

Convocation Address

Welcome to Cornell Class of 2007

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Members of the Class of 2007, transfer students, graduate students, professional students, parents, brothers, sisters, friends, good morning.

Thirty years ago, I sat where you sit, roasting 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.

One year ago, I once again sat where you sit, roasting 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 twenty-nine years could possibly have gone by so quickly. Excited, and a little bit afraid.

So let me begin my remarks 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. And I, of course, am treasuring it right alongside you.

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. To take a very practical question that these opportunities present, 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. Instead, I thought I would talk about a different aspect of how one can take full advantage of Cornell's opportunities. I want to talk 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 explain this idea, let me begin with a quote from the protagonist in the movie, "The Big Lebowski," a character known as "The Dude." The Dude is a bowler. In the scene in question, a rival bowler tells the Dude in very graphic language that the rival's team will beat the Dude's team convincingly in the tournament semifinals. And the Dude responds, "Yeah, well, you know that's just like your opinion man."

Most people who enjoy the movie really like that line. And I believe the reason the line works is that it resonates closely with one of the ways young children respond to arguments. As children we learn to be respectful of other people's tastes. Some people like chocolate ice cream and other people like vanilla, and it's silly to argue about which is better because everybody's entitled to their own opinion. So by saying, "that's just your opinion," a child is invoking his right to disengage, to stop arguing, to stop struggling to find agreement, by declaring the subject of conversation to be a matter of personal taste, like chocolate and vanilla.

So when a young child hears an argument that he doesn't like, but can't find an answer to, say, something like, "If you don't want to get cavities, you need to brush your teeth," the petulant child can say, "that's just your opinion." The child can declare the topic to involve opinions

that do not need to be justified or defended. They just are. And so the child can disengage from conversation, can call off the struggle to find a shared understanding.

The key word here is the word “just.” Saying “that’s your opinion” leaves open the possibility that it is an opinion based on facts, evidence, reasoning. Saying “that’s just your opinion” declares it to be a matter of taste and insists on disengagement.

So when the Dude says, “Yeah, well, you know that’s just like your opinion man,” he is telling his adversary both that he doesn’t agree and also that the subject is not susceptible to debate. Nobody is going to persuade anybody through reasoned discourse. We’re just going to have to wait until the semifinals.

At Cornell, you will quickly discover that an important part of the culture is a willingness to stay engaged with problems and arguments, to keep pushing for a shared vocabulary and a shared understanding. You will encounter 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 feel like matters of purely personal taste – chocolate or vanilla -- things that are truly “just, like, your opinion.” And you will find yourself spending many hours late at night and early in the morning, searching for that shared understanding.

And here you will discover one of Cornell’s great strengths as a community. Because 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 come together for four years on a beautiful hilltop, listen to one another with tolerance and respect, and engage.

From the days of its founding, Cornell has embodied that fundamental optimism. Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White founded Cornell University as a place where men and women would study together, as 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 135 years other universities have come to share Cornell's vision of higher education. And you, the Class of 2007, will be struck immediately by how important 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. And you will come to see their unique 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 with the line, "that's just, like, your opinion, man" you will find yourself driven to understand where differences come 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 you will refine your ability to hold two very different perspectives on an issue in your mind at the same time.

And here is where you will be well served to master a quality that the poet John Keats called, "negative capability." Keats knew that whenever people are facing two conflicting arguments, they naturally seek rapid closure. Figure out which argument is right and which is wrong. Which is stronger and which is weaker. And Keats wrote admiringly of how Shakespeare could "luxuriate in uncertainties and doubts, entertaining two opposing ideas without irritably reaching after fact and reason." This Zen-like ability to entertain two opposing ideas without irritably reaching after fact and reason is called "negative capability."

While you are at Cornell you will nurture negative capability. For it is by putting yourself into that state that you will truly be able to systematically probe and test out where an argument is vulnerable, and where it is robust.

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 *Antigone*. All of you have now read it (haven't you?), and I suspect most of you have probably read it more than once.

By one reading the central question of *Antigone* is whether *Antigone* was wrong to disobey Creon's law. For most of the play, Creon argues that *Antigone* was wrong, and he invokes the law of the community. *Antigone* argues that she was justified by higher principles of filial love and religion.

So here is the point of negative capability. As you prepare to go into your seminars, don't be too quick to choose *Antigone* or Creon. 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. 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.

How to do that? Here are seven things that I think might 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 and threaten to kill you, respond, "Yeah, well, you know that's just like your opinion man."

Second, some time in the next week look up into the Ithaca sky at night and look at Mars, while it is the closest to Earth that it has been in the past 60,000 years. Gawk and remember that when that incredible celestial event happened, you were at Cornell.

Third, 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 painting by Raoul Dufy. It could be the definitive exemplar of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, written in his own hand. It could be a building by I.M. Pei. It could be a first edition of Copernicus's master work, *On the Revolutions*. All of these are available to undergraduates as well as faculty and graduate students.

Fourth, try out a new sport or musical instrument or physical activity that you are not very good at. Your swim test does not count as taking up an activity.

Fifth, take at least one class a year that you are certain will never have any practical value for you.

Sixth, 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.

Seventh, 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.

But there are so many other things. The key is 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 to take on anything that life might throw in your direction.

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.

The 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, making their own choices and 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 "The Big Lebowski."

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

Welcome to Cornell.