

Commencement Address – University of Florida
Stephen C. O’Connell Center
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Delivered by Robert R. Lindgren

We have all heard “you can't go home again.” But actually, it is not difficult to do if in your heart you never left.

Provost Glover, thank you for that very generous introduction. Lyndon Johnson had the same deep affection for a place as I have for Gainesville. Whenever he would return to Texas and hear a similar glowing introduction he would say:

“I only wish my parents were present to hear what you just said. My father would have enjoyed it and my mother would have believed it.”

More to the point, it is often said that “behind every successful man there stands a surprised mother-in-law.” I am so pleased that my in-laws, the Knorrs, from Ocala, could join us today, and I am hopeful my mother-in-law still believes as well.

But I know for sure there is something that all of us here believe, and that is how lucky we have been, President Machen, to have had your superb leadership as the 11th president of the University of Florida over the past decade. Thank you.

Alma mater is in good hands, indeed.

And I can tell you easily – if somewhat superficially – why that matters to me. But what I would like to do for the next few minutes is tell you why, at a deeper and much more important level, it matters to us all.

That may seem like a difficult case to make. After all, you, Florida's gifted and accomplished graduates have just spent untold years and incalculable effort, working to be done. You have, by all accounts, done a magnificent job of it. So at some level you may be thinking: "I'm done with that. That chapter is closed. It no longer matters."

But I am convinced what happens here – and what will continue to happen when you go on – matters very much.

I am so happy – thrilled really – to be back and to witness this panoply of achievement and success in no small part because it is a chance to reconnect with my own youth. I came to Gainesville as a freshman, and left after spending nearly all of my adult life here; coming of age, earning two degrees, meeting and marrying a wonderful woman – Cheryl Knorr – herself having earned two UF degrees; starting our family, and spending some of the most satisfying and important working years of my life right here on this campus.

I am profoundly grateful to this place and to have received this most significant honor today.

And I have been blessed to have known well nearly half of UF's presidents. Starting with J. Wayne Reitz, our 6th president, who wrote the book on what it takes, not only to be a good president, but a highly effective former president as well. Having now been around the university world, believe me, that is a special commodity.

One of my favorite stories about Dr. Reitz occurred as we hosted, in this building, one of our major campaign dinners during my tenure here. As he and Mrs. Reitz approached the welcome table, staffed by some of UF's most attractive and outgoing students, he announced characteristically: "I am J. Wayne Reitz." The somewhat flustered young coed behind the table responded: "My goodness, you must have been named for our student union!" To which, Dr. Reitz, with his characteristic graciousness and dignity, simply replied: "yes...yes, I was."

Reitz's successor was Stephen C. O'Connell, a devoted and steadfast leader, who, coincidentally, was named for the building we are in today. He was president during my early student days and was followed by Robert Q. Marston, a man of eternal optimism, who bravely gave me my first job in higher education, as his assistant.

And Marston's successor, Marshall Criser, took a gigantic leap of faith by asking me to lead the entire development program at UF, at a time when I may have been too young and inexperienced to know any better. Marshall Criser's confidence in me changed my life.

[I am deeply honored that Marshall and his wife, Paula, and Marshall's provost and interim successor, Bob Bryan, are all with us today. Please let me thank you three for all you have done for the University of Florida.]

President Criser was followed by John Lombardi, one of the most talented persons I have known in higher education, who led the successful completion of our first ever campaign here, and then, unselfishly, helped launch me into another phase of my career.

I mention all of these presidents because each in his own way was an important mentor of mine. And mentors are so very essential to the positive development of any successful person. None of us would be who we are and where we are without our mentors.

I know that you graduates have your own mentors to thank for today's important milestone, including your faculty sponsors. And I encourage you to do just that: that is, thank them, early and often, for what they have meant to you.

And I would go even further than that. It's not just saying thank you, it's living the thank you that matters. I like the words of John F. Kennedy who said:

"As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

I call that "living by your gratitude." And I trust that part of your living by your gratitude – now that you have reached the pinnacle of your academic training – will lead you to become effective mentors to others. You now have a most influential platform from which to do just that.

Following your graduation, many of you will stay in the academy, associated with colleges and universities, either teaching or doing research, or, I hope, both. There are few opportunities for service today which are more important to our future.

Even those of you who go into the private sector, or public or non-profit work will, also, by the dint of your doctorate, be forever linked to our system of higher education, and in particular to the University of Florida. And it will be on your shoulders to preserve and strengthen both.

For, you see, America's system of higher education is under siege today.

Colleges and universities are being taken to task for not giving students a "fair return" on their increasingly expensive investment, and by the fact that students and families now owe more in college loans than ever before. Some argue that college graduates are not being adequately equipped with skills in communication, critical thinking and analytical reasoning.

These critics have their points. There is room for improvement, always. But, the fact remains that our system of higher education in America remains the envy of the world, preparing each new generation not just for jobs but for meaningful lives; while at the same time still serving as a prodigious engine of discovery and still the most effective ladder of opportunity for anyone willing to work hard and open their minds.

And today, more than ever, the challenges we face in this country and in the world, require men and women more steeped in the liberal arts, that is, from the Latin *artes liberales*: having greater understanding of what free citizens should study and know.

Two higher education stories have dominated our airwaves this summer. In one, from my home state, a relatively new president was asked to step down abruptly by the University of Virginia Board of Visitors – only to be reinstated almost immediately thereafter. And the grotesque saga from another distinguished public university, Penn State, has riveted us all, as it became clear that the basic human values espoused by this long admired institution were, shamefully, cast aside.

These experiences remind us of how important it is for institutions of such significant influence as the University of Virginia and the Pennsylvania State University and, yes, the University of Florida, to remember always that higher education is not a business. It is not an industry. It is a societal trust.

And the fact that we wear robes today – like judges, like clergy – reminds us that at some very deep and important level, it is a sacred trust.

Which is the reason I think James Madison observed: "Learned institutions ought to be favorite objects with every free people."

Last fall, I and a small group of liberal arts college presidents had the opportunity to have dinner with *New York Times* columnist David Brooks.

He described a survey he had recently conducted of Americans, of mostly folks in today's grandparent generation, to find out what helps lead to a life of satisfaction and achievement. Brooks used this information in his latest bestseller, *The Social Animal*.

His research led him to two important things he said we should absolutely teach our students in colleges like ours – the two things that would best lead our alumni to lives of greater satisfaction and achievement.

First, he said, we ought to teach them how to better select the right person to marry. Well, I don't know exactly how we do in this department. But his other recommendation I found relevant, even for post-graduates: that is, we should teach students how to be more resilient.

Brooks believes resiliency is a characteristic with particular meaning to Americans, and the most satisfied of his survey-takers – remember these were mostly individuals from our grandparent's generation – were folks who were not unfamiliar with challenges and obstacles and setbacks.

But rather, the very most satisfied and successful were those who faced challenges and overcame them; who experienced setbacks and even failure, and kept going, kept striving, kept achieving.

Those of you receiving these impressive degrees today have already shown you understand this. No one earns a doctorate from the University of Florida without demonstrating enormous resiliency. With the help and devotion of your families and loved ones, you have persevered here during one of the most challenging economic periods since the Great Depression. You have earned – and I underscore that word *earned* – your degree from an institution that still believes in the value of rigor, of high standards, and of integrity. I salute you.

And going forward my message is quite simple: *never let setbacks defeat you*.

As Walt Disney said: “The difference between winning and losing is most often not quitting.”

One of the most resilient persons I know is Michael Bloomberg, who, at the age of 39 and the very pinnacle of the financial world, was unceremoniously fired from Solomon Bros. Rather than lamenting his loss, he has, as we know, gone on to form Bloomberg LP, become a billionaire and remarkable philanthropist, and now mayor of New York City. He recalls thinking to himself on the day he was fired: “Let's get on with it. Here's where you are today. What do you do next?”

And his life philosophy is expressed by one of his favorite sayings: “How bad a day can it be when you are looking at the right side of the grass?”

My favorite story about resiliency and the choices people make in face of severe challenges is about an extraordinary individual touched by my other two institutions: Randolph-Macon and Johns Hopkins.

Paul Nyantaki came to the U.S. from Ghana in the late 1980's with literally just the clothes on his back. His local village had taken up a collection to send him over, but upon arrival his plan

to attend a small college in Arkansas didn't pan out. So he supported himself by driving a taxi in Washington, D.C. and taking night courses.

Paul knew he was capable of more in life. He just needed a chance. So he scouted around for a college in Virginia, and his sights landed on Randolph-Macon. In his interview he demonstrated such a strong desire to learn that our admissions dean simply had to find a way for him to attend.

Paul worked as hard as any of our students. He was a pre-med major, worked 2 jobs on campus, and still returned weekends to D.C. to drive his cab. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a 4.0 grade point average and won a full scholarship to the Johns Hopkins Medical School. He went on to do his residency at Yale and a post-doc at the NIH.

But it is what happens next that is important. Following his education and training at some of the best colleges and health centers in America, Paul could have written his ticket in academic medicine anywhere in the United States, joining the trend of his fellow countrymen. I am told there are more Ghanaian doctors practicing medicine in the U.S. today than there are in Ghana.

But Dr. Nyantaki took another route. He is now back in Ghana as a practicing physician, having established, by himself, 5 clinics, spread around the country, in which he provides mostly free healthcare to his countrymen.

And when a group of Randolph-Macon students visited Ghana recently, he made a special effort to travel across country to Ghana's capital city just to speak to them. To tell them his story. And with tears rolling down his cheeks, Dr. Paul Nyantaki concluded his remarks by saying:

“I will never, *ever* be able to repay the opportunity I was given in the United States of America. All I could do was to come home to Ghana and to be of service to my fellow countrymen.”

Now there is an example for us all: of the power of education...of resiliency... of a profound desire to give back...and of someone “living by his gratitude.”

And I can think of no better way to conclude my remarks today than to use the words of the respected late host of *Meet the Press*, Tim Russert, who, in his very last public appearance in May 2008, gave the following advice to Randolph-Macon's graduating seniors:

“Have a wonderful life. Take care of one another...And for the rest of your life: work hard, laugh often, and keep your honor.”

Work hard...laugh often...keep your honor. And I would add: “be resilient.” I cannot imagine a better formula for success and happiness than that.

Congratulations. God bless you all. And Go Gators!