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Kevin Dunn
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Commencement 2008 Address

Kevin Dunn

Good afternoon President and Mrs. Wilson, distinguished faculty, honorable guests, administration, alumni, and friends, and any assorted riffraff who may have wandered into the campus. I'd like to start by extending my congratulations to the 2008 graduating class of Illinois Wesleyan University, and to thank you all from the bottom of my heart for giving me this tremendous honor and opportunity to address you on this very important and joyous day. They say that time flies. Today, I'd have to agree, seeing as it was 31 years ago that I sat in your place, filled with conflicting emotions of great joy and a fair amount of sadness facing the end of my collegiate life.

On the first day I received word of this generous request to speak to you on this special occasion, I felt a bit shocked, very grateful, extremely flattered, and most proud to have been selected by the graduates and governors to deliver this address at my beloved alma mater. On that same night, as I drifted off to sleep, I began to dream of this soon-to-be memorable day. In this dream I found myself up on a stage in the midst of my address, the graduates were approaching the stage and in addition to receiving their degrees they were each given a bright green baseball, and it then became apparent to me that no one in particular was paying much attention to what I was saying. I then realized that I was looking through a metal cage. I glanced down and saw that I was seated on a small stool perched above a tank of murky water. As the graduates passed before me they stepped up and hurled the green projectiles toward a small, red target just to my left. They hurled a few insults my way, as well. The first few missed the target so I began plowing through my speech, desperately trying to finish, when suddenly one of the balls hit its mark. There was a roar from the crowd as the stool gave way and I plunged into the cold grey water and descended into the depths still speaking, entangled in my robe ... and I awoke in a cold sweat.

The uplifting emotions I that felt earlier that day had been rudely snatched from me and now I was left alone in the dark to wrestle with feelings quite altogether different ... abject and utter terror. Yes, terror. And it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure this dream out.

You see, as an actor, my entire career has been forged on committing to memory the words of oftentimes brilliant screen and television writers, and merely repeating them on cue, in front of a camera as if they suddenly appeared off the top my head, as if I had created them myself, that I owned them. Now I was being called upon to send the 2008 graduating class of Illinois Wesleyan University out into the world with fifteen minutes of eloquent, uplifting and stirring oratory that would dwell in their hearts for years to come. What was I getting myself into? No sooner had these feelings of terror which had now percolated down to the pit of my stomach begun to subside, I now came face to face with a new and equally unsettling slate of angst rendering revelations of inadequacy, shame, embarrassment, and guilt had now claimed their place. "You're a fraud!" my conscience barked. "Never in your sorry life have you ever headed up the FBI, put a deranged killer behind bars, sailed an uncharted course for the New World, advised a United States President, or rid the world of a ferocious oversized lizard. No, none of that was you. You only "played" these parts in movies and on TV. What gives you the right to address our future doctors, lawyers, scientists, artists, titans of business and industry who are, in reality, going to be the ones called upon to save this dying planet? And if memory serves, Mr. Dunn, you probably spent more time in front of a pitcher of beer at this university than in front of a book." Harsh words from my conscience.

It took me only about a day to decide that I desperately needed to devise a way out of all this. I came up with a plan. I would simply phone President Wilson, and, after expressing my heartfelt gratitude and regret, offer some grandiose excuse: a grueling three-month shoot in some exotic location on a movie that would only go straight to video, in Chad. That may work. Or perhaps I had developed a deadly allergy to pollens found only in Central Illinois, during the month of May. That may not work. As I continued to mull over this less than graceful exit strategy, my mind began to fill with fond memories of my days at Illinois Wesleyan way back in the '70s. Vivid memories. Memories of freedom, of camaraderie, of invulnerability, an endless stream of pranks, impromptu parties, cramming for exams. Late nights at the theatre, building sets, rigging flies, hanging lights. Performing in plays on the McPherson stage, wildly cheering Jack Sikma and the rest of Dennie Bridges' fighting Titans as they stormed through the league. Surviving on nickel burgers at Burger Chef and dime beers at the Metropole. And serving up mystery meals at the Sig House.

All of these sweet memories reminded me that it was here, on this little island of about two thousand people, in the midst of the fertile fields of Central Illinois, that the seeds were sewn which gave breath to the soul of my life's pursuit. So, despite my nagging fears and feelings of unworthiness, I decided that I must be here today, not only because it would it be an act of cowardice to refuse such a generous request -- it's not every day you're invited to give a Commencement address at your alma mater, and to receive an honorary degree, to boot -- but how could I insult the very institution that gave me the tools necessary to pursue my craft, and my dream? Because if it weren't for this University and its faculty, my future could have turned out much differently.

During the summer of my junior year, my usual summer job on the roofs of a Caterpillar plant failed to materialize. My father had lost his job when his company fell victim to a corporate takeover, and his position was given to someone who had come in with the new corporate ownership. So, disappointedly, it looked as if my senior year would have to be at least postponed, until I could make enough money to finish my studies. A high school friend of mine who worked for the railroad said he could get me a job, fixing rail cars. It paid pretty well, so I thought I'd do it for a year and then I'd return to finish school.

So, on a scorching July day I made the drive down to Wesleyan to meet face to face with Dr. John Ficca, who headed the theatre department, and was always an important advisor and confidant during my time at Wesleyan. As I walked through campus on my way to our meeting at the DugOut, I was overcome with sadness. This was my home for three years, and I truly loved it. The prospect of leaving it prematurely was almost unbearable to me, yet I felt I had no other choice. I sat down with Dr. Ficca, and awash with sorrow, informed him that I was unable to return for my senior year, but I would come back after a year, after I saved some money, and finish my studies.

Dr. Ficca listened, intently, with an occasional nod as I told my story, and after what seemed to be an eternity, he told me this. "If you leave school now, sport, you won't come back. You'll be out in the world making money and in no time at all this will seem like a distant memory. And years from now you'll look back on your decision and wonder if you ever could have succeeded in becoming an actor." He then reminded me of the upcoming season and the chances I had to play some choice rolls in some of the productions, and of the hope he had of seeing me succeed in a profession that required a great deal of fortitude and determination. We sat there in silence for a few minutes, I really had no idea of how to respond, and then Dr. Ficca offered me a proposal. If he could secure me the job of running the scene shop, which paid about 250 dollars a month, would it be enough for me to reconsider finishing my education. Of course, 250 dollars a month couldn't cover my living expenses as well as my tuition, but I found this proposal from Dr. Ficca to be a question requiring only one answer. In the words of the immortal Don Corleone, I think he was "making me an offer that I couldn't refuse." And that was that. The burden was swiftly lifted off my shoulders, and from that moment on I never doubted what my path would be. I returned to school in the fall, and it was the busiest, most fulfilling year of my academic life. And although I was always behind on my tuition, the administration never held back my 250-dollar check. So I owe a great deal to this University and to my mentor, Dr. Ficca, and to the many faculty members whose knowledge, sound assistance and encouragement enabled me to pursue my path to the future.

In addition to getting me through school, my job as the scene shop foreman also sustained me well beyond my college days. After college, I built many a set for theatre companies in Chicago, and I was later hired as a carpenter, by a contractor who had a soft spot in his heart for actors. I learned how to rehab old brownstones on the city's north side, and I was given the latitude to rehearse and perform eight shows a week while I could still swing a hammer during the day. And again in 1990, three years after moving to Southern California, my wife Katina and I purchased a 100-year-old tear-down in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, the only house we could afford out in Southern California, and we began the next 10 years of reconstructing the house. So while other actors were waiting for the phone to ring, I had walls to build, plumbing and electricity to install, concrete to pour and footings to dig. But if it weren't for that old house, and a very patient wife, I don't know if I could have survived in that super-competitive world known as Los Angeles. That old house was my therapy, my shrink, my way to channel the frustration that came from the constant rejections that came with the territory. And, fortunately, over time, I managed to have some successes as well.

When I met Katina in Chicago in 1985, she was a hard-driving journalist who was then writing for the Southtown Economist and the Chicago Reader. Katina nailed down a job out at the Orange County Register, which allowed us to make the move out to the West Coast, and it also gave me the opportunity to pursue an acting job without having a side job. Katina had a few rituals, which I found to be very useful in life

and that we've practiced for years. Whenever she was down to her last 50 dollars or so, she would spend the last remaining dollars on a bottle of Veuve Clicqout. I found this very rewarding; instead of worrying about your present condition of poverty you, instead, cracked open a bottle of great champagne to celebrate being broke. Kat had also one other ritual – maybe it was a condition – and that was no matter how great the part or how badly I coveted it, or how many callbacks it took, if I didn't get it, I was never allowed to mope about it for more than 24 hours. So if I didn't get if out of my system in a day, in our house, there was no sympathy to be had. Period.

In August of 1992, our son Jack was born. Since Kat and I were both in our upper 30s -- maybe I should just be speaking for myself, sorry -- we felt one child would be just fine. The prospect of having any more children after Jack conjured up images of kids at the baseball diamond calling me gramps and having to play wheelchair basketball with any additional offspring. Jack is now a sophomore in high school, only two years away from leaving the nest for college. And, although he's a fine student, a fine drummer, a good athlete, and a pretty great guy, I've been spending a lot of time lately worrying about what the world will be able to offer him when he, like all of you here today, leaves college to join the ranks of working America. Those same concerns and fears that keep me awake some nights, thinking about his future, I share with all young people today who are faced upon entering this uncertain world, and I share them with all of you here today who are now about to make the transition from student life to staking your claim in society.

Our world, our country is changing at a faster rate than at any time in our history. I certainly don't need to inform you of the ecological peril which threatens our climate, our agriculture, our oceans, the delicate balance of millions of species with whom we share a fragile existence. Most of you probably possess much more information about these circumstances than I do. What concerns me most about this global predicament is that the leaders of our nation, the richest country in the world, don't seem to have much interest or sense of urgency in joining in with the many government forces around the world who are willing to step up to the plate and use the vast array of existing technology and research that could begin to halt the devastating effects that threaten our very existence. Many of you here today have been preparing yourselves to take on these very challenges, yet without the collective will of our government to prioritize the need to seriously address these urgent problems, there may not be enough opportunities available for you to pursue.

We now live in a nation where corporate executives are paid tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars to figure out ways to cut the costs of their companies to the bone in order to create profit. And it's not profit to be shared with the workers who supply them with the goods and services needed for those companies to prosper; the bottom line now is about shareholder profit and their own obscene compensation. The less they pay their workers, the less benefits they provide for them and their families, the more profit they create for a select group of shareholders and themselves. Retiring employees who have given years of their working lives to a particular company are now informed that the money they invested in pensions during their working lives just simply no longer exists. Small businesses have the near-impossible task of affording the prohibitive costs of insuring their workers. And some of the lawmakers that we have elected to protect the rights of their constituents have, instead, abandoned them in favor of corporate dollars to fill their campaign war chests so they can keep up with the spiraling costs it takes to stay in office. These are some of the harsh realities facing you upon entering your post-collegiate lives.

Our country has now become the largest debtor nation in the world, mired in an astonishing three trillion dollars in foreign loans, a debt that, through no fault of your own, will be bourn by your generation. The five-year conflict in Iraq has cost us nearly one trillion dollars and continues on at a cost of nearly one billion dollars a week. This debt will also be saddled by your generation. Sadly, on March 23rd of this year, the number of U.S. service members killed in Iraq reached 4,000, 25 more have died in the two weeks following. And sadder still, in a national survey only 20 percent of those polled were even aware of that tragic milestone. Over 30,000 of our American soldiers have been seriously wounded and, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins, the number of Iraqis killed as of July of 2006 stands at over 600,000.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable problems and troubles which now face us, I see in your generation great hope for the winds of change. More news is now disseminated on the Internet than ever before because this generation has developed an unquenchable thirst for disparate points of view, and different sources of information, and this search to find the truth has created an audible rumble across this nation. More young people in their twenties have registered to vote than at any time in recent history. This new generation is waking up to give answer to a new call to arms, and we as a nation in desperate need of a great infusion of activism in this country and in this world are awakening to its sound. Our uncertain future is

now being placed into your waiting hands. And with great anticipation, with great expectation, we call on you to seize it with the vigor, compassion, fortitude, and grace that only your generation can provide. Democracy is a form of government that can only exist with actual participation. Without participation, it's just another word.

I'd like to close with a passage from Shakespeare's "Henry V," where the King rallies his ragged troops, who were greatly outnumbered on the fields of Agincourt, as they prepare for battle.

"*If we are marked to die, we are enow*

To do our country loss; and if to live,

The fewer men, the greater share of honour.

God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,

Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;

It yearns me not if men my garments wear;

Such outward things dwell not in my desires.

But if it be a sin to covet honour,

I am the most offending soul alive.

No, faith, my coz, wish not a man from England:

God's peace! I would not lose so great an honour

As one man more methinks, would share from me

For the best hope I have. O, do not wish one more!

Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,

That he which hath no stomach to this fight,

Let him depart; his passport shall be made,

And crowns for convoy put into his purse:

We would not die in that man's company

That fears his fellowship to die with us.

This day is called the feast of Crispian:

He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,

Will stand a tiptoe when this day is named,

And rouse him at the name of Crispian.

He that shall live this day, and see old age,

Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbors,

And say "Tomorrow is Saint Crispian:

Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,

And say "These wounds I had on Crispian's Day."

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,

But he'll remember, with advantages,

What feats he did that day: Then shall our names,

Familiar in his mouth as household words,

Harry the King, Bedford, and Exeter,

Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester --

Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.

This story shall the good man teach his son;

And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,

From this day to the end of the world,

But we in it shall be remembred;

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;

For he today that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,

This day shall gentle his condition;

And gentlemen in England now a-bed

Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,

And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks

That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

To the graduates of Illinois Wesleyan University, their families, President and Mrs. Wilson, guests, my congratulations and thanks, for allowing me to be with you on this wonderful day. Thank you.