

Commencement Address for Ohio Wesleyan University
May 13, 2007

I have observed that the traditional rhythm of commencement addresses seems to require one to begin with an inventory of guests. Accordingly:

Good afternoon parents, grandparents, friends, and neighbors, whose presence graces this day,
Good afternoon Members of the Board of Trustees, who govern the University with wisdom,
Good afternoon to the Ohio Wesleyan Faculty, who are the intellectual heartbeat of this scholarly place,
Good afternoon to members of the staff and administration whose good work is relied upon with great confidence,
And of course, good afternoon to the Class of 2007, who embody the University's central purpose.

It's very good to be with you today.

I'm not sure I want to publicly make the following confession because I may never stop hearing from the OWU development people. Nonetheless, I can confidently state that whatever I have managed to accomplish in my life originates with the experiences I had as a student at Ohio Wesleyan. This I did not know, or perhaps only dimly, when I stood on this very stage thirty-eight years ago. And so it is with great awe and humility that I once again stand on this stage, asked to reflect on the meaning of this occasion.

My main and central observation—and the only thing, perhaps, that you would carry away—is presented as a question: don't you think it's good to be alive today?

Like all fine questions, this one too begets still other questions: How do you know when you are genuinely alive? What characteristics does "aliveness" include? What is the difference between being fully alive and being merely a spectator on life? I am going to offer you eight mercifully short propositions that may help provide answers to such questions.

I am, of course, acutely aware that in one way or another such questions are the same as those addressed at every one of the thousands of graduation and commencement exercises that occur each year. Think about the last one you attended. Do you remember the speaker? Do you remember what he or she said? If you do remember, did they say anything useful? Perhaps this vagueness of memory is why Willard Wirtz, former United States Secretary of Labor, remarked that

“Commencement speakers have a good deal in common with grandfather clocks: standing usually some six feet tall, typically ponderous in construction, more traditional than functional, their distinction is largely the noisy communication of essentially common knowledge”

So it follows that one immutable aspect of life is that people will ignore you when you speak on public occasions, particularly commencements.

1. It makes sense to me, therefore, that as my first proposition, I will submit that one way you know you are alive is if you pay attention. Notice what is going on around you. Be attuned to the world. It is a pretty interesting place, after all, and there really is no reason ever to concede to boredom. Recalling Professor Thomas Szasz, “Boredom is the feeling that everything is a waste of time; serenity, that nothing is.” And most especially, when you are with other people, no matter what else is on your mind, give those other people your full attention. They will appreciate it, hold you in high regard, and think you very smart, simply because you may be the only person that took the time to pay attention to them that day.

2. The second way you know you are alive is if you appreciate, respect, and seek out diversity. People come in an astonishing and remarkable array, with all manner of shapes, sizes, colors, religions, political views, ethnicities, personalities, origins, and ways of being. Take the time to search for an understanding of what it is like to be other people. Be suspicious of claims that there is only one single truth or one group that lays claim to it. If human variety discomforts you, you will probably have a very difficult time negotiating your way in the contemporary world. So each time you see a person different from you, have a private little moment of joy and realize that you are both seeking nothing more than being perfectly alive in the world.

3. You know you are alive if you exercise your body. Robert Hutchins, former president of the University of Chicago, once quipped “Whenever I get the urge to exercise I just lay down until it goes away”. Bad advice. I think a more apt cliché would be “use it or lose it”. If you want to feel what it is like to be alive, pump some iron, chase after a ball, go for a zesty walk, stretch your luxurious muscles.

4. You know you are alive if you seek beauty; music; art; drama; dance. These are expressions of what is most human in us. The arts demonstrate the full range of our propensity to create and showcase people in the rich assortment in which we come. So if you want to know what it feels like to be alive—go to a museum, see a play, listen to a concert, or better yet do it yourself—write a poem, paint a picture, or

perform your own instrument. It is quite impossible to conceive of a world that is too beautiful. It follows that you should never resist the opportunity to add some color or sound a note. In fact, while you are at it, be bold—sound a lot of notes at once on every possible occasion. I shall never forget the advice given by Derek Walcott, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992, who when asked at a small gathering at my house what it took to be a poet, Walcott answered simply “do it everyday”.

5. You know you are alive if you take the time to help others. Life is busy. In fact, being busy seems to be a predominate and defining theme in modern society. Who do you know who isn't busy, including yourself? But no matter how occupied you may be, please remember there are always those who are less fortunate. There are real live people who go hungry. There are people who can't read well enough to shop at the grocery store. There are people who at the end of the day don't have a home to go to, a bed to sleep in, or anyone to hug them. One thing of which I am quite convinced is that problems rarely take care of themselves or go away on their own accord. Somebody has to solve them. Busyness should not be a reason why we fail to notice challenges in the world that need attention, and to offer our own contribution to helping. You may not be able to save the world—although you surely should want to—but you can make the world a better place by giving of your time, your treasure, and your committed energy. And if you are feeling overwhelmed, take Mother Theresa's advice: “if you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one.”

6. You know you are alive if you can improvise. I am a great believer in preparation, in being organized, in systematic planning. But never let planning be a sole substitute for improvised, unconventional action. Don't be afraid to trust to the impulse. I remember the first time I ever gave a speech in public. It was in eighth grade Latin class. I was to give a talk on Roman catapults, which I carefully and thoroughly researched, and then organized the talk on three by five index cards just as instructed by the teacher. When my time to speak finally arrived, I was so nervous I dropped my cards all over the floor on the way to the front of the room. Horrified, I shoveled them together from the chaos and was so straight-jacketed by my organization I could only give the talk in the now completely randomized order in which the cards appeared. Needless to say it was a thoroughly rotten (and thoroughly embarrassing) performance. I promised myself from then on that I would not be overly reliant on notes, and always be ready and willing to take a chance on improvisation if the occasion warranted. You will no doubt observe that, not wanting to fall prey to self referential existentialism, I don't always take my own advice.

7. You know you are alive if you believe in yourself. Did you ever doubt you would make it to this graduation? Were there moments when the work seemed too intense, the assignment too difficult, the wall too high to scale? Of course there were, but you kept at it and you did it. This reminds me of a metaphor by E. L. Doctorow that I like: if you are going on a long journey of a thousand miles at night in an automobile, you need to use your headlights. With your lights on you can only see fifty feet in front of you, but you can go the whole thousand miles seeing only fifty feet in front of you. Good lesson that. All it takes for success is to know that success is possible. You have proven by your presence here today that you can accomplish difficult tasks, even if you can't see the end as you work. So when things seem impossible, believe in yourself and remember to turn on your headlights.

8. You know you are alive when you share moments with family and friends. In the end, this matters most. You might be rich, you might be famous, you might be important, you might be powerful, but if you don't have close and reliable friends and family, all the rest won't make up for it.

So let's demonstrate how alive we are on this fine day. I ask the graduating class of 2007 to please stand. Recounting my eight advices:

- Pay attention
- Seek diversity
- Find beauty
- Exercise
- Help others
- Improvise
- Believe in yourself
- Give thanks

Members of the class of 2007: if you look around you will notice your families and friends. You earned your way here today, but you also owe much of your success to them. What do you have to say to them?

I see you have mastered at least the last of my advices. Thanks to you too, and congratulations.