

Convocation Address

Welcome to Cornell Class of 2008

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August 21, 2004

Members of the Class of 2008, transfer students, graduate students, professional students, parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends, good morning.

Thirty-one years ago, I sat where you sit, here in Barton Hall. I was brand new. Beginning my years as an undergraduate student at Cornell University. Listening and fidgeting, as President Dale Corson explained what my life at Cornell would be like. Excited, and a little bit afraid.

Two years ago, I once again sat where you sit, here in Barton Hall. I was brand new. Again. Beginning my years as the parent of an undergraduate student at Cornell University. Listening and fidgeting, as President Hunter Rawlings explained what my son's life at Cornell would be like. Wondering how three decades could possibly have gone by so quickly. Excited, and a little bit afraid.

So let me begin my welcome this morning by saying to all of the new students, and to all of the parents of new students, that this is a moment to treasure. The opportunity to be brand new, to begin a new role, to step out onto a road without knowing where it will lead, is exciting. It is a little bit frightening.

New Cornell students, before you begin your studies here you should pause for a moment to appreciate what you have accomplished by being here. You achieved something extraordinary when you earned admission to this university. And you then demonstrated great wisdom in choosing to enroll here rather than at some other great institution of higher education. Cornell's combination of attributes – quality and breadth, respect

for theory and commitment to practice, excellence and openness – give you opportunities as a student that cannot be found anywhere else.

Indeed, the opportunities are so vast that they can feel overwhelming. So many opportunities force you immediately to confront a very practical question: how do you allocate your time? If you spend all your time preparing for class, you will be a really boring person. If you spend too little time preparing for class, you will be a really unemployed person.

I'm not going to try here to give you any rules of thumb about balancing, but I will say that there are many skilled advisors and mentors on campus – faculty, staff, and fellow students – who stand ready and willing to help you. What I will do is talk about a different aspect of how one can take full advantage of Cornell's opportunities. I want to talk with you about a general way of thinking about difficult problems, a habit of mind that will serve you well for the rest of your life, in any field of endeavor you may choose.

To motivate this discussion, I would like to link it to a movie that was released three years ago this fall. The movie – *Zoolander* – was written, produced, and directed by Ben Stiller, who also played its eponymous protagonist.

Derek Zoolander is a superstar fashion model, three-time Male Model of the Year, whose seemingly idyllic life is suddenly disrupted by two devastating blows. As the movie begins, he is unexpectedly deposed from his modeling throne. And then he loses his three closest friends in a tragic self-service gas pump accident.

The movie then follows Zoolander on a ridiculous odyssey. He returns to his hometown in a futile effort to reconnect with his coal miner father and brothers. He is hypnotized by evil-doers who set him up to be an assassin. He overcomes a crippling personal limitation (his inability to turn left as well as right) to save the life of the man who was to be assassinated. And finally he launches an institute to promote child literacy.

The humor of the movie derives from the interaction between the plot and the improbable character that Stiller has given to Zoolander. Zoolander is an astonishingly shallow person, with few intellectual re-

sources. His difficulty with the English language rivals that of Richard Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop.

And yet, I would submit, we all have something to learn from Derek Zoolander. And I think that is especially true for Cornell students. All Cornell students will have moments when they can identify with elements of Zoolander's plight. Moments when, after years of unrelenting success, they face an unexpected setback or a loss.

In his moment of deepest humiliation, Zoolander has a conversation with his own reflection in a rain puddle. Quoting Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables*, he asks, "Who am I?" His reflection responds, "I don't know." And in a flash of blinding insight, Zoolander observes, "I guess I have a lot of things to ponder."

We all have a lot of things to ponder. And during your time at Cornell you will develop your capacities to ponder them in ever more effective and satisfying ways, ways that were unavailable to Derek Zoolander. And you will develop those capacities not through a process of solitary inquiry, but rather through a process of sustained engagement with others.

Many students arrive at Cornell having internalized a norm that might be called "respectful disengagement." Points of disagreement – about politics or religion or culture – are treated as points of potentially unpleasant conflict. And conflict is avoided by declaring them to be mere matters of "taste," where everyone's tastes are treated as equally legitimate. If the choice between Bush and Kerry is no different from the choice between a latte and an orange-mocha frappacino, then there will be no disputes, and everyone will feel, in the vernacular, "validated."

At Cornell, the aspiration is for a different norm. Instead of respectful disengagement, the goal is respectful engagement. A willingness to stay engaged with problems and arguments, to keep pushing for a shared vocabulary and a shared understanding. You will encounter on this campus a post-Enlightenment sensibility, under which more and more corners of human experience are susceptible to critical analysis and debate. Fewer and fewer domains of life will feel like matters of purely personal taste. And you will find yourself spending many hours late at night and

early in the morning, searching for that shared understanding. There is indeed a lot to ponder.

And here you will discover one of Cornell's great strengths as a community. It doesn't take much work to search for a shared understanding with someone who is pretty much like you. But it takes real effort to search for a shared understanding with someone who is different.

The most profound optimism underlying higher education today is the simultaneous recognition that, on the one hand, differences of view, background, and perspective are real and important, and, on the other hand, people who hold those differences can assemble for four years on a beautiful hilltop, listen to one another with tolerance and respect, and ponder together.

From the days of its founding, Cornell has embodied that optimism. Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White founded Cornell University as a place where men and women would study together, as members of an integrated community where people of all religions and races would come to study every topic imaginable and would strive to find shared understandings that transcend background differences. Over the past 139 years other universities have come to share Cornell's vision of higher education. And you, the Class of 2008, will be struck immediately by how fundamental that vision is to the way you learn.

You will find yourself immersed in an environment where you are surrounded by people who approach questions with perspectives that are different from yours. Your classmates are amazingly smart. Amazingly talented. They come from all fifty states in the nation and from 80 other countries.

You will admire and respect them. You will make friends with some of them. And you will come to appreciate their widely varying perspectives on life and the world. You will relish discussions of profound and difficult issues. You will also relish debates about silly issues. And when you find yourselves disagreeing, rather than disengaging you will find yourself driven to ponder where those differences came from, and to keep working to find a space of at least partial common understanding.

It will become easy and natural for you to look at a question and think, “How would my friend think about this problem?” And it will become easy and natural for you to come up with a plausible answer. You will progressively refine your ability to hold two very different perspectives on an issue in your mind at the same time. Think of it as the intellectual analogue of being able to turn left as well as right.

And here is where you will begin to master a quality that the poet John Keats called, “negative capability.” Keats appreciated that whenever people are facing two conflicting arguments, they naturally seek rapid closure. They try to figure out which argument is right and which is wrong. Which is stronger and which is weaker. And Keats wrote admiringly of how William Shakespeare could resist the impulse for closure, how he could “luxuriate in uncertainties and doubts, entertaining two opposing ideas without irritable reaching after fact and reason.” This Zen-like ability to entertain two opposing ideas without irritable reaching after fact and reason is called “negative capability.”

While you are at Cornell you will nurture negative capability. By putting yourself into that state, you will be able to probe and test where an argument is vulnerable, and where it is robust. You will be able to experience the special intellectual pleasure of grappling with an important and complex idea.

Let me offer you a concrete example.

Each year, a part of orientation is the New Student Reading Project, through which we all turn our attention to the study of a single text. That text becomes a point of intellectual common ground for all of us, regardless of our school or college or intended major.

This year’s text is Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, which I’m sure you all have read by now. One interesting question presented by *The Trial* concerns the moral responsibility of the functionaries who operate within Kafka’s seemingly capricious legal bureaucracy. By one understanding they should be held to account for their role in enforcing an unjust system. By another they should be absolved of personal guilt – they lack the power or authority to know whether the overall system is just, and if the system were just, then were their behavior would be unobjectionable.

So here is the point of negative capability. As you prepare to go into your seminars, don't be too quick to choose one side or the other. Relax your mind. Don't try to get closure too quickly. Put your brain into a state where both sides can coexist, and you will find yourself seeing ever more subtle, nuanced perspectives on the question.

We want you, as Cornellians, to have that kind of subtle, nuanced intellect – the kind of intellect admired by Keats and displayed by Kafka, Shakespeare, and Stiller.

But to get the full Cornell experience, you must engage the community more than just intellectually. You need to find ways to participate and contribute. You need to have a beneficial impact on this university, and not just let it have a beneficial impact on you. You need to do the things that will sustain other qualities that will matter to your life – qualities such as curiosity, adventurousness, citizenship, and a reverence for quality.

If this sounds like a tall order, here are six suggestions that could help.

First. While you are standing in line somewhere, introduce yourself to a total stranger and strike up a conversation. If they look at you like you're nuts, go ahead and blame me. I won't mind.

Second, go find something on this campus that is a work of true genius and spend an hour in its presence, trying to understand its greatness. It could be a first edition of Copernicus's master work, *On the Revolutions*. It could be a handscroll by the painter Wu Li. It could be a synchrotron source of high energy X-ray radiation where Nobel Prize winning research has been conducted. It could be the definitive exemplar of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, written in his own hand. All of these can be experienced by undergraduates as well as faculty and graduate students.

Third, try out a new sport or musical instrument or activity that you are not very good at. Your swim test does not count as taking up an activity. I can vouch personally for the ability of Cornell Outdoor Educa-

tion's programs to help you stretch your sense of what you are capable of.

Fourth, take at least one class a year that you are certain will never have any practical value for you. For so many of us who are Cornell graduates, it was just such a course that left the most lasting impression on our lives.

Fifth, get involved in public service. It is part of what makes one a Cornellian, and the Cornell Public Service Center is here to help you.

Sixth, learn about Cornell's special traditions. Sing the alma mater and Davey, eat far too much ice cream from the Cornell Dairy, sleep out for hockey tickets, and try to get the bear to talk.

And these are just my suggestions. If you ask a different faculty member, you will get a different list. The key is for you to make choices and get involved. If you do, you will lose yourself in Cornell for four years. The time will fly by. And you will find yourself transformed – ready whenever life gives you new things to ponder.

Finally, I want to say a word to the parents who are here. I want to congratulate you on a job well done. The fact that your children earned the opportunity to attend this remarkable university is a great tribute to you, and you should take enormous pride in their achievement.

Your challenge now is to accept the fact that, from here on out, your children's destiny is truly their own. Beginning with their selection of which courses to take this fall, your children will make their own choices, consulting you on their terms. And I want you to know that, from personal experience, my wife Kathy and I understand just how hard it can be to give up that all-too-fragile sense that you can protect them. Sometimes they will make mistakes that last year you might have been able to talk them out of. And they will experience the consequences of those mistakes. And it will sometimes be hard to watch.

But in return you will see the full flowering of your labors. By living out the Cornell mantra of freedom with responsibility, by making their own choices and by accepting the consequences of those choices, your children will emerge as adults whom you admire and respect. They will

still need you. They will still want to be around you. Sometimes. But they will be sturdy and opinionated adults who will want to engage you over your differences. They will still learn from you, but at least as often they will teach you things. Maybe, if you're lucky, they will take you to see "Zoolander."

And so, to all of you, new students, and parents and family and friends of new students, Kathy and I extend our heartiest welcome as we all, together, treasure the opportunities that come with your new lives as Cornellians.

Welcome to Cornell.