

Ohio
Wesleyan
University

MATRICULATION CONVOCATION ADDRESS

Making a Difference—One Life at a Time

Friday, October 10, 2008

Making a Difference—One Life at a Time

Members of the Class of 2012, it is a great honor for me to join those who have already spoken and say to you: Welcome to Ohio Wesleyan University. Your arrival has been anticipated for months, and tonight we collectively tip our hats to you as we share with you and your families what we hope is one of the most special moments in your lives.

As it is for you, this is an especially meaningful moment for me. Like you, I am beginning my first year at OWU. As a member of the “freshman class,” I can relate to some of what you may have experienced in recent days. If there has been a time when you found yourself excited beyond words about what lies ahead; if there has been a time when you found yourself nervous and on edge about the uncertainty of leaving a place and people you know well for a place you have visited only a few times and people you do not yet know well; if there has been a time when you were filled with excitement about what is ahead, yet you have found yourself wondering what will it really be like—if you have had any of these feelings, know that I am right there with you. I only hope that you find, as I have found, that the people on this campus are among the most caring, intelligent, compassionate, optimistic people on the face of the planet. And I only hope that you will find, as I have found, that each day brings confirmation that you have come to the right place, and you have made the right choice.

You are here tonight because after months, and in many cases years, of exploration of colleges and universities across this country and, in some cases, around the world, you reached the conclusion that this is the place where you will thrive in ways that are different from what would happen at any other institution. You are here tonight because after careful consideration you have chosen Ohio Wesleyan University.

But you also are here tonight because Ohio Wesleyan University has chosen you. You completed a rigorous application process before being offered admission. We asked you to tell us about your high school curriculum. But we wanted to know about more than your academic record. We asked about your record of leadership, your participation in extra-curricular activities, your travel experiences, and your record of volunteer service. We looked for well-rounded students who were prepared for success in a rigorous and challenging academic program but who also were eager to make a difference in the world. We sought to build a class that reflects the diverse interests and life experiences that make this such a rich world in which to live. You represent less than 20 percent of the people who applied for admission to Ohio Wesleyan University this year. You are here because Ohio Wesleyan has chosen you.

As you formally begin your time at Ohio Wesleyan, I have some words of advice. But first, I have some words for your parents. Parents, I know much of what you are feeling tonight. Two nights ago, I sat where you are sitting tonight and watched as my son processed with his class and took his place as a first-year college student. I know something of the emotions of this day—the excitement, the pride, and the anticipation, but also the ambiguities of knowing that when our sons and daughters return home they will not be the same people we are leaving this week. On the one hand, that is why we are so happy that they have chosen to enroll at places like Ohio Wesleyan University. On the other hand, we know that this means a chapter in life is ending. We have completed a significant part of our work

as parents. It is time to let go in a new way. It is time to watch from a greater distance as our sons and daughters begin to chart their own courses, to find their own paths, and to make their own decisions. We will watch, albeit with deserved pride, from a bit farther away as they achieve even what they tonight do not know they can achieve. And we will need to stand a bit farther back when they fall, allowing them to confront their mistakes and to learn from them. (When my wife, Melissa, read this speech yesterday, her response to me in this section was, “You wrote this better than you lived it.” I know this is not easy for any of us.)

As you prepare to leave this campus in the next day or two, rest assured that every person here is committed to the success of your sons and daughters. Every person who is employed by this university has chosen to be here because of a desire to participate in the greatest vocation on this planet, the education of a new generation of individuals who will become leaders in the most dynamic time in human history. We cherish this calling, and we will do everything possible to insure the success of these students.

Now, some thoughts for our students. On my first day as president of Ohio Wesleyan, I asked a group of about 15 students to join me for lunch. During the course of the lunch, I asked all kinds of questions about life at OWU. Near the end of the lunch, I reminded them that I would be speaking to you tonight, and I asked them what advice they would suggest that I offer to you on your first day on campus. Here is their advice, with some of my own thoughts woven in.

Embrace the liberal arts. The father of a woman who graduated from here five years ago told me a few weeks ago that he most valued OWU because it gave his daughter “the freedom to think and the support to create.” This is the essence of the liberal arts. Our world needs leaders educated in the liberal arts now more than ever before. You will receive that education here. You will be challenged to think and speak for yourself. You will be challenged to write at a new level. You will be challenged to achieve what you did not know you could achieve and to imagine what you never imagined before. This education will prepare you for leadership in a rapidly changing and shrinking world. Embrace the challenge.

The students at lunch seven weeks ago told me to tell you that your professors at OWU will become some of the most important people you ever meet. They will be your teachers, they will be your mentors, they will be your friends, and at times they may even be your adversaries, but only because they want you to fulfill your great potential. Get to know them. They are our most treasured asset, and they are your most valuable resource.

Test your intellectual limits. Do not be constrained by what you have already considered or by what feels most comfortable. In your freshman year, take at least one class you really think you don’t want to take. It may become the most important class you ever take. And don’t be afraid to take the hard classes. You are here to get an education more than you are here to achieve a grade point average.

Get to know the people around you. Never again in life will you have the opportunity to live in such proximity with so many people whose life stories are so different from your own life story. Listen to those whose perspectives are different from your own. Consider

the possibility that another viewpoint may have a value you have never before considered. Allow yourself to ask new questions and to test old beliefs. If you emerge with those beliefs as they are tonight, you will be stronger than ever. If you emerge with a realignment of those beliefs, you will have discovered an even better way to understand the world and to order your life.

Join an organization. Join several organizations. Join at least one organization you thought you would never join. And along the way, think about starting a new organization. Collectively, your class will leave a mark that I cannot even imagine tonight. When you walk across the commencement stage in the spring of 2012, this campus will be a different place, in large measure because of the contributions you have made, including the organizations you have formed, the causes you have championed, and the passions you have pursued.

See the world. Your education begins in the classroom but extends far beyond the boundaries of this campus. Begin thinking now about where you will go. Whether it is an internship in Philadelphia through the Woltemade Center, a semester in our Wesleyan in Washington program, a summer in the science research program, a volunteer trip in a developing country, or a study-travel experience in a setting you have not yet imagined, begin thinking now about how you will round out your education.

Be responsible. Maybe this is my parental moment, but I owe it to you to remind you of the importance of responsible behavior and mature decisions. You will be presented all kinds of opportunities to make good decisions, and you may encounter opportunities to make decisions that have the potential to destroy you. Each year across the country, college campuses experience dreadful tragedies because of poor decisions, particularly related to alcohol. Be responsible. Manage well the new freedom that has been given to you. Understand that part of life in a community is responsibility for the well-being of those around you. Hold one another accountable. Expect the best from one another and expect the best from yourself. Know that we will expect the best from you and that we will hold you accountable as well. You have too much potential, and the world has too much need for that potential, for it to be squandered. In all things, be responsible.

Have fun. Tonight you are embarking on what may be the most exciting time of your life. Over the next four years, you will become friends with people who will nurture the rest of your life. Over the next four years, you will make decisions that will set your life journey, professionally, personally, and vocationally. The opportunity to spend four years at a residential college, where all dimensions of life—work and play, intellectual and social, reflective and active, material and spiritual—are bound together in a single place, is a rare privilege. Cherish the privilege and enjoy the ride. It could be the time of your life.

Finally, dream big, and think about what matters most. In the spring of 2012, when you receive your diploma, we want you to be able to say not that you accomplished everything you hoped to accomplish at OWU, but that you accomplished at OWU what you had never before dreamed you could accomplish. And we want you to be able to say that along the way you were challenged to think about what matters most to you, what values will order your lives, what work will give your life the most meaning, what life path will allow you to fulfill a calling to make the world a better place.

Over the past few weeks, I have had the opportunity to meet alumni from seven different decades. Many have attained the highest levels in their chosen occupations, as corporate and business leaders, educators, physicians, attorneys, public servants, research scientists, teachers, ministers, and community volunteers. But of even greater interest to me is the significance of the social contributions made by many of these people. In recent weeks I have met individuals who have built a school in Tanzania, built an orphanage in Haiti, and spent a year as a full-time volunteer teacher in a charter school in one of the nation's poorest cities. These are people who determined that their lives would make a difference.

As I met these people, I was reminded of the legacy of Branch Rickey, who as a player-coach at Ohio Wesleyan University witnessed the shocking indignity of a teammate's being denied a hotel room because of the color of the player's skin. Mr. Rickey returned to this campus and pledged that some day he would do something about this. And in 1947, long before *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* and long before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Branch Rickey opened the doors to America's pastime so that the courageous Jackie Robinson could break the color barrier in major league baseball. What did all of these people have in common? It is the experience of an education at Ohio Wesleyan University, where they were challenged to dream big, and where they dared to focus on those things that matter most. They believed that they had the capacity to make a difference, one life at a time. If you give us a chance, we will give you those same tools, so that when you leave this institution you can focus on making a difference, one life at a time. Dream big, and think about what matters most.

This summer I read Richard Russo's new novel, *Bridge of Sighs*. Set in a post-industrial village in upstate New York, the novel explores the extent to which we choose our own destinies versus the extent to which our lives are determined for us. The principal character, Lou Lynch, lives his entire life in that village, living basically as his father before him—and his son after him. His friend, Bobby Marconi, on the other hand, finishes high school, leaves the village, travels the world, and becomes a world-renowned artist, a vocation none of his high school classmates would have imagined. Reflecting on the path taken by his friend Bobby, Lou says, "Bobby alone, it seems to me, invented both a life and a self to live it."

Tonight, as you begin your four years here, you have the opportunity to invent a life and to discover the self who will live it. I can think of no greater adventure, and I can think of no better place. You join tens of thousands of students who have entered this institution, and you begin the journey that ultimately will place you alongside those who after four years on this campus went on to become leaders in every sector of our society and who set about making a difference, one life at a time. Congratulations on this great moment in your lives.

As you begin the journey on this day in this new era, we repeat the practice that began in 1842 and has continued each year as we welcome a new class and formally open the academic year with the ringing of the bell first rung 166 years ago. As I ring this historic bell, first used to call Ohio Wesleyan classes to order in 1842, please stand and join with me in singing the Alma Mater.