time for bigness. Be small when it is time for subtlety. Be strong when strength is required. And at all times, be expansive of heart.

Ladies and gentlemen, this ceremony is concluded. Our circle is open, but unbroken. I wish all of you Godspeed on your remarkable journey!

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