

FORTY-SIXTH
DOCTORAL COMMENCEMENT
ADDRESS

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THE GRADUATE CENTER
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Before I begin I'd like to thank President Bill Kelly for the inspired leadership that brought us here—and, more personally, for according me the honor of addressing you on this happy occasion. My thirty-five years of teaching at the Graduate Center, among stimulating colleagues and exceptional students, have given me some of the most fulfilling experiences of my life. During that time the school has grown from a local to a national institution with students from all over the world, with increasing financial aid and a double-barreled commitment to access and excellence. In the name of my colleagues I'm delighted to extend congratulations to today's graduates and their families, who no doubt shared many of the trials and joys of completing this work. We on the faculty know how exacting this was; we've gone through similar rites of passage ourselves, which no doubt helped us guide you through them. But many of you now face daunting obstacles that we did not have to confront.

It's no secret that the academic job market, which took a sharp downturn soon after I joined the faculty in the 1970s, has recently contracted even further, thanks to the recession that has curtailed employment throughout the economy. There have also been major structural shifts in universities as they deploy more part-time faculty, with few benefits and no job security. This dependence on adjunct teaching by doctoral students has seriously lengthened students' time to degree; they put in additional years with no assurance of later gaining full-time work. CUNY has fought these pressures with greatly enhanced fellowship support. But the attrition of tenure-track jobs has led some observers to suggest that graduate study in the humanities has become some kind of scam to entice cheap part-time labor. Some graduate students have taken comfort from the notion that they have, if not a secure career path, then at least a high number in the big academic lottery.

Science students have more options than those in the humanities, but the figures show that even our humanities departments have done reasonably well in placing their students, though often in jobs less prestigious than their talents deserve. So who would blame them or their families for feeling discouraged? The cover of the May 24 issue of the *New Yorker* says it all: a freshly minted Ph.D. is hanging his diploma in what is obviously his boyhood room, as his troubled parents look on anxiously from the doorway. This is perhaps a far-fetched case: unlike recent college graduates, few new Ph.D.s are likely to be moving back with Mom and Dad, in part because they are already long in the tooth, perhaps with families of their own. On the cover instead we see a guy who looks like the '50s comic-book character Archie Andrews, someone who never got out of high school, who today, sixty years later, is still trying to decide between blonde Betty and dark-haired Veronica. This pop-art image takes us back to a more innocent era when a high-school degree, not a doctorate, was a prerequisite for many jobs.

Now that a doctoral degree has become just such a credential, with an incentive for overproduction, it turns out too often to be not *enough* of a credential, a milestone more young people have reached than our society thinks it needs. At this point the predictable role of the commencement speaker, faced with an insoluble dilemma, would be to reassure the graduates of the intrinsic worth of the research they've done, of the knowledge and experience they've gained, and of the handsome accolade about to be bestowed on them. But having received my own degree in the 1960s, in the twilight of the academy's golden age, when American society was in upheaval but jobs were plentiful, I'm in an awkward position to stress idealistic goals in the face of adverse economic conditions. In 1967 our world was in flames over the Vietnam War, the draft, and our country's racial divisions. On the same day I was due to deposit my thesis, I joined with 400,000 other people on both coasts in a huge demonstration against the war, which was then tearing our whole society apart. But I already held a tenure-track job. I could afford to be high-minded, with few worries about how to support a wife and ten-month-old son, even on a paltry salary. Students today cannot readily fall back on the luxury of pursuing learning for its own sake, out of their god-given talent, love of their subject, and the noble urge to contribute, however modestly, to the sum of human knowledge.

Yet neither are today's students faced with the quandary of new graduates during the Great Depression. Higher education then was only a fraction of the size it is today, and even the brightest graduates rarely went out for advanced liberal arts degrees. College teaching positions were scarce, especially for the children of immigrants. Instead the best of them wrote seminal books, founded magazines, did politics or journalism, worked for foundations, and took day jobs where they could find them. Only the great expansion of the university system after World War II enabled them to find academic posts, much to their own surprise. Some who would later be numbered among CUNY's most eminent professors, including Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Michael Harrington, Alfred Kazin, and Irving Howe, had no doctoral degrees; they made their mark on a larger stage as public intellectuals rather than specialized scholars. They helped turn the university into a more cosmopolitan place, a school that cultivated scholarship yet also interacted fluently with the life of the city, the nation, and the world.

This is part of your heritage today, sharpening the value of the work you have done. Current scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences is typically more relevant to social problems than the kind of Ivory Tower research that was the norm before the war. It is shaped by the contemporary world, even as it explores remote times and places. Your work has honed your skills as writers, trained researchers, and historically informed thinkers. The world needs what you have to offer, though it may not fully understand how much it needs it. So I say to today's graduates: You are the best and brightest of your generation. You must be especially gifted, or you wouldn't be here today, but you've chosen a difficult path, not to go to law school or business school, where your economic prospects might look brighter, not to go for the money but to pursue advanced knowledge in a field you love, that taps into the best you have to offer. To get this far you had to show not only talent but persistence, stamina, intelligence, discipline, and imagination, qualities that could serve you well, and serve the world, in many different professional arenas, not simply in college teaching.

My own field of literary study, once the province of antiquarians and gentleman scholars, has become far more engaged with present times, partly under the gun of theory but even more because literature itself is so engaged. When I think of the writers I've taught this semester alone,

writers like James Baldwin, Mary McCarthy, Vladimir Nabokov, Elie Wiesel, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, John Updike, and Philip Roth, I'm amazed that, besides the sheer pleasure their work gives, they shed so much light on issues like race, immigration, genocide, personal and cultural identity, marriage, gender, morality, and the very nature of truth. We don't study them for practical use but we use them nonetheless. They enlighten us not with didactic messages but with fresh experiences. They introduce us to people and situations we might never encounter, in language at once unexpected and unforgettable. As we engage with them critically and feel their power, their meanings become more accessible to us; they inform and alter who we are. This deeper understanding lights up the best work in history, in philosophy, in psychology, in anthropology, in every field that the French aptly call the "human sciences." This is the thrill of scholarship that rewards us for the hard labor.

But the methods we use in that scholarship have been immensely transformed in recent years. We live on the cusp of a new era. Like most new technology, the digitization of knowledge offers both a boon and a threat. It's become a cliché to say that it poses the greatest challenge to book culture since the invention of movable type. Thanks to the Internet, never have we had so much information at our fingertips or so much uncertainty about how to organize and interpret it. As in our daily lives, we risk being overwhelmed by the sheer flow of information, the kaleidoscopic demands on our attention. One benefit of the book is that we read it page by page; it's like what Keats called his Grecian Urn, a "foster-child of silence and slow time." If a book proved a boon for reading, the Internet is ideal for searching. It's better suited to skimming than to careful reading. It speeds us up where books slow us down and give us pause. Books make knowledge seem palpable yet offer space for reflection.

If any search is to be worthwhile, we must know what we're looking for and how we might explain it once we find it. No search can simply plumb the void; it must be thoughtfully conceived in the first place. If your graduate education has given you anything, it gave you the tools to trawl the new knowledge environment, the skills and instincts to turn information into insight, dumb fact into articulate idea. This power of critical thinking will serve you well in any field you enter, and it will

make the difference between journey work and genuine achievement. It will help determine whether society will benefit from what you do and whether you yourself will reap genuine satisfaction from it.

Right now the obstacles for advanced graduates are great and will grow even greater with the budget cuts that are sure to come as government and the private sector cope with the troubled economy. The path before you could prove to be a minefield. The arduous course on which you first set out some years ago may be even more challenging today, despite the proud accomplishments that brought you here. My hunch is that you do what you do because you love it, and because nothing else can be as meaningful to you. Pursuing knowledge today, and especially taking the academic route, in a society that has never valued education enough, requires a leap of faith not unlike the one attributed to the early Christian theologian Tertullian, who said that he “believed because it is absurd,” a leap later described by Pascal as a “wager.” I hope this wager pays off handsomely for you. I wish you all well as you set out on career that combines a sense of social purpose with a deep feeling of inner fulfillment.

The Graduate Center is the doctorate-granting institution of the City University of New York, the largest urban university in the United States. The only consortium of its kind in the nation, the Graduate Center draws its faculty of more than 1,700 members mainly from the CUNY senior colleges and cultural and scientific institutions throughout New York City.

Since its inception in 1961, the Graduate Center has grown to an enrollment of 4,700 students in over thirty doctoral programs and seven master's degree programs in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, and has awarded 10,000 doctoral degrees.

The Graduate Center also hosts the CUNY Baccalaureate Program for Unique and Interdisciplinary Studies, through which undergraduates can earn bachelor's degrees by taking courses at any of the CUNY colleges; the School of Professional Studies and the associated Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies; and the Graduate School of Journalism.

The Graduate Center is housed in the former B. Altman building at 365 Fifth Avenue, between 34th and 35th Streets, a landmark structure redesigned to meet the specific needs of a 21st-century institution of advanced learning. The campus features library facilities, state-of-the-art computing facilities, seminar rooms, a dining commons, and student lounges, as well as a cultural and conference complex that includes the Harold M. Proshansky Auditorium, the Baisley Powell Elebash Recital Hall, the James Gallery, and the Martin E. Segal Theatre.