

Opening Convocation

Monday, September 3, 2007

2:00 PM

The Smith Center

620 22nd Street NW

Remarks by

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and

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The Value of a University Education

Introduction

Good afternoon! It is a great pleasure to welcome all of you to GW. To the class of 2011 I want to say a special welcome on behalf of the entire faculty. I also want to extend my appreciation to parents and others accompanying students. Thank you for everything you have done to bring these talented, motivated, very well prepared students to GW.

The class of 2011 represents nearly every state in the nation as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands – and more than 40 countries. This geographic diversity contributes to the richness of the academic journey, which is what I want to talk to you about today.

Many of you may have heard me talk during Colonial Inauguration about some of the specific ways you can challenge yourself to make sure that the journey is a rewarding one. Today I want to speak about this in more general terms. I want us to consider for a short time what your years at GW will truly mean. I invite you to take a moment to reflect on the goals of a University education. I'm certain each of you has your own personal response. Today, I'm going to share mine.

First, of course, a University education will help you get a job – a better job than you would find, most likely, if you did not have four years of higher education. This is important. Although graduation day may be far from your mind now, in June 2011, you will be counting on your diploma to open doors for you.

But I would like to use our time together today to talk about less tangible goals of a University education, namely, a lifelong sense of curiosity about the world, the habit of critical thinking, and the importance of civic engagement.

This summer, I recharged my batteries in Maine, and I spent a great deal of time sailing in the bays surrounding Maine's rocky shores. I also started reading a new biography, written by Walter Isaacson, about the 20th century's greatest thinker – and, incidentally, *Time* magazine's person of the 20th century: Albert Einstein. It's a wonderful book, and I hope some of you will find the time, in between studying and getting to know your classmates and professors, to read it.

Einstein was born in Germany in 1879, more than 100 years before most of you. He died in 1955, more than half a century ago. He was brilliant. He was reading philosophy at 12 and studying calculus at 15. So what does Einstein – one of the world's greatest geniuses – have to teach us about the meaning of a University education?

Developing Intellectual Curiosity

To begin, Einstein had an inexhaustible curiosity. One day, when he was four or five years old, his father brought him a compass, which Einstein found mesmerizing. He was amazed at the way the needle flickered, not in response to touch but in response to a hidden force – the magnetic field. Later in life Einstein wrote: "I can still remember that

this experience made a deep and lasting impression on me. Something deeply hidden had to be behind things.”

Throughout his life, Einstein retained a child’s wonder at the natural forces of the world and their seemingly magical influence on nature’s phenomena. As a physicist myself, I understand exactly how Einstein felt.

But this sense of wonder and curiosity isn’t limited to the natural sciences. Those of you who love literature, those of you who have a passion for politics, those of you who paint pictures or compose music or write computer programs can all experience the same delight in digging beneath the surface of things.

I encourage you to take full advantage of these next four years to expand your understanding of and appreciation for the world around you. Explore! As well as learning all you can about what interests you now, be open to new areas of knowledge. If you are an artist, take a math course. If you have always excelled at math, study a new language. Historians – try a drama class. Remember that even though you are becoming an adult and preparing for the world of work, you can keep a childlike sense of wonder alive your whole life as Einstein did. “We never cease to stand like curious children before the great mystery into which we were born,” Einstein wrote in a letter to a friend later in his life.

I also urge you to wait a year or two before choosing a major. Some of you have been focused on developing an area of expertise since you were in high school. If you are truly certain you want to be a doctor, a lawyer, or an anthropologist, by all means pursue this path enthusiastically. But if you’re still not sure, take your freshman and sophomore years to consider several options. Then you can make your choice without second guessing yourself. And by the way, I want to mention that there is no reason to take on the burden of a dual major. Studies show that dual majors are not important to employers. Once you select a major, allow yourself the pleasure of fully exploring it.

Critical Thinking and Civic Engagement

Another interesting part of Einstein’s character was his rebelliousness. He was an iconoclast – he didn’t accept regimented ways of learning and he challenged accepted wisdom. All great scientists and thinkers do: it is the only way to advance the frontiers of knowledge! I hope you will use your time at GW to challenge the status quo. By all means, listen well to your professors and learn all you can. Then, ask yourself if there is another way to look at things. The habit of critical thinking is a good one to cultivate now. It will last a lifetime.

Einstein didn’t only challenge accepted wisdom; he also believed he owed a debt to society. In 1933, unnerved by the political climate in Germany, he left Europe for a new life in the United States. In the summer of 1939, the year before he became an American citizen, Einstein spent the summer on Long Island, sailing and playing music with friends. While there, he learned that scientists in Germany had been experimenting by bombarding uranium particles with neutrons, resulting in the splitting of an atom, a

reaction they called fission. (It may interest you to know that another famous physicist, Neil Bohr, brought this news to a scientific conference held at GW's Hall of Government early in 1939.) The fission reaction concerned Einstein, who worried about the possibility that the Nazis might use it to develop an atomic bomb.

With two of his friends, Einstein decided to write a letter to President Roosevelt, warning him of the destructive powers of such a weapon and suggesting that the United States take "quick action" to deal with the threat. Roosevelt understood immediately and set in motion what became the Manhattan Project and the development of the world's first atomic bomb.

After World War II, concerned about the weapon's potential to destroy humankind, Einstein urged international leaders to create a strong world governing body. "The politicians do not appreciate the possibilities and consequently do not know the extent of the menace," he wrote.

Conclusion

Einstein's activism went hand in hand with his curiosity and his habit of critical thinking. He understood that knowledge is dynamic – the conventional wisdom of today may not suffice to solve the problems of tomorrow. "The aim of education," he once wrote, "must be the training of independently acting and thinking individuals, who ...see in the service to the community their highest life achievement."

It is my hope that as you pursue your studies at GW you will become an independent thinker and that you will find ways to put this ability to use for your own satisfaction and for the greater good of society.

As you begin your undergraduate career, I encourage you to approach learning with an open mind, to cultivate your curiosity, and to practice critical thinking. Find new answers to old questions. Take full advantage of your time at GW.

Thank you.