

Protect Your Reputation Before It Exists

*To be a solid, reliable pillar of the community when you're 50, start now, noted columnist urges graduates.**

** (And no one yelled "Bingo!")*

Nationally syndicated Washington Post columnist William J. Raspberry delivered this year's Commencement address at the College on June 9 and was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree. Raspberry, who joined the Post in 1962, held a variety of positions there before beginning his urban affairs column in 1966. From 1956-60, he was a reporter, photographer, and editor for the Indianapolis Recorder. He also has served as instructor of journalism at Howard University (1971-73) and variously as reporter, moderator, or commentator for numerous Washington television stations. Born in Okolona, Miss., in 1935, Raspberry has a bachelor of arts degree from Indiana Central College. The following is the text of the address he delivered at Kalamazoo College:



William J. Raspberry

I am more than slightly embarrassed to tell you that I came very close to declining your invitation to be here today. It isn't that I'm insensitive to the honor you have extended me. To be asked to be a commencement speaker at any institution is one of the high honors that an institution can offer. To offer the honorary doctorate makes it all the more appealing and to have the invitation come from a truly fine institution like Kalamazoo College makes it very special indeed.

So it's not from want of appreciation that I considered declining the invitation, **nor am I going to get all floppy and sappy and tell you that I don't deserve the honor.** Maybe I don't, but I'm fully willing, even eager, to defer to your more objective judgment. No, the reason I thought seriously about not coming is for a reason that is altogether unserious; I'd better explain that one.

A couple of years ago, the Sunday magazine of the

Washington Post ran a frivolous little piece on commencements—college commencements. The writer, looking for an off-beat way to mark the graduation season, and lacking the wit and energy to do anything serious, settled for a short piece in which he attacked commencement speeches. Silly pomposities, he called them, that no one wants to hear, least of all the graduates, who only want to get the diploma, get out, and get crazy.

Well, that's not an uncommon view of commencements and it's shared, in fact, by most commencement speakers. And if that was all there was to it, I'd have snapped up your invitation without a moment's hesitation. But that wasn't all. Here's the rest of it.

Accompanying that snide little article was a picture of a Bingo card, the center marked "Cliche-free Zone," and the other 24 squares containing commencement



Members of the Kalamazoo College graduating class of 1990

speech cliches. You know them: "This is not the end but truly a commencement; The friendships you made here. . . : If your education ends now your education has failed; You have been given much—now you must give something back; As John F. Kennedy told an earlier generation, Ask not. . ." And on it went, including the quote the speaker's secretary had dug out of a Bartlett's and the obligatory joke about high tuitions and broke parents.

And here was the writer's truly fiendish idea:

Members of the audience would be given these cards and instructed to cross off each cliché as it was uttered. When anyone got five in a row, vertical, horizontal or diagonal, he was to stand up and yell, "Bingo!" But get this, but since everybody would have the same card, at some point during the speaker's somber and inspirational message, the whole damn room would stand up and yell, "Bingo!" ... Since the day that piece appeared, Sunday, May 22, 1988—I have been afraid to death of making commencement speeches.

My first reaction, of course, was to tell myself that, as a writer of some experience and insight, I could surely avoid the clichés, or at least avoid enough of them to prevent giving anybody five in a row. But the more I thought about it, the more it became clear that it is impossible to make a commencement speech without resort to clichés.

Commencements are clichés. Commencement speakers are invited because of their relative success in the outside world, and it is natural to expect them to offer some clues as to how they achieved that success. But the advice must necessarily be general. You wouldn't expect a surgeon who was addressing your class to tell you in detail the process by which he first diagnosed and then removed a troublesome gallbladder. You wouldn't expect a prominent architect to describe how he managed to design a new office building in a

regentrified section of Kalamazoo without either copying the existing spot or clashing with it.

And you don't expect me to tell you how to write leads or conduct interviews. You expect your speakers to talk about life and duty and dedication in general terms. In other words, you virtually demand clichés. And I stand here dreading a chorus of "Bingos!"

I think there is a way out of our mutual dilemma, and here it is: I propose to let you compose your own commencement speech. I'll give you a little help—I know you've gotten used to that from your professors—so I'll give you a couple of ideas. I don't want to tie you up too long on this—you're not going to pay much attention to what I say, anyway. You've earned the right not to pay much attention to what anybody says today, but put your minds

to work long enough to contemplate these two questions which I propose, as a sort of theme for your own commencement speech.

One, what will you be doing when you're my age?
Two, how will you be thought of when you're my age?
What will you be doing? Don't be embarrassed; the answer to that one is a simple: "I don't know." Apart from that minority of you who will graduate from such trade schools as medicine, law or engineering, most of you will, by the time you are my age, be doing something utterly unrelated to your college major.

It does not mean that your careers, your years at Kalamazoo

College, will have been a waste; it means only that their value will consist primarily of the generalized information we call liberal arts. What your college education will have given you is some place to stand while you figure out where to go. Take the word of someone whose college major was, at various times, English, history, and mathematics before I became a pre-seminarian.

It's all right that you don't know for sure what your career will be. You don't really need to know now what you will be doing 10, or 15, or 25 years down the road. And even if you wanted to know, you couldn't. Things are changing too fast for that. Time doesn't always make ancient good uncouth, but it regularly renders ancient majors irrelevant.

Talk to your professors, talk to your role models, talk to the people whose success you admire in your home communities and ask them what they majored in. The

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chances are that their majors have as little connection with their careers as my long-ago math major has to do with my career in journalism.

It's not likely to be much different for you. Some of you will wind up in careers that have nothing to do with your majors because you simply cannot know at age 21 or 23 what you will want to be doing at age 40. Some of you will switch because you find your chosen careers unrewarding or obsolescent. And some of you will wind up in fields that don't even exist now. The career possibilities that will be introduced by such technologies as space exploration and microchips and recombinant DNA are unknown and unknowable. You cannot possibly get ready for them in any specific way.

I only hope that during your years at Kalamazoo College, you've learned the art of flexibility—willingness to stay loose, to recognize opportunity when it comes along, even if it bears no observable relationship to your major. But if you could manage only an uncertain answer to my first question, "What will you be doing when you are my age?" perhaps you can do a little better with the second: "How will you be thought of when you're my age?"

We take you back to my earliest days at the Washington Post when I was assigned to the obit desk. You know about obituaries; the thing about them is that they summarize a person's entire life in a few paragraphs, or if they're truly famous, in a column. The whole schmeer gets stuffed down and compressed into several paragraphs, and the lead pretty much tells it all—the first paragraph.

Imagine for a moment that you are writing your own obituary. What will the lead sentence say, that summary sentence? "Joseph Q. Dokes, who earned \$60,000 a year and drove a BMW, died yesterday." No. "Mary Doe, who recently acquired her third expensive fur, succumbed on Thursday to" No. "Richard Roe, who died on Tuesday, had a really nice home and frequently vacationed abroad." No.

There is nothing wrong with good salaries, or furs, or expensive cars, but that's not how you want to be remembered. All of us want to be remembered, not for our incomes or our expenditures, but for our contributions. And we do intend to contribute, don't we? Maybe even to become famous philanthropists. . . but later. Right now, we have other fish to fry.

Well let me remind you that "later" is too late to begin fashioning your reputation, writing your obituary. If you want to be remembered as a solid, reliable pillar of your community when you're 50, you can't be an irresponsible corner-cutting explorer at age 25. Building

your reputation, determining how you will be thought of, has more to do with ordinary behavior than with career planning. It's like the 90-year-old man you heard about, hard-drinking, chain-smoking, old geezer who was heard to say to a friend, "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself."

It's not all that funny. If Michael Milken, the junk bond artist, had known that his \$500 million a year salary wouldn't keep him out of jail, he might have taken better care of himself. If Marion Barry had known that one day he would be at the pinnacle of political power in the nation's capital, and the next day hoping for a hung jury to keep him there, he might have taken better care of himself. If Vanessa Williams—remember her?—had known that she would one day be Miss America, she might have taken better care of herself. The point is, you don't know what strange and wonderful opportunities will fall your way, so take care of yourself anyway. The time to worry about protecting your reputation is before you have one.

I don't want to hold you too long—you've got more important things to do—but I do want to say one more thing before I turn you over to the real world. Your generation has been taught by us oldsters to measure the worth of your education in dollars. Well, we taught you wrong. Money is important, and I hope you will manage to accumulate a fair amount of it. But the pursuit of money for its own sake, competition for the fruits of affluence, can only turn you into something you don't really want to be. It may make you rich, but it won't make you happy.

So let me suggest another kind of competition. Let me urge you to compete not primarily for dollars, but in terms of your contributions to the general good of the society. I don't know how to say it without making it sound like a sermon, but your best shot at happiness, self-worth, and personal satisfaction—the things that constitute real happiness, real success—is not in earning as much as you can, but in performing as well as you can something that you know to be worthwhile.

Whether that is healing the sick, giving hope to the hopeless, lifting a race to greater heights, teaching the little ones or adding to the beauty of the world, I can't tell you. Your own talents, inclinations, and ideals are your best guide. But do it, do something, build on what you gained here at Kalamazoo, learn to recognize opportunity when it comes your way, make your parents and families proud of you and, "Bingo!"

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