

Graduation Speech
Junker Center; Behrend College
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“We’re In This Together”
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Good evening and congratulations to the 2006 graduating class of the Behrend College. Some 18 years ago, at a graduation ceremony similar to this one at Harvard University, a random sample of 23 students, faculty, and staff were invited to participate in a short, peculiar exit survey [Schneps, M. H., & Sadler, P. M. (1988). *A Private Universe*. Santa Monica, CA: Pyramid Films.] I’ll let the graduates consider for a moment the myriad of topics that might have been covered in the survey. The topic was astronomy, and the volunteers were asked to offer an explanation for the seasons. The answers from the Harvard respondents were taped and 21 out of the 23 volunteers responded something like this. “It is coldest here in the winter because that is when Earth is farthest from the Sun.” Shall we conduct a similar exit survey here tonight? Why is it so cold this December evening after all? Astronomers everywhere are anxious to correct that distance from the Sun has little to do with the seasons; just two days after the Nittany Lions kick off in the Outback Bowl on New Years day, Earth will be *closest* to the Sun. As a courtesy to the Behrend graduates who might be surveyed after the ceremony, I am happy to share the right answer. It’s the tilt of Earth’s spin axis as it orbits the Sun that causes the seasons. I’ll bet the graduates didn’t expect a lesson on the seasons tonight.

Occasionally we find ourselves in a sizeable group of people – such as a college classroom, or a graduation ceremony – where we are nervously uncertain of an answer to a question posed to everybody. Privately, we begin to sweat, blush, and fidget in our seats desperately hoping that someone else will raise their hand to answer. “Please do not call on me!” we mutter to ourselves. This of course is very different from what we hope will happen at a graduation ceremony. We actually *want* our name to be called, to be singled out of the throng of happy graduates as we walk across the stage, for just a moment. But back in the classroom, there is silence, with no one wanting to speak up and everyone wishing to remain anonymous.

As a freshman physics student, I was in a similarly anxious class trying to avoid the gaze of the teacher who had just asked the class how we might determine where a cannonball would land if we knew its initial speed and direction out of the cannon. All I could think of was the song “Blowin’ in the Wind” by Bob Dylan “...how many times must the cannon balls fly, before they're forever banned?” No one said anything for what seemed like an hour and the teacher appeared to be growing frustrated. Then a miracle happened! A socially peculiar student, known to everyone as “Tom”, answered from the back of the room in his unusual, proper voice, “If we consider the problem in two equal parts, we can find the time the cannonball takes to reach the top of its path and then double the time to get the total time of flight. The impact distance then follows from the time of flight.” It was at that moment that I first understood the principle of projectile motion. I was impressed by the organization and delivery of Tom’s answer and dismayed by the idea that I had actually learned an important physics lesson from the class nerd. I remember appreciating that the class nerd had been in class that day.

It is tempting to think that we reach milestones in life *in spite* of the many people we encounter along the way; that we somehow percolate to the top of a deep academic ocean through our own ability to swim. But the opposite is really true for, figuratively, we are buoyed to the surface by the upwelling current generated by others swimming beside us. Both our social and intellectual developments are shaped in profound but subtle ways by chance meetings we have with dozens – sometimes hundreds - of people every day. The diplomas the graduates receive tonight then are testimony to the struggles and triumphs they *shared* with countless students on similar paths through the Behrend College curriculum. We do not learn in isolation, just as we do not *live* in isolation.

How many of you fought traffic on your way to the Junker Center tonight? When we get stuck in traffic or can’t find a parking space in a busy lot, we go through four common stages of vehicular emotion. These include: (i) anxiety and bewilderment, (ii) fear and anger, (iii) tears and cussing, and (iv) acceptance. Unfortunately the first three emotions do not promote “peace on earth and good will towards all”, and few of us actually make it past the tears to stage four. Anyway, consider for a moment what it would have been like if there had been no traffic this evening, no cars competing for parking spots, and no one

but you and your family, and possibly *me* here in the Junker Center this evening. Look around and imagine that the seats next to you are empty. Imagining ourselves in an isolated context helps us to *empathize* with the concerns, interests, and struggles of other people. From this perspective, personal annoyances such as navigating a congested parking lot, or waiting in line at the grocery store, or even paying taxes help us to *remember*, and to appreciate our natural *citizenry* in an extremely competitive and busy society, to which we owe *everything*.

We come tonight as individuals, but we celebrate the accomplishments of the graduates and of the entire Behrend student body together.

The grandeur of tonight's celebration is rooted in this stadium atmosphere with the cheers and clapping that you hear mostly coming from people that you don't know. The same thing happens at athletic arenas across the country, where thousands of people of different age, gender, race, religion, political affiliation, academic background, hair color, and lung capacity...flock to cheer in *unison* for athletes on center stage that they do not know. "We Are Penn State!" And although few will dare admit it, in athletics we also cheer the *opponent* - generally by booing - because we recognize that the success of our own team is magnified by the size and strength of the opposition. A crowd is much more energized when Penn State is playing a #2 or #5 ranked football team than if they play a team ranked #20, even if the chances of Penn State losing are greater.

In both collegiate and professional athletics, it is understood that the health of an organized sports program is directly dependent on the strength and vitality of each of the teams comprising it. The states of our country and the countries of world are similarly interdependent. No region of the world is immune to the economic, political, or environmental troubles plaguing another. Locally, the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina, the horrors of 9-11, the influx of desperate Mexicans and Cubans across our Southern borders, and the spread of avian flu, AIDS, and west Nile virus have affected us all.

But it is during the height of tragedy when we are often lifted to higher ground through empathy, respect, and appreciation of one another. It is in these moments when our perceived differences disappear and we begin to see the world as if from space, without territorial names or political boundaries; only as a mix of clouds, land, ice, and sea. Not too long ago, John Lennon invited us to “(i)magine (that) there's no countries. It isn't hard to do.” The singer Bette Midler followed that “(f)rom a distance the world looks blue and green, (a)nd the snow-capped mountains white. From a distance the ocean meets the stream, (a)nd the eagle takes to flight.” Seen from space, the song goes, Earth is at peace. “From a distance you look like my friend, (e)ven though we are at war. From a distance I just cannot comprehend, (w)hat all this fighting is for.”

With global warming and other natural and human-generated disasters upon us, we are drawn to abandon the notion that one group of people on Earth is somehow *better* than another, and that a concentrated, uncompassionate civil-defense strategy is somehow beneficial to the world. The late astronomer Carl Sagan offered that “(t)here is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than th(e) distant image of our tiny (earth). According to Dr. Sagan, the image of the Earth from space “underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.”

As you pull out of the Junker Center parking lot tonight, and the Earth spins beneath your feet on its long journey around the Sun, remember that “We’re in This Together!

Congratulations graduates and thank you!