Dare to Rest

On a Tuesday evening in late August, 2001, Pulitzer Prize winning trumpeter and composer, Wynton Marsalis was playing at the Village Vanguard—one of the world’s most famous jazz clubs. David Hajdu was there to see, hear, and relay this extraordinary moment:

He played a ballad, “I don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You,” unaccompanied. Written by Victor Young, a film-score composer, for a 1930s romance, the piece can bring out the sadness in any scene, and Marsalis appeared deeply attuned to its melancholy. He performed the song in murmurs and sighs, at points nearly talking the words in notes. It was a wrenching art of creative expression. When he reached the climax, Marsalis played the final phrase, the title statement, in declarative tones, allowing each successive note to linger in the air a bit longer. “I don’t stand…a ghost…of…a…chance…” The room was silent until, at the most dramatic point, someone’s cell phone went off, blaring a rapid singsong melody in electronic beeps.

People started giggling and picking up their drinks. The moment—the whole performance—unraveled. Marsalis paused for a beat, motionless, and his eyebrows arched. I scrawled on a sheet of notepaper, MAGIC, RUINED. The cell-phone offender scooted into the hall as the chatter in the room grew louder. Still frozen at the microphone, Marsalis replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he repeated it, and began improvising variations on the tune. The audience slowly came back to him.

In a few minutes he resolved the improvisation—which had changed keys once or twice and throttled down to a ballad tempo—and ended up exactly where he had left off: “with…you….” The ovation was tremendous.

With all due respect to Marsalis’ magnificent gift and skill, I think the key to his memorable recovery that evening is captured in two words situated in the middle of Hajdu’s recollection:

“Marsalis paused.”

Each of us has a song to play in this life. Our song is distinct and unique to us. Our songs may be similar, but no two songs are exactly alike as no two persons are exactly alike. In life we are called to play together and we are called to solo. One thing is certain, whether it be in concert with others or a solo by yourself, all music, planned and improvised, requires pauses.

Where there are no rests, there is no music.

It’s not easy to rest in a world that sometimes seems to despise it. The roots of such disdain can be found among influential religious reflection. A well-known historic saint of the Christian Church once prayed for strength “to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest.” A highly respected leadership guru lists “rest” in a group of obstructions to genuine growth and development. He warns, “If the idea of having to change ourselves makes us uncomfortable, we can remain as we are. We can choose rest over labor, entertainment over education, delusion over desire. Real change is actually choosing to be different, to live different.

If you don’t value your rest, no one else will. You have to become convinced of the meaning and value for rest in your own life. You have to become persuaded that you are a better person with rest than you are without rest. Convince yourself that rest leads to peace, peace leads to clarity, and clarity leads to creativity. Should you begin to feel guilty and selfish about making more time for nothing, dare to believe that the deeper selfishness is not giving yourself such time. As long as you remain “crazy busy” you insure that the world, including those nearest and dearest to you, will never behold you at your finest. That would be selfish. You have to rest to be your best.

2. Planning. Schedule daily and weekly times of rest and leisure, and be open to the unscheduled graces of free time to simply be. Planning them with the same intent that you plan your work signals to your consciousness, and just as importantly your unconscious mind, that rest is as important to you as anything else in your life. You have to rest to be your best.

3. Practice. Don’t just plan your rest and leisure, but live it. Real change involves more than knowing you need to change, wanting to, and planning to. As valuable as they are, authentic change transcends awareness and desire. Real change is actually choosing to be different, to live different. And, sustaining true change involves trusting your transformation beyond all fear and suffering.

4. Personhood. Know that having regular periods of rest and relaxation helps you to remember that you are infinitely more than what you do. I hope you don’t mind me saying to you from the window of my Christian faith tradition that you are God’s “fabulous you” apart from any accomplishment or achievement. God cannot love you any more than God loves you right now, not because of anything you have done or will do. Such divine affirmation can relax you in amazing ways. Among other things, it will help you to avoid the mad rush of living for acceptance and embrace the sweet peace of living from acceptance.

In conclusion, there is a story told of the musk deer of North India. In the springtime, the doe is haunted by the odor of musk. He runs wildly over hill and ravine with his nostrils dilating and his little body throbbing with desire, sure that around the next clump of trees or bush he will find musk, the object of his quest. Then at last he falls, exhausted, with his little head resting on his tiny hoofs, only to discover that the odor of musk is in his own hide.

Kirk Byron Jones

Penn Baccalaureate Address given Sunday, May 17, 2009 by the Rev. Dr. Kirk Byron Jones, professor of ethics and preaching at Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, MA.
Graduates, family, friends, members of the faculty, Reverend Dr. Jones, and honored guests: Welcome, and congratulations to the great Class of 2009!

American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow reminds us that “all things must change/to something new, to something strange.” Things have changed. The number of defining moments during your senior year easily tops every other graduating class of my Penn presidency.

In late October, those of us who are Phillies fans celebrated a long awaited World Series Championship. Soon after, on Election Day, we turned out in record numbers for one of the most path-breaking presidential races in history. And, later that night, the many Penn supporters of Barack Obama marched from campus to City Hall to celebrate a momentous victory. Just last month, you not only enjoyed yourselves at Spring Fling, but also launched a brand new Final Toast tradition during Hey Day, which should live on in Penn history.

Of course, this year was not all ticker-tape parades and late-night celebrations. We also anxiously watched the financial system unravel and jobs disappear in a downturn of historical proportions almost as great as the election of the first African-American president.

Like Alice in Wonderland, we felt ourselves tumbling down the rabbit hole, upended and uprooted. Now, we find ourselves in a new—and daunting—world of possibility. A world that needs you, our great Penn graduates.

But, how will you know which adventures to pursue? In Wonderland, the caterpillar offers Alice advice by posing three seemingly simple questions.

Today, I ask the same three questions of you.

The first—and most fundamental—question: Who are you?

At Penn, you answered this question by seeking out life changing experiences. You became lacrosse and soccer stars, Sphinxes and Friars, members of Red and Blue Racing, Alternate Spring Break, Penn Leads the Vote, Big Brothers and Big Sisters.

You searched for yourself, Penn-style, by connecting with others. Your answer to “who am I” changed many times, sometimes in the course of a day, because this question does not lend itself to a single or simple answer.

The second question: What size do you want to be?

In Wonderland, the second question was “How much do you want to eat?”

So: what’s the test question? “Will I find a job?”

Finding a job will be a far bigger challenge than you probably bargained for—but it won’t be the toughest test you’ll take.

Pretty soon, every one of you will have landed a job, if not a spot in post-graduate school.

No, the toughest test you, I, and all of us will face boils down to one overarching question (to which there is no one correct answer): “What matters most to me?” When economic bubbles burst, individuals and institutions need to focus all the more keenly on what matters most to them.

A pessimist, Winston Churchill remarked, sees difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.

But you don’t need to be an optimist to make the most out of a tough situation. You do need to be broadly educated to figure out what truly matters most in your life, and then pursue it.

So if you want to find out who you truly are and where you are going in life, ask yourself: “What really matters most to me?”

In my own life, family and friends have always come first. When I became Penn’s president in 2004, I made the most of the opportunity, gaining thousands of new friends—my Penn family.

The world is new and strange. It is also exciting and challenging. This is the world that is awaiting you.

Meet it, as you have met one another and me, with open arms. Accept the challenge of knowing yourself, growing large, and as a consequence, even in tough times, gaining the greatest happiness. Penn expects nothing less of you. I am very proud of all you have accomplished and excitedly await your next adventures. Congratulations!

PENN COMMENCEMENT 2009

The Pursuit of What Matters Most

Chairman Riepe, Trustees, honored guests, families, alumni and friends: It is my great privilege to welcome you to the 253rd commencement of the University of Pennsylvania!

Please join me in congratulating the graduates of the great Class of 2009!

Jay Furman, Penn Class of 1934, is also here celebrating his 75th reunion! Let’s hear it for Jay and all returning Penn alumni!

Graduates: You have passed your exams … and you have survived Walnut Walk!

But just when you were putting your final exams and dissertations behind you, a global economic crisis confronts you with an even tougher exam—perhaps the toughest test of your lifetimes.

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Graduates, be sure to demonstrate how much your friends and family mean to you in some small way each and every day. Let’s seize this moment to thank all the parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses, partners, and friends here today with a Penn round of applause.

When I ask what else matters most in my life, my thoughts quickly turn to Penn and higher education. I find it not only satisfying, but also thrilling to be educating the most creative minds to make the maximum possible difference in our world.

“Genius,” Wittgenstein said, “is talent exercised with courage.” By combining intellectual talent with a bold spirit, you will be courageous enough to pursue what matters most to you.

It takes talent and courage to teach for America and devote yourselves full-time to transforming young lives.

It takes talent and courage to expand micro-finance in impoverished communities and to empower women so that they can support their families and give their children a far brighter future.

It takes talent and courage to pursue breakthroughs in health care and to serve the world’s poorest populations, some of them right here in our own communities.

It takes talent and courage to branch out beyond traditional roles and career paths and to follow the road less traveled.

I don’t see any of you forever following a single straight and narrow path...
to maximum security, which has a ring of prison about it. Rather, I see all of you taking the road less traveled to a more satisfying life.

You won’t find the road less traveled on any roadmap—because it is waiting for you to determine its direction and then blaze its path.

Where will your road take you? Perhaps it will lead you to create a ground-breaking work of art that expands the frontiers of human understanding. Perhaps it will lead you to discover an elusive cure for a disease, a way to alleviate world hunger, to reduce political strife, to put our economy on firmer ground, and to sustain our planet.

Penn’s dedicated faculty has educated you to be successful in the world of work—but we have educated you not only, or primarily, to be so successful. We also have empowered you to ask yourselves and answer the most fundamental question in anyone’s life: “What Matters Most?” How you answer this question has never mattered more than it does today.

“The mind,” Milton wrote in Paradise Lost, “is its own place. … (It) can make a heaven of hell, or a hell of heaven.”

Over the past four-plus years, I have been as proud as a parent can be that you have made the most out of your time at Penn, which you and I know is the nearest approximation of heaven here on earth.

Penn Commencement Address by President Amy Gutmann (continued from previous page)

The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent

Greetings and congratulations from the more than 4000 members of the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania; scholars from nearly every academic discipline, from American diplomatic history to Zebrafish genetics, from Z-algebras to Acute encephalomyelitis, and many equally engaging stops in between.

At some point during this celebratory day, you will no doubt be asked to reflect on the host of formidable challenges that we face as individuals and as a society. In partial reply, let us consider our collective assets as a University and how well Penn has helped prepare you to meet these challenges. The word “assets” has been on the lips of citizens in the US and throughout the world in increasing numbers and with increasing intensity over the past few months. Google the word “tassets” and you will obtain an amazing 102,000,000 hits in 90 milliseconds. “Assets” oftentimes has appended to it colorful—if not unsettling—modifiers such as troubled and toxic assets, or exotic, forbidding and stealthy, such as foreign, nuclear or human assets.

On this day, let us reflect on the more positive characterization of assets—a thing or a person that serves as an advantage or a source of strength.

You, as graduates, are clearly one of the four great assets of our University. Our physical space—our campus is our second great asset and, if you allow


The Courage to be Unreasonable

Now, when I think about Penn, I think about the metaphor of resilience, of a culture that works, of a hunger to change. If you think about 20 years ago, when Penn was struggling and the changes that the people around me made to turn it into the most desirable undergraduate major from a standpoint of high school applications in the country, from the kind of culture that has been built here, you see that the culture works, and that the combination that you see represented on the stage, that the parents are so proud to have sent their students to really has delivered, the very best that we can do here in America.

And of course, we also have the best cheesesteaks in the world, which is not so bad.

When I look at this group, I see the Google and Facebook generation. And when I was first in this stadium, my track buddies and I got in a sta-
tion wagon—you remember them—and I drove up here to go to a track and field event with the great Marty Liquori. And I think this is almost 40 years ago. We had Tang, you have Red Bull.

Now, we programmed computers in a language called BASIC. You, of course, use Java. We had VCRs that had an hour of video and cost $700. You use YouTube and you upload 15 hours of YouTube video every minute. And we got our news from newspapers. Remember them? You get news from blogs and tweets. And for those of you who don’t know what a tweet is, it’s not what you hear in a zoo.

We stood in line to buy Pong, you stood in line to buy the Wii. We didn’t tell people about our most embarrassing moments in college, you record them and post them on YouTube and Facebook every day. And I am looking forward to watching these for the next 30 or 40 years. We used mainframe computers with 300 megabytes of storage to go to the moon 6 times. You use an iPod with 120 gigabytes, that’s about 500 times more, to get to your next class. Which is not that close, because it’s an urban campus.

We thought that “friend” was a noun. You think of it as a verb. We had phone booths, remember them? You have cell phones. We wore watches; we took pictures with cameras. We navigated with maps; we listened to transistor radios. Again, you have a cell phone. We thought that the marvels of computers and technology would help us improve, we would agree, and I for the right. So despite all these marvels, this a great time to be graduating.

Now, you went to college to develop the kind of analytical thinking skills to deal with enormous amounts of complex information that you’ll face for the rest of your life. But I would argue you have in many ways the best opportunity before you because you’re graduating into a tough time.

I used my favorite search engine of course to find out “What did the Great Depression spur?” Well, it spurred Rice Krispies, Twinkies and the beer can. You would have never gotten through college without these things, right?

So it seems to me that with all the technology and connected-ness that we see, you have an opportunity that’s even better, even stronger than anything that I ever faced when I was sitting in the same seats. You are seeing a situation where due to the enormous goodwill of people—here on the stage and others—we have an opportunity to have everyone in the world have access to all the world’s information.

This has never been possible. And why is this so important? Why is ubiquitous information so profound? It’s a tremendous equalizer. Information is power, people have fought over it, people care a lot about it, it serves as a check and balance on politicians. If you were a dictator, which of course you’re not going to be, because you’re a fine graduate from Penn, first thing you would do is shut off all the communication so that people couldn’t actually talk each other and figure out how to make the world a better place.

Information is very, very important. And, in fact, the way you should invade these oppressive regimes is through information. Then the citizens will take over and turn their societies into better societies. This is going to continue and to continue and to continue.

And what are we going to do with this vastly more popular web? Well we’re building a contemporaneous and historical record that is unparalleled in human history. There are all sorts of interesting possibilities.

You’ll have megabits of bandwidth to essentially every human pair of hands in the world. For knowledge, for entertainment, for all of the things that people care about. You could have a face-to-face meeting across the world. And with automatic translation, you can talk to them even though they don’t speak your language.

When you’re traveling in Mongolia, those of you who are graduating and want to take a week off, go to Mongolia and you fall off your motorcycle, you can get a radio and hire a doctor that doesn’t speak your language because your medical records can be right there. This is life changing, life saving, life fundamental.

Imagine a situation, happening very soon, where all of the world’s information will be translated into all the other languages, so we can find out what everybody really thinks. And we can develop a new insight into what they care about and they can with us. In the next ten years, it will be possible to have the equivalent of iPods in your purse or on your belt with 85 years of video. Which means that if it’s given to you at birth, you’re going to be frustrated the whole time, you’ll never be done watching all the videos. That’s how profound this technological revolution is.

You could ask Google the most important questions, like, where are my car keys after all? Because all of a sudden we’ll know where everything is and we can make this available.

Computers are good at some things, and they are particularly good at these sorts of things.

We can detect flu outbreaks, because we can watch what people are doing quicker. We can do things; here’s another example. What I really want is while I’m typing a paper I want the computer to tell me what I should have been writing instead. Wouldn’t that have been useful?

Another product that we’ve suggested but it’s not been built yet is the paper lengthening project. It adds ten percent to every paper and its recursive. It would have been very useful. The point is that computers really can help you, even though you don’t need this anymore now that you are out of college.

So if you think of mobile phones as a metaphor, as an extension of you, with image recognition, avatars and all the technologies that are coming, you can see that the ability for us to make our lives even more powerful is all right before us.

So what should you do, right now then? Well you should start by listening. Like, George Bernard Shaw who said that, “all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

Graduation gives you the courage to be unreasonable. Don’t bother to have a plan. Instead let’s have some luck. Success is really about being ready for the good opportunities that come before you. It’s not to have a detailed plan about everything you’re going to do, you can’t plan innovation or inspiration, but you can be ready for it. And when you see it, you can jump on it and you can make a difference, as many of the people here today have already done.

The important point here is, if you forego your plan you also then have to forego fear. In many ways in the last four years and maybe in high school as well, you’ve been penalized for taking chances. From now on, the rewards will gravitate to those who make mistakes and learn from them, as the president said.

So stop right now. Take a minute and think of something completely new and go work on that. Take that as your challenge; take that as your opportunity. Whatever you care the most about.

So how should you do it, how should you behave? Well, do it in a group, its much more fun anyway. None of us is as smart as all of us. Universities now are good at teaching you how to work with other people, its no longer the lone light sitting in the lab, it’s a team.

And you can see Twitter as an example of a form of social intelligence; use it. Find a network of people that care about you and so forth and so on. You can imagine watching Watson and Crick, who discovered the structure of DNA, did it at a university. You can imagine there are two people who probably met on Facebook at a university. And then are going to say to each other, “what are you up to right now?” “Oh, I’m finding the secret of life, then I’m off to a pub. LOL.” It’s okay. Do it together.

But amidst all of this, some truths emerge. Leadership and personality matter a lot. Intelligence, education, and analytical reasoning matter. Trust matters. In the network world, trust is the most important currency.

Which brings me to my final question. What is, in fact, the meaning of life? And in a world where everything is remembered and everything is kept forever—the world you are in—you need to live for the future and the things that you really, really care about.

And what are those things? Well in order to know that, I hate to say it, but you’re going to have to turn off your computer. You’re actually going to have to turn off your phone and discover all that is human around us.

You’ll find that people really are the same all around the world. They really do care about the same things.

You’ll find that curiosity and enthusiasm and passion are contagious. I see it with the students, I see it with the faculty, I see it with the trustees and the president here—it’s contagious. Make it happen, take it with you.

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