

FRANK H. T. RHODES' FINAL COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

As prepared for delivery by
Frank H. T. Rhodes, President
Cornell University
At Cornell's 127th Commencement
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Members of the glorious Class of 1995; candidates for advanced degrees; parents, spouses, families and friends of the graduates; members of the Board of Trustees; Mrs. Edelman, our distinguished Baccalaureate speaker; colleagues and fellow members of the faculty and staff; honored guests.

Today is a great day for us all, although as Mr. Tanner has indicated, this is a somewhat unusual Commencement in that both you and I are rounding out our Cornell careers. You may remember from your orientation literature that in answer to the question, "*What is Cornell?*" one student responded, "*A four-year sleep deprivation experiment.*" But after four, or six, or eight years -- here you are with your hard-earned degrees, and here I am, after 18 years, without one. I "graduate" "all-but-degree," ABD.

Still, as the industrialist Armand Hammer once said, "*When you work 14 hours a day, seven days a week, you tend to get lucky.*" That explains a lot about the Cornell experience we have both enjoyed. So all of us here congratulate you. We have the highest hopes for your future. We are very proud of you.

But, if today is a day to look back on past achievement, it is also a day to look ahead. Most of us, I suspect, can relate to the Gary Larson cartoon that appeared in the Cornell Daily Sun a while back. It shows a collection of insects, all wearing caps and gowns, being addressed by a distinguished insect in equally formal academic dress, who intones: "*And so, as you enter the adult phase of your life, you will thank God that these past 17 years of being stuck in the ground and unable to move are over. . . Congratulations, cicadas of 1995.*"

Of course, only I -- not you -- have been underground that long, and we've both had somewhat more mobility than the average cicada. But the process of metamorphosis into a new life phase is invigorating nonetheless. And all of us congratulate you on your perseverance in making it through these long years at Cornell, and we rejoice with you in the continuing success I know you'll experience.

Each of you has a story of personal achievement to tell. Let me share just one, about Jared Genser, a human service major from Potomac, Maryland, who graduates today having made public service his vocation. He has worked with the homeless and the terminally ill. He founded the Cornell chapter of "Best Buddies of America," which pairs Cornell students with developmentally disabled adults from the community. He has been a training program coordinator for the U.S. Justice Department's National Service Program, "JustServe," and an intern and consultant for Youth Service America, for which First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton

honored him at a White House ceremony last year. He graduates from Cornell with the John F. Kennedy Memorial Award, which honors the Cornell senior who shows outstanding promise for a career in public service, and as one of only 12 students worldwide to be named a Raoul Wallenberg Scholar, which will enable him to spend next year in graduate study at Hebrew University in Israel, studying the function and role of leadership in democratic societies. Today it is our privilege to congratulate him -- and all of you -- on your success. Class of 1995: Great job!

So here we are together, fellow members of the glorious Class of 1995: all of us wistful and expectant -- wistful for the time that we have spent together, expectant as we stand at the threshold of new and uncharted territory. As Woody Allen said, *"It's clear the future holds great opportunities. It also holds pitfalls. The trick will be to avoid the pitfalls, seize the opportunities, and get home by six o'clock."*

Not many of us may hope to succeed quite that well, but we pause together to compare notes on the journey that we have completed and the journey that lies ahead. And what a journey it has been! We have shared some remarkable times together -- not the degrees, because each one is different; not the skills, for they are so diverse; not the knowledge, for we differ one from another, some more, some less; but the journey we've shared. That is what binds us together.

That journey included visits by Hillary Rodham Clinton, Janet Reno, "Live," Dave Barry, Tom Brokaw, Jane Goodall, Kiri Te Kanawa, and so many others. It took in two winters that threatened never to end and buried the campus under literally feet of snow, and one -- the one just past -- which proved an empty threat and was called off before it had begun. We've survived green dragons and Slope Day, the latter only barely, and the remarkable parade on the Tuesday after classes ended, in which so many of you participated. Rosa and I will never forget the warmth and good humor with which you bade us farewell.

And if we look back on the things that have made Cornell so memorable, we must stop to say thank-you, for we all have so many others to thank, and none more than the parents, spouses, family members, and other loved ones who have been with us all the way. Humorist Bob Orben once said, *"Considering the cost of tuition, room, board, clothing and books, more than ever before, a student has to be very careful in his selection of parents."* And today's ceremonies stand as proof that you have chosen very well. Your family members have been there when you needed them, not simply when bursar bills were due, but whenever you needed their encouragement, their advice, their love.

I know it has not always been easy. It's been said that between the ages of 18 and 22, a parent can age 20 years. And so let me say to the families -- your families and mine: We're proud of you. We're grateful to you. We love you. Families of the graduates and my family -- please stand so that we may recognize you and applaud you.

Others have also figured prominently in the success we celebrate today: Professors and other teachers, mentors, coaches, advisors, chaplains, trustees, and other benefactors of Cornell, who give so much with such fidelity, and those who have served us in so many ways on the campus -- in the dormitories, on the playing fields, in the libraries, in the dining halls, sweeping floors,

meeting our needs, beautifying the grounds, plowing snow. We especially salute those retiring this year:

- From the Board of Trustees: Julie Crotty, Ken Derr, Fred Eidt, Bill Phillips, Ernesta Procope, Nelson Schaenen, Patricia Carry Stewart.
- From the administration: Provost Malden Nesheim; Senior Vice President Jay Morley, and Deans Robert Phemister and David Call.
- From the faculty: 38 men and women, representing 1,164 years of service, an average of 31 years each.
- From the staff: 181 people representing a combined total of 4,214 years of service.

We salute you for pointing the way, for encouraging us, for inspiring us, for believing in us, for loving us, for helping us. Please stand, all trustees, deans and executive staff members, faculty and staff members who are retiring or completing their terms of service, so that we may applaud you and thank you.

And so we pause to look around one last time before we leave the life that we have shared together in this maddening, lovable community -- so impersonal sometimes, yet so all-embracing; so demanding and yet somehow so supportive. We pause to look out once more across this hilltop, across this glacier-gorged and stream-ravined landscape, to stroll in memory down these steep, winding trails, past these cascading waterfalls, these familiar paths, and these welcoming buildings. We wonder again at this improbable creation in this unlikely place of a remarkable institution, founded by the stubborn dream, the steady conviction, and the unswerving commitment of Ezra Cornell.

But if today ends one journey, it begins another. You will return here for your 50th reunion in the year 2045 to celebrate another journey that you will have made, not in this goodly company, but with new partners and new traveling companions. And what can Cornell give you in preparation for the journey that now lies ahead and for the homecoming and reunion that we hope will also be in store?

I've thought about that quite a bit since last summer, when I made my first visit to Ithaca, the other Ithaca, the Greek island for which our city is named. I went there with over 100 Cornellians, some of them here on the platform today. Ithaca, of course, was the home of Odysseus, to which he returned to find his Penelope after ten years of fighting in the Trojan Wars and another ten years of wandering and struggles against the most formidable adversaries: the Laistrygonians, the Cyclops, and Poseidon. This green, rugged, hour-glass-shaped island is the smallest of the Ionian islands and consists of two mountains joined by a narrow isthmus. It was immortalized by Constantine Cavafy, the Greek poet who worked as a clerk at the Ministry of Irrigation in Alexandria, Egypt, for some 30 years, in his poem "Ithaca." Written in 1911, it was read, not coincidentally, at the funeral of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis last year.

Bear with me for a moment while I share with you Cavafy's text, as translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard for *C.P. Cavafy/Collected Poems* (Princeton University Press, 1992), for it speaks eloquently of the journey that lies ahead, as well as the one we conclude today.

"Ithaka"

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
angry Poseidon -- don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

*Hope the voyage is a long one.
May there be many a summer morning when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you come into harbors seen for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind --
as many sensual perfumes as you can,
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.*

*Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*

*Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her, you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have [deceived] you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.*

What a message for us today! Leaving Ithaca you begin a new journey to Ithaca. Notice Cavafy warns against imagining troubles that may lie ahead, promising that you won't encounter them unless you carry them within your soul. He also expresses the hope that the journey may be a long one with many summer mornings and with many glorious discoveries of new places along the way. And I hope that will indeed be the case for you.

But in thinking about Cavafy's poem, one passage seems particularly poignant today: "Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey. . .you are wealthy with all you have gained on the way. . .without her, you wouldn't have set out. She has nothing left to give you now."

But what is this wealth that has been given you? Her gifts are not inscribed on the diplomas you will shortly receive. They are not things covered by courses or majors. But they are four things more precious than the coral, amber and pearls of Phoenician markets or the most sensual perfumes.

First, Ithaca -- Cornell -- has taught you that knowledge matters. Knowledge humanely applied makes human progress possible. It is never perfect, of course, and it is almost always provisional. But we must never stop learning, never stop asking questions, for it is the impertinent question -- that challenges existing assumptions and conventional approaches -- that inches toward truth.

Knowledge is also the basis of all the competence you bring to your professional tasks, but competence is not enough. I was struck the other day in reading the recently published C. S. Lewis diaries, in which Lewis wrote, "*I also read some Dryden. . . He is. . . a man who was just a poet and nothing else -- no magnanimity, no knowledge, no power in thought: just rhythm and gusto.*" How tragic to be just a poet and nothing else -- or just an engineer or just an economist or a physician or a lawyer; to be just a millionaire, just a Nobel Laureate, and nothing else. Knowledge, creatively derived and thoughtfully used, is our best defense against defeatism and despair, against the nothingness of life, and I hope that your Ithaca journey has shorn up your defenses. But knowledge alone is not enough.

There is a second gift that Ithaca has given you -- the realization that conviction matters, because conviction guides knowledge into particular directions. It guides our search for knowledge, and it guides our application of knowledge. Ours is an age that lacks conviction. The ultimate sin for some is to declare one value superior to another or one activity more worthy than another. We flee from judgment because we confuse it with being judgmental.

But without conviction, there can be no direction, and without direction, there can be no journey. Yogi Berra once said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it," but Seneca was closer to the truth: "If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is the right wind." There might still be movement, but from one unplanned destination to another. And so I hope Ithaca has given you convictions, for they are the truths you will live by as the journey proceeds. What compass of conviction guides your journey?

Knowledge. . . conviction. . . and then there is a third gift that, I hope, you are taking from Ithaca, and that is the recognition that solitary journeys are not much fun. With companionship

and the love that supports it -- that is the way to travel. French philosopher Gaston Berger once wrote, "*There are only two precious things on earth: the first is love; the second, a long way behind it, is intelligence.*" Without love, life is futile and arid. Only love redeems life from repetitious triviality. Only love humanizes and tempers our convictions. Only love preserves judgment from being judgmental. Without love, conviction can run to excess and knowledge can be arrogant and selfish. Taste may be refined, but after all, the butchers of Buchenwald enjoyed Mozart. Only love can transform knowledge to wisdom, which is the way in which knowledge is held. Hang on to one another tightly today. Hang on to your families and your classmates. Don't forget. Don't neglect one another. It's a tough world out there, and Robert Fulghum was right when he wrote that all you really need to know you learned in kindergarten: "*When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.*"

So Ithaca has given you the marvelous journey -- with knowledge, conviction and love -- but I hope it has given you one more thing, for journeys begin with dreams. Alumnus and Trustee Emeritus Kenneth Blanchard '61 tells a story about his son Scott, who transferred to Cornell from another major university. Ken asked him, "What is the difference between Cornell and University X?" Scott thought and then replied, "Cornell students dream bigger dreams." I think that is a marvelous description of what Cornell has offered: bigger dreams with the knowledge to support them, the conviction to sustain them, and the love to realize them.

And so we end one journey together and begin another. Savor this moment well. Cherish it, for it unites all that has gone before. Tomorrow it will be a mere videotape memory. Always keep Ithaca in your mind and heart, and with it these priceless gifts of knowledge, conviction, love, and large and noble dreams. Ithaca has given you the marvelous journey. She has nothing else to give -- for without her you would never have started out. But you leave knowing what these Ithacas mean.

May you enjoy many summer mornings. And may you be old by the time you reach the island. And wealthy with all you have gained on the way. As you make that journey from Ithaca to Ithaca:

May the sun shine gently on your face.

May the rain fall soft upon your fields.

May the wind be at your back.

May the road rise to meet you.

May the Lord hold you in the hollow of his hand.

Until we meet again.

Graduates of the glorious Class of 1995: Congratulations. Good success. God speed.