

Spring 5-25-1986

68th Commencement Address

James T. Wooten

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/commence>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Communications at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Commencement Addresses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

SPEECH BY JAMES T. WOOTEN, ABC NATIONAL CORRESPONDENT
AT 68TH COMMENCEMENT OF CONNECTICUT COLLEGE
MAY 25, 1986

President Ames, distinguished faculty, honored guests, I'm very pleased to celebrate with you this morning yet another milestone in the life of Connecticut College and its continuing commitment to excellence.

My fellow impoverished parents, I share with you the pride of our childrens' achievement today and breathe with you a collective sigh of relief. We, too, have perservered. We, too, have survived. We, too, have made it through!

And to the class of '86...my most sincere gratitude for asking me to be part of these moments in your lives. None of you can know, can even imagine, what a generous gift you have given me. I thank you. My family and I will treasure these memories forever.

This is not my maiden-voyage into the dangerous waters of commencement rhetoric.

Several years ago, my alma mater graciously invited me to address its graduates on the twentieth anniversary of my own rather miraculous escape from the same campus. Afterwards, a young woman in cap and gown, with new diploma in hand, approached me and said:

"That was a good speech, Mr. Wooten. I heard it four years ago when I finished high school, but I liked it much better today. It was shorter, I think. You must have left something out."

* * *

WOOTEN/2

History repeats itself today. This one will be even shorter. I intend to leave something out.

At any rate, it must be clear by now to those who have heard more than one commencement address -- and especially to those who have written and delivered more than one -- that there are probably no new ideas appropriate to the occasion.

What is more important, though, is that young people who've never heard one before, much less been asked to make one, already know more or less what to expect -- which might lead an intelligent person to wonder whether this sort of rhetorical exercise might not be a waste of time.

Except...that even though young people, like you, already are quite familiar with the ideas most appropriate to a morning like this, you probably don't have much confidence that they have practical application in the life you're about to launch.

That's where I come in. My job today is not to introduce you to new concepts, but to tell you that the ones you've already heard about have real meaning. Here are some of them that are important to me.

* * *

I thought perhaps I might advise you to have as many babies as you want, on the premise that over-population is not a problem the class of '86 could significantly exacerbate -- but in case I'm wrong, I don't want that on my conscience.

WOOTEN/3

I also considered telling you flatly that one of the things you damn well ought to do is stop watching television; it will turn your brain to cream of wheat and has little redeeming social value. But I won't say that lest it get back to my employer.

Sometimes, the world is not what it seems, but most of the time it is.

So, if you're not already a realist, learn to be one; otherwise, you will travel blind. Being a realist does not mean you cannot also be a romantic; it simply guarantees that you won't have your heart broken quite so often, unless of course, you enjoy that sort of trauma, in which case, you will have chosen stupidity as a primary value in your life. Which leads to my first rule: TRY TO AVOID BEING STUPID ON PURPOSE.

* * *

Also, please understand that it is possible to change the world, but in most cases only a little bit at a time -- and usually in such infinitesimal increments that '60 Minutes' will never notice.

So, if you're on your way to making a different world than the one we've given you -- which is an altogether noble pursuit -- please try to remember that it is not a one-semester project. Little things do mean a lot, but only a lot of little things.

Rule Two: IF YOU KNOW THIS TO BE TRUE, YOU WON'T QUIT AFTER A COUPLE OF WEEKS.

* * *

WOOTEN/4

Understand that next, pain and suffering in the world are reducible only to the greatest degree that an individual declines to cause pain and suffering.

There is, of course, the havoc wrought by what the church and the insurance companies both call "acts of God," -- storms, volcanic eruptions -- but most of the world's pain is a human product.

So, Rule Three: IF YOU ARE SERIOUSLY OFFENDED BY THE MISERY OF THE WORLD, DO NOT ADD TO IT.

* * *

And, in that same vein, Rule Four: DO NOT CAUSE PAIN AND SUFFERING TO YOUR SELF, BY DIRECTING YOUR LIFE TOWARD THAT WHICH YOU ALREADY KNOW IS UNSATISFACTORY.

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is discovering, in an on-going study, that thousands of college students are choosing business majors and subsequently business careers that do not match their personal interests. They are following their pocketbooks because following their hearts turns out to be bad economics. They are candidates for pain and suffering because they have swallowed the basic Yuppie myth of the '80's, which is this: Pursue a career that guarantees the sufficient cash income to underwrite an expensive life-style in an expensive home, with extensive travel and leisure, and an impressive estate for the kids.

I think not.

WOOTEN/5

Not simply get a job, but do something worthwhile that pleases you.

Not be successful, but be somebody with whom you can live at peace.

Not merely travel, but see the world and deal with it and change.

Not buy a nice house, but really live some place, and change it.

Not bequeath a large estate, but leave some trace of your soul behind.

And finally, a word of counsel about bugle blowers. Beware of them. Do not avoid personal patriotism, and always give your country your best. The more you travel, the more certain you will be that it is clearly the best that man has come up with so far. But beware of bugle blowers. I have seen many people die in eight countries on four continents and almost without exception, they have been young people, many of them no older than you, some of them heroes, most of them not -- but all of them without exception caught unextricably in some final fatal moment devised by others, older others.

Rule Five: BEWARE OF THOSE WHO OFFER YOU SOMETHING FOR WHICH TO DIE.

Consider the happy possibilities of discovering that for which you can joyfully live.

Thank you.