

DRURY COMMENCEMENT
December 20, 2008



NEVER GO CAMPING WITH ONE PACK OF HOTDOGS

President Parnell, distinguished faculty and administrators, ladies and gentlemen, friends and family and, of course, this graduating class of 2008: I'm delighted to share this graduation with you.

Filmmaker Ken Burns told the Georgetown University graduating class that their future lay behind them. The past, he said, is a great teacher. He wondered what today's college graduates will learn from history and how you will put those insights to use. Burns-like, I set out in search of history lessons that you might find helpful.

The history book I chose reflects what people were thinking way back in 1993. The book -- *What I've Learned So Far* -- was written by students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. I do not offer *What I've Learned So Far* as a repository of wisdom to light your way. Wisdom is rarely visited on the very young. Wisdom comes slowly, sometimes painfully, but nearly always it comes through maturation and experience.

When we live a while and grow a while, we begin to connect some of the dots of life and understand that the world is larger than we thought and we don't stand at the center of it. But a price we pay for attaining the insights of adulthood is that we tend to forget what we were like as children. We move away from our youth so steadily and naturally that we are no longer aware of who we once were. We knew then how important we were. We mattered. We could change the world for the better, and we would! Peter Pan recognized the danger of growing up and feared it.

So I don't turn to my young friends for sources of wisdom. I turn to them to remind me of what I'm missing by growing up. I look for myself as a child among them. I cherish their exuberance, their freshness, their sense of justice.

1 To get us started, here's an example of what I mean. An 11-year-old states flatly, *"I like money and I don't have it."* He is EVALUATING HIS SITUATION.

And what could be better advice for anyone sporting a new college diploma? If money lies at the heart of your heart, the decisions you make will be influenced accordingly. There's nothing wrong with the earnest pursuit of money. We need honest, qualified CEOs for corporate America. The problem is that there are 140 million workers in the United States and few of them start at the top. Therefore, evaluating your situation and setting goals that will meet your needs is good advice from anyone, even an 11-year-old.

2 A 5-year-old writes, *"I want to know how to read. It helps me know what those words under the pictures mean."* I named this one DARE TO DREAM.

Langston Hughes wrote:

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow.

Hold fast to your dreams.

3 A 9-year-old warns, *“Never go camping with one pack of hotdogs.”*

To me this screams PLAN AHEAD!

Let’s face it, not everyone has a plan. A lot of people live for the moment with a Ready-Fire-Aim response to whatever happens. Their fires tend to burn out prematurely and they’re always mooching hotdogs. As you consider how to apply your college knowledge, remember the “one pack of hotdogs” model. It’s better to start with a plan and improve it as you go than to spend a lifetime scrambling to respond to the unexpected.

4 Another 9-year-old writes, *“When you sharpen a pencil too much, you never get any work done.”* In other words, DO SOMETHING.

I saw a poster of a priest kneeling in the dark before an altar. A stream of light pierces the gloom over his head. The priest wants to think the light is divine, but he asks himself a pertinent question: “Is this a light from above or just a hole in the roof?” If it is a hole, whose job is it to fix it? As another young writer put it, “No matter how hard you pray, God won’t clean your room for you.”

Discussing a problem helps us understand the issues but in the end someone has to climb a ladder and fix the roof. We have plenty of pontificators who relish being part of the problem. We need more people ready to be part of the solution. I urge you to become doers.

5 A 10-year-old writes: *“In math, don’t let the big numbers scare you.”*

DARE TO TAKE A RISK.

Theodore Roosevelt said, “It is not the critic who counts . . . The credit belongs to (those) . . . who actually strive to do the deeds; who know great enthusiasms, the great devotions . . . and who at the worst if (they) fail, at least fail while daring greatly, so that (their) place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

6 HAVE FAITH IN YOURSELF or, as an 11-year-old writes, *“If you say you can, you can. If you say you can’t, you can’t.”*

Anne Lamott is a writer who sometimes feels overwhelmed when she faces a new novel. When she is tempted to tell herself she can’t do it, Anne picks up a one-inch picture frame, which she keeps on her desk. It reminds her that all she has to do that day is write down as much as she can see through a one-inch window. It’s all she has to bite off for the time being. Thinking in terms of what she can do rather than what she can’t is the trick. It restores her faith in herself. Buy a one-inch frame and keep it handy. It might work for something besides writing novels.

7 LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES. As this 9-year-old notes, *“Never go roller-skating with a dress on.”* I think this advice is self-evident.

8 PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT. A 6-year-old reminds us what might happen if we don’t: *“We should take care of the world we live in because if we don’t, our trees will not give any fruit or vegetables.”*

Last week someone driving by our house tossed out a sack of fast-food leftovers. I marveled that some people just don't get it. If we're still throwing sacks of garbage onto our streets, what will motivate us to tackle the big environmental issues? Your generation's leadership can – it must – make the difference. Think back to when you KNEW you could make the world a better place. Rededicate yourself to your own early aspirations.

9 *“Be brave,”* says a 9-year-old. *“Learn to write cursive and don't cry if you fall down.”* In other words, PERSEVERE.

I especially recommend this advice for personal relationships. Remember the 100-year-old couple who filed for divorce and told friends that they had hung on until the kids were all dead? My wish for you is that you find someone to love who will love you back in the same way and for a long time – at least until the kids are all dead. Work at being somebody's best friend. It's always worth the effort.

In summary: If you like money and don't have it, evaluate your situation. Dare to dream. Don't stand around all day sharpening your pencil. Take a risk now and then. If you say you can, you can. Never go roller-skating with a dress on. Protect the world we live in. Be brave and don't cry if you fall down. And never go camping with one pack of hotdogs.

Abraham Lincoln said, “We are about as happy as we make up our minds to be.” How you go about pursuing happiness is up to you. What I've learned so far is you leave here with our love, respect, best wishes, and high hopes.