

Our Mission on Planet Earth
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Commencement Address
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Thank you, President Garner, and congratulations to the “Class of Y2K”!

It is a daunting task to be called upon for remarks befitting a millennial commencement. On such an auspicious occasion, and not having done this before, I sought advice from an expert, Cornell’s President, Les Garner. He had three suggestions:

- ! His first suggestion was, “Keep it short.” I will. I have approximately 11.2 words for each member of the class.
- ! His second suggestion was that I speak as if to the members of the class that I have known particularly well. I pondered that advice. More than a few of you are dear friends. I reflected on the students who have haunted my office this past year, but I thought it would be inappropriate to single out Brandi Monger by name.
- ! Les’s third bit of advice was, “Don’t worry. Nobody will remember what you say anyway.”

That was reassuring, but was it really true? A little web research on commencement addresses seemed to be in order. I discovered that most of the thousands given every year are forgotten as soon as they are given. Cornell’s web site mentions only one commencement speech. The year was 1863. During the speech differences of opinion over the Civil War provoked brawling among the spectators, but the name of the speaker and the subject of the speech appear to have been forgotten.

Global media coverage of commencement addresses reinforces the point. Speeches that receive public notice do so not for what was said but for who said it. Thursday’s *Gazette* noted today’s commencement ceremonies at Coe and Cornell. The article about Coe was headlined, “Leach to speak at Coe Graduation.” The article about Cornell was headlined, “Cornell to Grant Degrees to 185.”

OK, I get the point. I’m a college professor, not a Congressman. The popular culture celebrates the messenger and ignores the message. I need a higher profile. What if I were Elián? Two thousand reporters would hang on my every word. You would have no place to sit. But, if I were Elián, I’d be six years old. What could I possibly have to say to the Class of 2000?

But today we are all Cornellians, and I choose to believe that Cornell is one place where the message still matters.

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Almost everything at Cornell happens one course at a time, and so I have had occasion to consider my commencement responsibilities while teaching my ninth term course. That course was Environmental Politics. It began just two days after the nation celebrated the 30th Anniversary of Earth Day. And so, I suppose, it was inevitable that I have chosen to say a few words this afternoon about “Our Mission on Planet Earth.”

Our mission at Cornell is education, and that’s as big as a mission gets. Education has created the modern world. Some would say science or technology, but the fundamental distinction that separates modern human societies from those of prehistory is our ability to record and store and transmit knowledge from one generation to the next, allowing the creative genius of the present to build on that of the past. Without education there would be no science, no technology, no Shakespearean sonnets, and no *B Minor Mass*. Also, no politics or government or taxes. You think you wouldn’t miss those, but you would.

Today our accumulated knowledge has literally become a force of nature, allowing humans to reshape the planet in ways that are simultaneously magnificent and terrifying. For Americans the magnificence is all around us. We live in a world of luxury, freedom and possibility unimagined by kings just a century ago. Resources are mobilized globally to meet our every need: Oil flows from the Middle East and electronics from the Far East; every American grocery store—even Gary’s—has become an international bazaar.

In stark contrast to the visible magnificence, for us, the terrors are pretty well hidden. We have some kind of national gift for denial, and it is reinforced by our favored institutions. We place our trust in markets, democracy, and the mass media. They give us what we want, when we want it: which seems to be more of everything, right now!

Free markets respond to the distribution of wealth, never questioning its justice. We are the wealthy, so that works just fine for us. The standard economic measures sum up all the goods and services in an economy then add on all the bads and disservices as if they were all the same. Economic theory systematically discounts the future, and economic actors behave accordingly. As Nobel Laureate Robert Solow has written, “the future is not adequately represented in the market, at least not the far future.” Indeed not, markets reflect our collective preference for the short run, because, as John Maynard Keynes so famously wrote in 1924, “In the long run we are all dead.” In a perfect world this economic short-sightedness would be balanced by a political system that reflects the long-term interests of society, a system capable of representing noneconomic values and unborn generations. Alas, in a world where both markets and democracy seem to be triumphing everywhere, political choices appear to be as short-sighted as economic ones. Just as the business manager must show a healthy profit for each quarterly report, the politician must court the quick fix and show results before the next election.

And, if markets and democracy seem short sighted, the media often appear to lack vision entirely. At their best, our national media are myopic and self-obsessed, celebrating celebrity, moving seamlessly from “all Monica, all the time” to “all Elián, all the time,” fixating on personality while ignoring humanity, and wallowing in the present moment while ignorant of history and

uninterested in the future.

Each in its own way, our most cherished institutions encourage us to ignore the wide-spread and long-term consequences of our choices: consequences that include poverty for most of the planet and looming ecological catastrophe.

Almost a century ago the great American naturalist, John Muir, wrote: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” Today, the connections are increasingly apparent.

World Resources 2000-2001 is a joint report of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank, and the World Resources Institute. Released just last month, it paints a disturbing picture of the environmental price that has been paid for an economic prosperity that still eludes most of the world’s citizens.

- ! Fishing fleets are 40 percent larger than the oceans can sustain.
- ! Twenty percent of the world’s freshwater fish are extinct, threatened or endangered.
- ! Half of the world’s wetlands have been lost in the last century.
- ! Logging and conversion have shrunk the world’s forests by half.
- ! Soil degradation has affected two-thirds of the world’s agricultural lands in my life time.
- ! And finally, since 1980—in the lifetime of the Class of 2000—the global economy has tripled in size, and population has grown by 30 percent to more than 6 billion people.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that world population continues to grow at a rate of almost 9,000 per hour. If current rates were to persist, world population would double to 12 billion within the lifetime of the Class of 2000. Just 30 years ago the celebrants of Earth Day worried primarily about relatively localized air and water pollution. We enter the 21st century facing environmental problems on a global scale.

A year 2000 report of the National Academy of Sciences put global climate change at the top of its list of environmental concerns. Temperatures are rising, and our dependence on fossil fuels is a contributing factor. If temperatures continue to rise, as expected, the results could include: more violent and unpredictable weather; melting polar ice caps; rising sea levels flooding low lying regions where 40 percent of the world’s population live; widespread famine, epidemics of infectious disease spread by hundreds of millions of environmental refugees, economic and political instability; and acceleration of the mass extinction of species already underway. It might not be that bad, but it might be worse.

In a kind of preview of coming attractions, just last month the National Security Council declared HIV/AIDS a national security threat to the United States, likely to kill 25 percent of the population in sub Sahara Africa and threatening similar catastrophe in India and the former Soviet Union. Such a plague, the National Security Council warned, would not only overwhelm medical resources, but destroy economies, and destabilize political regimes. It would, in short, shred the fabric of civilization.

The new environmental problems we face are global in scale, potentially catastrophic, immeasurably complex, and plagued by scientific uncertainty. Still, if we continue as we have, we face almost certain declines in the ability of Earth ecosystems to yield their broad spectrum of benefits: from clean water to stable climate, fuel to food, and timber to wildlife habitat.

In what has been described as “the most authoritative assessment ever of the environmental crisis,” the United Nations report, *Global Earth Outlook - 2000*, concludes, “The present course is unsustainable, and postponing action is no longer an option.” And the *World Resources* report warns that “halting the decline of the planet’s life-support systems may be the most difficult challenge humanity has ever faced.”

Education has brought us to this point. For the first time in Earth history humans have the numbers and the technology to reorder the biosphere in potentially catastrophic ways. Indeed, there is ample evidence that we are doing so already. But something else has changed as well. The same education that rapidly equips us to destroy the very fabric of life on planet Earth, increasingly equips us also to understand the consequences of our actions. Whether we would have desired it or not, we have become the stewards of Planet Earth. Her future is in our hands, and her future is our future.

We can choose a new path forward. It will require a new world view, one that recognizes that the preservation of healthy ecosystems is essential to our own survival. We must learn to evaluate our decisions on land and resource use in terms of how they affect the capacity of ecosystems to sustain life -- not just human life, but all life.

Meeting this challenge will require reordered priorities, new political and economic institutions, technologies not yet known, a concern for future generations, and a willingness to pay now for benefits in the distant future. Meeting this challenge will require unprecedented collective and cooperative efforts from people the world over. In the end it will require nothing less than a new world order where ecological health is valued as highly as free markets and democracy.

It is often remarked that the Chinese ideogram for “crisis” combines the symbols for “danger” and “opportunity.” Education has created the dangers we face. Education has also created the opportunities. To seize the opportunities in the face of danger is our mission on planet earth, and some of you will need to be missionaries. The road ahead will require wisdom and more. It will require a creative synthesis of science and technology with values and public policy, a synthesis of arts and sciences. It will require liberal education.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Class of 2000, you have been given much. You are members of the global elite. You wield physical and intellectual resources out of all proportion to your small numbers. My expectations of you are high. My fondest wish is that each of you will go forth from here and contribute, in your own unique way, to the achievement of human societies increasingly capable of living in harmony with each other and with the global biosphere of which we are all a part.

I am eternally envious of the young. You live at the dawn of a wondrous era. The dangers are real. But the opportunities are great, and you are well prepared. I am optimistic about your future. I hope you are too.

If not, you'd better wear sun screen.

Thank you.