

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY PAUL E. TSONGAS

What is my purpose here today?

One, obviously, is to observe that you are young and you are bright and you are accomplished. And we do that with joy. Secondly: to recognize the remarkable contributions and support of your family and friends.

You will find that your appreciation for your parents will grow with time. The older you get, the more you appreciate what they have done for you, especially someday when you yourself are a parent.

My task is to draw from my own personal life, as well as take whatever value there may be in that experience and pass it on to you for your consideration.

So where are we going to find philosophy? Well, clearly, you will find it in the classics, religious leaders--gurus, if you will--and theologians and you've spent time reading them. But you can find purpose anywhere; even in the Sunday newspapers; and even in the comic strips. Take Peanuts, the comic strip that runs in many American newspapers.

In one Peanuts cartoon, Lucy turns to Charlie Brown and says, "Charlie Brown, there are two kinds of people in this world, those who take their deck chair and face it in the direction that they are going, and those that take their deck chair and face it where they have been. What I want to know, Charlie Brown, is: in which direction are you going to point your deck chair?"

To which Charlie Brown replied, "I can't even get mine "open."

Yes, there will be lots of thrashing around in the undergrowth in the years ahead of you. There will be lots of questions. But there will, however, be some constants. And one of them will be the law of averages.

The fact is, some of you will live long lives, and others of you will not be so fortunate. Some of you will receive great notice, and others of you will not. Some of you will learn the joys of loving and cherish that. Others of you will choose not to. Some of you will be honored, some of you respected, all of you loved.

Some may live a life of peace on a farm in Vermont. Someone may write the great American novel. And some may even get indicted to add some charm to all the success.

But it is not fascinating to recognize that the law of averages will have the same effect on your class as it did on mine. What is fascinating is that no one can say who will do what and what is out there.

So what is out there? Does it make a difference? Or, to put it another way, who cares?

Generally, caring is nice, but the fact is, millions of people have come and gone who spend their total life unaware of, and insensitive to, the world around them. Right now, while I am talking, a child is dying of starvation in Somalia, another in Campucha, and another in East Timor. This reality will touch some people, and they will devote their lives to trying somehow to pursue world justice. But most people will simply not be affected.

There is, however, one issue that touches everyone, leaving no one the option of apathy. That is the specter of nuclear war.

In my home state of Massachusetts, Cardinal Medeiros delivered a message last year. Let me read a part of it:

"The horrors of nuclear war are widely known. When all-out nuclear exchange occurs then countless millions will be destroyed by blast, fires, and radiation within hours. Millions more will die from global contamination, disease, and starvation."

The issue of nuclear war, of all the issues, is singly depressing. So why raise it on a day like this, at a time like this? Why not say that everything is just fine?

If I did, knowing what I know from my work on the Foreign Relations Committee, I would be like the farmer who was in an automobile accident and who sued the other party for damages.

When the case came to trial the attorney for the other side put the farmer on the stand, and he said to the farmer, "At the time of the accident a state trooper arrived in the scene and you said to him, 'I feel fine.' Did you say that?"

The farmer said, "Well, I guess I did."

"Well," said the attorney, "How can you then sue for damages?"

"Well," said the farmer, "Look. I was driving down the road in my pickup and I had my cow in the back of my truck. Your client came across the center strip, hit me broadside, and both I and my cow went flying to the side of the road very badly hurt."

"The state trooper arrived on the scene, went over to my cow, said, 'This cow is in terrible shape,' took out his revolver: BANG, right between the eyes."

"He said to me, 'How do you feel?' and I said, 'I feel fine.'"

The fact is, everything is not fine. My job, simply, is to point that out.

The reality is that, if the arrangements could be made, I could take you hand in hand to the Soviet Union. And I could take you to a place and allow you to take your hand and put it on a warhead. An existent nuclear warhead. That warhead is already made. It's already on the missile. That missile is already targeted. And should it ever fly, it will destroy you.

I didn't make that warhead, but it's there. It is in a world that you have inherited.

At Hiroshima I was four years old. I had nothing to do with it. But there was the world that was given to me by the times and circumstances, as today it is your world.

Most of you are more than 20 years younger than I and, therefore, you have 20 reasons more than I do to care deeply about this issue. I have traveled most of this world. I have done what I have wanted to do professionally, and I have watched my three children be born into this world.

That is all before you. If all goes wrong, then what are you going to do? You will have 15 minutes to contemplate the rest of your life. And what will you do? Will you get angry? Now is the time to feel the anger-- yes, at me for robbing you of some of the carefreeness of this occasion.

That is fine. But eventually it's your world, too. And it's your society and it's your system. And by your knowledge of it, you must take on responsibilities.

That is what graduation is all about. But what it means, above all, is that you have to believe that you have a chance to change it. There

are a lot of changes that have to take place, some of them nearby in your own communities. But it goes beyond that to the great national and international issues.

It is very hard to graduate and believe you can actually go out and make a difference. You have to have faith that you can, like the fellow from Massachusetts who went to see the Grand Canyon. You know we don't have anything quite like that in Massachusetts. And he went to this precipice that was 5,000 feet straight down. And he was so awed by it he tripped and over he went.

Fortunately there was a tree growing about 30 feet below the rim and he managed to grab it on the way down. He was hanging there and getting very tired.

Eventually he cried out in desperation, "Is there anyone up there?"

After much silence a voice said, "I am here. I am the Lord."

The fellow said, "Well, thank God you are here, God. Could you please help me?"

The Lord said, "I can help you if you have faith in me. Do you believe in me?"

The fellow said, "Well, of course, I believe in you, God. But could you hurry up because my fingers are slipping."

And the Lord said, "Do you truly believe?"

The man said, "I truly believe."

The Lord said, "All right then, I will help you. To demonstrate your faith in me, let go..."

The fellow thought for a moment and cried out, "Is there anybody else up there?"

There is nobody else up there on these great issues. And I plead with you to be involved with the issue of our time. For your sake, obviously, but for my sake as well--but most of all for the sake of my three daughters, the oldest of who is nine and will depend on you, as it turns out, not on me. To give them a chance to live their lives in peace and to grow up, and to graduate, and to experience the fullness of life.

I wish you all Godspeed.

Thank you very much.