

"Liberal Education: Foundation of the Examined Life,"

Speech by Ben Schmidt, UW-Green Bay Student Commencement Speaker, 16 May 2009.

On behalf of over 700 members of the graduating class of May, 2009, I extend greetings to the graduates, their family members and friends, the faculty and administration, and the distinguished guests here on the stage.

I must say, I was quite surprised when I was invited to speak at commencement. My high school teachers and fellow students would be even more surprised, since they witnessed the horror of my public speaking abilities at that time. My wife puts videos of my speeches – unfortunately such videos exist – in the VCR and watches them to get a good laugh. If nothing else, perhaps I'll provide such unintentional humor today.

Graduates, this is such an exciting and emotional day in our lives. Today, we celebrate the completion of our degrees and our graduation from a liberal arts institution. This is incredible! But what are we really celebrating? We can't really celebrate the fact that we no longer have to read, write, study, or think about complex issues. I'm pretty sure that after graduation, we are still going to be expected to continue doing those things. While we would like to be celebrating the cool jobs we're about to get or the large paychecks we'll soon be receiving, for many of

us, there is no certainty in the immediate job market. Any celebration of not having to pay tuition anymore is tempered by the fact that our student loans are coming due. And the thrill of accepting the piece of paper we're about to receive will pretty much be over when the last party ends this evening.

But none of this is to suggest that there isn't something to celebrate, because there is. What I think we should celebrate is the completion of our liberal arts degree and everything it really means as the foundation for the engaged, thoughtful lives we go forth to live.

The actual end or goal of a liberal arts education, at least in my view, is the betterment of our lives as human beings, to find our purpose in life and to care for our souls. A job is only one small aspect of this goal.

Without knowing our purpose, our jobs and the money that comes with them are meaningless. We need to select careers that best serve our purpose in life, rather than choosing a job that assigns us purpose.

Socrates, an early lover of the liberal arts, claimed, "the unexamined life is not worth living." He believed we should examine our lives: what we're doing, why we're doing it, what we should be doing, why we're here, and how we can better ourselves. What Socrates really wanted us to do was to constantly contemplate everything in our lives and determine what's necessary and what's not. The ability to reflect in this way and the opportunity to make conscious decisions about how to lead our lives is the real benefit from a liberal arts degree. Obtaining this

degree took a vast amount of hard work and intense thinking to examine ourselves, others, and the world around us. Our degree serves as a launching pad for the rest of our future, regardless what our jobs and careers end up being.

Because we chose to attend UW-Green Bay, we've gained the opportunity to enhance our liberal arts education by taking advantage of interdisciplinary fields of study. These oddly named interdisciplinary fields all of us either majored or minored in, provide us with unique experiences to take what we learned in one field and apply it in another. For instance, we can utilize ethical arguments against "the ends justify the means" to criticize cost-benefit analysis in economics. We can understand the social and economic dimensions of environmental issues and problems. And we understand the biological as well as cultural influences on child development. As a veteran, a subject near and dear to my heart is war and peace. This past year, the campus common theme was Waging War, Waging Peace. The year-long series of readings, films, speakers and discussions around this topic drew on theology, foreign policy, philosophy, and history, and prompted a deep self-examination of what patriotism means. These are but some examples of how studying and working within multiple fields, in addition to the normal liberal arts education, can move us closer to becoming Renaissance men and women, a noble goal for any student.

Hopefully, if not today, then sometime in the future, all of us will understand the true value of our degrees. Maybe after we're done celebrating and searching for jobs, we can take a little time to reflect on and celebrate what a liberal arts and interdisciplinary education means to us as individuals.

Now, many of us are frightened about graduating today, because the world is in the middle of a recession, jobs are hard to find and unemployment is elevated, health care is expensive, energy costs remain high, our national debt is immense, and global climate change threatens us all. Certainly some of us have wished we could be graduating during a robust economy when jobs are plentiful or at least at a time in history when there are fewer problems in the world. It would be so much easier! However, most things in life worth having never come with ease.

Instead of looking at this recession as a burden for the Class of 2009, we need to view it as an opportunity to shine. Difficult times and situations build, mold, and temper our characters as human beings. The Greatest Generation didn't receive its name because everything was handed to them on a silver platter, and our generation won't shine as brightly if we're not tested and tried by tough times. The global recession isn't a good thing and many problems will arise from it that will take years to resolve. But so much good can also come out of the challenges of these times if we continue to strive through it and push hard to overcome these

great obstacles. Just don't ever give up! We'll get through these trying times just as people for thousands of years have overcome their hardships.

In closing, and on behalf of the graduates, I'd like to express our gratitude and recognize those who have enabled us to rise up and meet these challenges head on. The faculty and staff at UW-Green Bay are outstanding and passionate about their work and the success of their students. Personally, I'd like to thank the philosophy and public and environmental affairs departments for their continued support and encouragement for me. I believe these departments are the greatest on campus, but, of course, I may be just a little biased.

In fact, I know quite well that other departments on campus have great faculty as well, because I had amazing courses with Professors Aldrete, Kain, Austin, Luczaj, and O'Grady. Only Professor Luczaj could make rocks seem so fascinating!

All of our family and friends also deserve our thanks for consistently believing in us and for offering their support and advice when we needed it to make difficult decisions. I know I couldn't have done it without them, especially my lovely wife who has put up with me for the past ten years. She has taught me so much about life and myself. Without her, it would have been impossible for me to achieve what I have.

Also, thank you graduates. Without all of you, our liberal arts education would have been severely shortchanged. Because of our diverse backgrounds, viewpoints, and opinions, all of us profited more from our experiences at UWGB.

Graduates, sometime today or next week, please take the time to thank your family and friends, spouses and significant others, and the faculty and staff here at UW-Green Bay, for assisting you in achieving this immense feat. Aristotle instructed his students to surround themselves with those better than themselves in order to improve the character of his students. Fortunately, for the graduates in this room, those great people surround us today and have surrounded us while we furthered our education. I believe most of us are better today than when we arrived. Don't forget to thank those who made this possible.

Congratulations graduates! I thank you for your patience and attention in listening to me, and may God bless you now and in the future!