

# H.S.U. COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

May, 2009

It's great to be back here at my alma mater, Humboldt State University, to share this special day with the families, guests, and graduating students who are here to celebrate and commemorate the culmination of years of effort and sacrifice.

When I was a student here in at a time that may seem to today's students as remote as the Jurassic period there were no personal computers and no internet. Personal video cameras, digital photography, MP3 players were all unheard of. There were no cell phones, no youtube, no facebook, and twittering was something birds did. Primitive as we were, students of my day did have something in common with the class of 2009. Like you, we worked hard, we played hard, and by some miracle we made it through and earned our degrees. To this day, we carry with us an abiding affection for this great university that gave us the educational foundation upon which we built the rest of our lives.

Graduating students: As one of your own I have come here to assure you that there *is* life after Humboldt State. Events great and small and as yet unknown will present you with challenges and opportunities. How you react to them will define your lives.

Three decades ago, when I was sitting where you are, all that lay before me seemed a great mystery. I was about to enter uncharted territory. In the years that followed I experienced great triumphs and great disappointments, joy and sorrow. I made wise decisions and monumental blunders. Meandering through the years and working in a variety of professions has given me the lucidity of 20-20-hindsight. There is a lot I know now that I wish I knew then. I would like to share some thoughts with you about some things that I have come to believe can have a positive effect on the journey of life.

**Passion** is a human attribute that is critical for progress and success. The most successful people I have encountered in the entertainment industry are those who radiate passion about their work and about their interests. Opportunities that I have lost have resulted from a perceived lack of passion about the project. If you are excited about what you are doing, it becomes infectious and others will be excited as well. No one is impressed by indifference. If you don't care, why should anyone else?

When a writer or director pitches an idea to a movie studio, the quality executives and producers look for most is the passion of the presenter. No project is ever green-lit unless someone presents it with genuine enthusiasm and believes in, and effectively communicates its merits.

All good screenwriters know that when creating a fictional character, the degree to which an audience will care about and root for that character to overcome obstacles and achieve objectives is directly proportional to the degree of passion that character feels about obtaining those goals. Consider the fact that *you* are the lead character in the movie of

your life. Find within you that passionate person who excites people about what you want to accomplish and they will root for your success. Quest for things that ignite your passion and you will be a star in your own adventure.

Even if you have a naturally laid back personality, it is important that you make clear your inner passion to those in a position to open doors for you. If you are excited about your work, if you are passionate about making things happen in your profession, you won't really be working at all. You will just be getting satisfaction. If you cannot be passionate about it, you have the wrong job and will languish like a vegetable. Life is too short. If you cannot feel passion about what you are doing, do something else.

Do not be afraid to *ask* for what you are passionate about. No one can read your mind. Those who can, cannot give you what you want if they do not know you want it. Ask with courage and conviction, and express with honest passion the basis of your request and you are more likely to get a positive response than if you make your case with an indifferent lack of enthusiasm.

## **Knowledge**

It is important to keep in mind that a university degree does not mark the end of a process of learning, but the beginning.

I'll give you an analogy:

*[keep this section] Many years ago, before my time at HSU I was living in Asia and had just attained a black belt in martial arts. I deluded myself into believing that I had attained some plateau of mastery. My teacher sagely reminded me that my ignorance was still quite profound and that I had merely reached a level where I was ready to begin. After a brief demonstration of some of his previously unrevealed skills I found myself helpless and immobile before I even knew what happened. My teacher gave me a lesson in humility that irrefutably proved how little I really knew. My respect for the rest of the world suddenly grew.*

*Over the years other lessons in life and career have taught me that the more I learn the more I realize how little I know. Each new nugget of information reveals vast new areas of the unknown to be explored and understood. Instead of being an exercise in futility, the pursuit of learning is a path of ever-increasing fulfillment. It is always better to know than to be ignorant, even though nobody can know it all... with the possible exceptions of television talking heads, members of Congress, and the passenger sitting next to you on a long flight.*

The continual acquisition of **knowledge** must be a life-long process or you risk stagnation in our ever-changing world. The pace of cultural evolution is faster now than at any time in human history and is accelerating exponentially. Those who stop learning

are left behind and are doomed to being confined in what was not all that great about the past.

Seek allies in the search for knowledge. They are always important. Complimentary minds can fill in the gaps. Collectively knowledge is more effective in achieving desired results.

*My years spent on movie and television sets have made this obvious. There are grips, gaffers, camera crews, set decorators, make up artists, craft series people, special effects, visual effects, actors, producers and directors. Each person has a special skill set built upon a unique body of knowledge. Only their collective endeavors make a quality production possible*

You may already be experiencing this through your use of social networking sites. Cyber communities will become increasingly important in the future you will live in. Keep building your network as you enter your professional life and your network will pay you back as you advance through your career.

Those in possession of knowledge and that have the wisdom to use it have the power to shape the future on their own terms. The knowledgeable lead. The ignorant follow. *This holds true even when considering the relationship between certain prominent political leaders who have displayed questionable intellectual prowess, and their hordes of supporters. In these cases the ignorant lead and the even more ignorant follow.*

## **Wisdom**

In Thailand there is a saying: “*Chalat daeh mai chaleo*”, “Clever but not wise.” This recognizes an important distinction between two human qualities. There are many people who know a lot but lack the wisdom to employ that knowledge to best effect. This results in unfortunate decision-making and can have disastrous results.

Those who seek wisdom come to know their own strengths and weaknesses. They discover contentment as wisdom can provide freedom from the illusions our species creates for itself.

What constitutes wisdom changes as the history of human thought evolves and new discoveries alter perceptions of reality. Incredible as it seems to us now, at one time there were “wise” people who believed that human sacrifice was necessary to insure the return of Spring. Others believed that ships sailing too far out into the ocean would fall into a mysterious void. Still others concluded from their observations of the sky that the earth is the center of existence that all else revolves around us. *We now know that this is only true for certain A-list actors and directors.*

From wisdom naturally flows **humility**, the recognition that what we think we know may be disproved... that the meaning ascribed to what we experience is what we project upon it from our own imaginations... that we can never really know anything with absolute certainty. This is the humbling aspect of wisdom that those who pursue it eventually come to discover.

Penultimately, I would like to talk to you about **service**... giving back to our country... and to our world. There is much to be gained by looking beyond one's self and serving the greater good. The rewards can be surprisingly significant and will surely exceed what you have given of yourself. Service can be performed in many ways; the military, government, teaching, community activism, and working to safeguard the environment. In my case it was the Peace Corps.

I was in high school when President John F. Kennedy, in his inaugural speech, put out the call: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." When I earned my BA from Middlebury College in Vermont, like some of you, I was not really sure what I wanted to do. The President's words stuck with me, so I answered the call and volunteered for the Peace Corps. I soon found myself building small dams and bridges in rural Thailand and having the adventure of a lifetime that would change my life forever. The projects I did made the villagers' lives a little better, but I got so much more in return... the most exciting, vibrant, rewarding years of my life. Later on, I achieved some recognition in my career in the entertainment industry... golden statues and glamorous events schmoozing with celebrities, but in all truth they were nothing compared to honest joy and sincere warmth of a celebration in a jungle village to mark the completion of one of my Peace Corps projects. The world of the glitterati can be surreal and hollow, filled with social conventions as artificial and pretentious as those of the court of Louis the XIV.

The world of people who live by their own hands and knowledge of their environment has an honest dignity, a minimum of social artifice, and a refreshing lack of guile. Having the opportunity to live and work in their world has taught me to see commonality in the human condition and to find honor and value in all human cultures. This experience also made it easy to see through the delusions and pretensions of our own society.

There is dignity in even the most humble of circumstances. Being free from the influences of my own culture, I discovered things about myself of which I would have remained oblivious. Who would have expected that these experiences years later would have a significant influence on STAR TREK? The Peace Corps made it possible for me to conceive of imaginary alien cultures and inspired imagery later seen by and enjoyed by millions of people around the world and in a small way contributed to an entertainment phenomenon that has become part of the human mythos.

Without question, today's world is scary. The global economy is a mess. Brutal conflicts plague various parts of the world. Insane forces grasp for power. Jobs are scarce. So I encourage you, especially if you have no set plans for the immediate future, to consider some form of **service**. It can give some interesting experience for your resume, a chance to see new things, have a little adventure, and do something you can remember with pride for the rest of your life.

We have started a new era in America... new leadership, new attitude. The times call for recognition that the lives of all human beings on earth are somehow intertwined. Our species has attained undreamed of technology. Travel and communication have opened access to every part of the globe. And yet there is still poverty, still ignorance, still hunger, still disease, and there is much to be done.

This is the best time of your lives to be a part of something bigger than yourselves. Before you have the major responsibilities of family and career is when you have the freedom to choose a path of service. Serving others may just present you with experiences as life changing and ultimately rewarding as the Peace Corps was for me.

## **Success**

We can spend our lives searching for it in directions where it may not be found. The meaning of success is subjective, and varies with every individual and his or her relationship to personal goals. Mistaking true success with societally generated illusions of what is important can interfere with the achievement of personal happiness and satisfaction in life. Do not squander your energy seeking success as society defines it, pursue it on your own terms. People who build their lives on integrity, consideration, constant learning, and working to the best of their ability earn the love and respect of the people in their lives and are generally happy as a result. This is success.

The founding fathers of our country were wise in recognizing that each individual has an "inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." They knew that in the game of life, beyond material wealth, beyond social status, and the trappings of power, happiness wins. Everyone has a variety of personas: One for a profession, one for the general public, one for friends, one for family, and the one within. Look inside; strip away the layers of social complexities and see if you can discover that inner persona and get comfortable with the person you really are. Try to build a life that satisfies the person within. Thrill to the miracle of life. Be proactive in pursuing happiness, keeping in mind that truly satisfying success is achieved in human terms. Square footage of houses, horsepower in slick cars, and numbers in bankbooks can be hollow indeed if gained selfishly. Respect is earned by being a positive contributor to the lives of others. The world has given you a lot. You can derive great satisfaction by giving back.

*Perhaps Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best when asked:*

What is Success?

*His response was:*

To laugh often and much;

To win the respect of intelligent people  
and the affection of children;

To earn the appreciation of honest critics  
and endure the betrayal of false friends;

To appreciate beauty;  
To find the best in others;

To leave the world a bit better, whether by  
a healthy child, a garden patch  
or a redeemed social condition;

To know even one life has breathed  
easier because you have lived;  
This is to have succeeded.