



University at Buffalo
The State University of New York
Office of the President

President's Address
2003 Commencement
Professor William R. Greiner

Class of 2003, welcome to a very special day in your lives; a day for celebration and for giving thanks, and a day of new beginnings.

You have worked hard to reach this day, but others have worked hard to help you along the way. Look around you, look at the audience gathered here today for you. Lots of folks have put forth time, effort, financial resources and energy to support you in reaching your goals; your families and friends, your professors, the people of the state and of Western New York. Many have invested in you. Today you begin the process of providing returns on that investment.

The people here today to help you celebrate and reflect are not your only investors, Class of 2003. You were chosen by them to be supported during your student years, and by UB, but you've also been chosen by history to be the recipients and inheritors of all the tremendous gifts, knowledge and resources available in the 21st century, and especially so in these United States. With all this power at your command, how will you begin to pay back for what has been given you?

In 1961, John F. Kennedy spoke these now famous words; which suggest what you will need to do to pay the interest on your social capital:

...Of those to whom much is given, much is required. And when at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us, recording whether in our brief span of service we fulfilled our responsibilities...Our success or failure, in whatever office we hold, will be measured by the answers to four questions: First, were we truly people of courage...Second, were we truly people of judgment...Third, were we truly people of integrity...Finally, were we truly people of dedication?

To what end should you direct your courage, judgment, integrity and dedication? I have a suggestion. The events that have taken place since you first came to UB have demonstrated that the world's citizens — its human beings — must determine how to live together peaceably, in dignity and with respect and understanding for each other, or else run the risk of a cruel and brutish future. This is by no means a new challenge for humankind. In 1624, John Donne wrote:

No man is an island, entire unto itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.

Today we read this statement as transcending merely one island or continent, and instead as referring to the whole world. We read it as a recognition of all humanity; as a recognition of the

brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind. And we know as a scientific certainty that John Donne was correct: we are all part of one main.

In this, the 50th anniversary year of the discovery of the double helix structure of our genetic makeup, we know that, under the skin, we are all one and the same. We are, genetically, biologically, all members of one family. We are descended from common ancestors; we truly are the family of humankind. Why, then, are we so troubled and divided? With all the knowledge and resources we have at our fingertips, with all the lessons we've learned through history, what makes us such a dysfunctional family?

Part of the answer is that humanity is not only about biology. It can never be reduced solely to the science of the genome. Humanity is born from our languages, our cultures, our histories and traditions; it is something we create, something special and beautiful and of great and wondrous diversity that comes from us. We ought to celebrate that the family of human kind comes in many sizes, colors, tongues, beliefs, faiths; we should rejoice that our family expresses itself in so many different ways.

But, somehow, we've been divided by our surface differences – our sizes, shapes and colors – and by our creations – language, religion, culture. We have allowed our humanity to divide us, when it should bind us together.

How should we celebrate the many diverse and wondrous characteristics of our family? How will we get beyond our dysfunction? That will be your challenge, Class of 2003. What the world will come to be for humankind will be determined by you and by your contemporaries in Africa, Asia, Australia, South and Central America and Europe; and in the Middle East; and in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. But that outcome is especially in the hands of the great majority of you who will live and work and lead in the U.S.A. To you much truly has been given; from you much will be expected, for yourselves and all of humankind.

A recent visitor to campus, Senator Bill Bradley, wrote the following in the spring of 2001:

We are an increasingly diverse nation, which means the challenges and joys of living together will multiply. We cannot permit any American to live without the hope of realizing his or her potential, for the diminishment of some of us is really the diminishment of all of us. I hope that more of us will come to see that ultimate connection and that our insight will be expressed in public policies and private actions that move us all toward an America that lives up to its ideals.

At UB you have lived and worked and played with people hailing from all over the globe. UB is, in fact, a good surrogate for the global community; we are the largest public university in the nation's most cosmopolitan state. Students come to UB from every state in the nation, and many different countries – 13% of our population, in fact, is comprised of international students, and we have educational exchanges and programs in over 60 countries around the world. We are multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-national. We are strong in our diversity, and our diversity makes us strong. You have benefited from these strengths, even as you have contributed your own gifts to our university community and lent your voices to help shape its future.

Now raise those voices and use those gifts to contribute in some measure to global peace, to the protection of human dignity, to the preservation of precious human cultures. Hold yourselves and your brothers and sisters to high standards. As citizens of our nation and of our

world, challenge the status quo. We have expected your best here at UB. You have expected your best here, and you have delivered. Don't be afraid to ask, what can we do better? And don't just ask about what we are doing, ask: what ought we be doing.

In his 1964 acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

I refuse to accept the idea that the "isness" of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the "oughtness" that forever confronts him.

Reach for that oughtness in you. Be people of courage, judgment, integrity, and of dedication. Much has been given you, and in the days ahead, much will be required. The bell is tolling. Listen to its call. We are all part of the main. The diminishment of one is the diminishment of all.

Trust in yourselves and in your ability to make the world better, stronger, and more tolerant. Believe in yourselves and that you can and will make the world a place for all humanity and its many shapes, sizes, colors, languages, ethnicities and religions.

I know that you can do that. I believe you will do that. Lead the way; make a difference. And as you define your century, remember your alma mater, and the lessons you learned here.

Salaam, Shalom, Peace. Good Luck and Godspeed, Class of 2003.