

Graduation Talk

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Greetings: graduates, parents, families, friends. It is no revelation to you graduates that today is a very special day in your life journey. This time is also special in my life journey. I have come to the end of my career and you are just about to set forth on yours. For you and for me, this time is what has been called a life passage, the ending of one period of our lives and the beginning of a new. And for both you and me, this is a good time to reflect on the past as well as look forward to the future, even though you have a shorter past to look back on, and what I hope will be a longer future to look forward to.

For both you and me, it is a time to be joyful. The Spanish word for “retirement” says it well: *jubilarse*, which means “to retire” but also “to rejoice,” “to jubilate.” Webster’s *New World Dictionary* defines “jubilate” as “to shout for joy,” based on a noun that means “a wild shout.” I imagine you will all be doing your share of wild shouting today; I hope so. Your family and friends, and your professors, too, jubilate with you, at least in spirit.

You are graduating in a Department of Foreign Languages and Literature. All of you are very aware of the importance of knowing well a foreign language. But the second element in our Department title is Literature. Literature has been an important part of your lives these past few years, and I hope it will continue to be part of your future. For, whereas other disciplines, such as philosophy, deal with the abstract and theoretical, or like history, typically deal with large movements and transcendent events, literature concerns the concrete and the individual. Reading literature is perhaps the best way to experience what it is like to be someone else, or many someone elses, to live their situations, to understand “where they are coming from,” as we say.

When you read literature, you put yourself temporarily inside someone else's head, you see through their eyes, you feel through their skin. Reading literature calls on the emotions and the imagination as well as the intellect, it engages the whole person. Literature provides the reader an opportunity to develop empathy and compassion, by inviting him or her to become the "other" for a while. Renaissance humanists believed that by studying letters, literature, one became a better, more ethical, more humane, person. That is still a worthy goal. And you graduates have the distinct advantage of having developed the skills to read literature in another language, French or German or Spanish. The range of other minds, other hearts, other lives that you can experience vicariously is much greater than for those who can read only in their mother tongue.

One of the universal metaphors in literature, especially but not exclusively in narrative, is the journey. That famous reader of literature, don Alonso Quijano, aka don Quijote de la Mancha, set out on a journey. He was older when he left home in search of adventure as a knight errant than all of you when you began your university studies, but some aspects of his journey are analogous to yours. He began his journey "a la ventura," that is, he had a very general idea of his goal: to right wrongs, to correct injustices, but he didn't have a clear sense of how to begin; in fact, at first he simply followed the path his horse wished to take. Some of you may have been in a similar state when you began your studies; you may have known only in a somewhat vague way what you wanted to do in life and therefore what path of study you should follow, you may have needed to do a lot of exploring, following your nose, so to speak. In the course of his journeying, don Quijote discovered a lot that he wasn't expecting, about the world around him and about himself. It took him a while, but he absorbed the lessons, and in the process became a deeper, richer character. I suspect the same has been true for you. On his journeys don Quijote met all kinds of persons, persons of diverse ages, backgrounds, and interests. In some cases he

mistook their identities at first, learning only later who they really were. I imagine the same can be said of you. Perhaps some of you, like don Quijote, have tilted at a few windmills and been knocked off your horse, but have gotten back on and set off again, ready for the next adventure.

But don Quijote is not the only hero in Miguel de Cervantes's masterpiece. Sancho Panza is a hero in his own right. When he first set out on his journey as squire to don Quijote, he was enticed by the latter's promise of an island to govern. In the course of the journey he suffered so many blows that he was tempted more than once to abandon his master, but as time went on he continued to stand by him not only because of the hope of the governorship but also, and maybe more, because of his growing affection for don Quijote himself. And in the end, Sancho's pragmatism and practicality, his realism, was not replaced, but enlarged, by the contagion of don Quijote's imagination, his dream, his vision. Perhaps something analogous has happened to you. Maybe you began your university journey motivated simply by the hope or expectation of securing a well-paying job at the end of it. As time went on, in addition to preparing for that future job, maybe you discovered an unexpected love of learning itself, maybe you "caught the fever" from a teacher or a peer. In the course of his apprenticeship with don Quijote, Sancho gradually became more capable of eloquent speech when it was needed; we could say he learned another language.

Don Quijote and Sancho Panza had only about one and a half years on the road; you've had several more. I hope they have been enriching years in many different ways. Someone has said education is what is left when we have forgotten everything we ever knew. I interpret this statement as referring to what has gone deep, what has become so much a part of our way of thinking, feeling, and looking at the world that we're no longer aware of that learning or

knowing as something outside ourselves; it is no longer something we possess but simply who we are and what we act on.

I hope you will take time out this week to reflect on your years at NC State, the point you started from on this journey called a university education, the point at which you have arrived, and the journey itself. And as you go forward on the next phase of your life's journey, may you be a happy traveler, and remember, that what you meet on the road is part of your apprenticeship.

Once more, congratulations to each and all of you!