

Commencement Address:
PERSPECTIVES FROM A LIFE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Thank you, President Habuki. Greetings to today's honored guests, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, proud parents, families and friends, and most particularly, members of the Class of 2006! Good morning!

It is indeed my great pleasure, my honor really, to join my friends at Soka University on this wonderful occasion. Our two institutions, the University of Delaware and Soka University, have a long and very special relationship that stems from a special relationship that developed through scholarly pursuits and spread to the two administrations and to the institutions themselves.

The University of Delaware's initial connection with Soka University was established by the late David L. Norton, a professor of philosophy who was a scholar of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the founder of Soka Gakkai. One of Professor Norton's books, titled *Democracy and Moral Education*, was translated into

Japanese, in part by Hirotaka Kato, a professor at Soka University in Japan, who spent a month on our campus with his wife.

After the death of Professor Norton in 1995, the relationship between the two institutions was solidified as Soka Gakkai International President Daisaku Ikeda established a memorial fund that supports an annual Norton Lecture at the University of Delaware. The lecture reflects Professor Norton's life and interests, focusing on the nature and relevance of interdisciplinary humanities study.

The University of Delaware, in turn, initiated a program in which two students from Soka University are in residence at our University each year, and two students from UD are provided opportunities to study at Soka University in Japan.

In 1999, I was honored to receive an honorary doctorate from Soka University in Japan, and in 2000,

I was equally honored to present Daisaku Ikeda an honorary doctor of humane letters degree from the University of Delaware during a ceremony in Tokyo.

So, as you can see, the relationship between our institutions has been rewarding on many levels. In fact, our two institutions even share the same school colors. Yours are blue, white and gold. Ours are simply blue and gold. Of course, your choice of mascot—the mighty Lion—is somewhat more fearsome than our mascot, the Fightin’ Blue Hen, but, I hasten to add, our mascot is fierce in its own way!

I have had the pleasure to visit your beautiful campus several times over the past few years, so it is a special honor to have been invited to address you on your last official day at Soka University. Of course, this presents me with a special challenge, since my remarks today may be your very last college lecture. But, you can relax. There's no need to take notes—there will be no quiz.

Standing here, it is only natural for me to reflect both on my own days in college and on what has been a long and fulfilling career in higher education.

As a young college student, I attended night school at the University of Pittsburgh while working for the Westinghouse Corporation. My commute was 85 miles per day. I later was able to transfer to West Chester University, located in a lovely community near Philadelphia, where lush green trees line quiet streets and the downtown features historic brick buildings. And I lived on campus and left my automobile at home.

When I first stepped on that campus—and I am sure many of you felt the same on your first day as students here at Soka—I was struck by both the beauty of the place and the limitless opportunities it afforded.

I treasure the memories of my college days—days that gave me the luxury of exploring many areas of learning, while charting my own path in the world. I am thankful for a system of higher education that provides such a rich and stimulating environment.

When I arrived on that campus, I had no clear academic goal in mind—certainly becoming a university president was not an objective at that point in my life. I had always had a facility for mathematics, so that first day I wandered over to the mathematics department. There I found a wonderful mentor and friend in a gentleman and scholar named Albert E. Filano.

Al Filano turned out to be one of the most lively and knowledgeable teachers of mathematics one could ever hope to know. I have never understood why, but Prof. Filano took a genuine interest in me, and he took it upon himself to help guide me through college at

West Chester and, eventually, on to graduate school at Duke University.

I took a course from Prof. Filano every semester I was enrolled at West Chester. In fact, the only time I didn't take one of his courses was the semester I took two of his courses.

He taught me many things about mathematics, about teaching, and about life. And, as with all great teachers, his influence has extended far beyond my undergraduate days.

In graduate school at Duke, for example, I had a teaching assistantship in mathematics. The night before I was to teach my first class, I remember pacing and worrying about how I would present both myself and the lesson to the students that next morning.

Then, I thought of Prof. Filano, and I asked myself how would he teach the class? I patterned my lecture

after his, and albeit a poor imitation, I was on my way as a teacher.

Of course, one thing leads to another in this life, and Prof. Filano's teaching style, which I adopted, also affected those students I taught. In one of my classes at Duke, I was privileged to meet the woman I eventually would marry, and as I think about it now, I wonder if, in fact, she was attracted to me or to the teaching style of Al Filano.

Through the course of the next several years, I was fortunate enough to teach and serve in the administration of several fine institutions: the University of Maryland, Louisiana State University and Virginia Tech. I was later named president of the University of Kentucky in 1987, and in 1990 moved to my present position as president of the University of Delaware.

Since my first day on campus as a student at West Chester University those many years ago, much in higher education has changed.

Then, we had rotary telephones, one to each dormitory hallway, if we were lucky. Today, each and every student, faculty member and administrator carries with them the ubiquitous cell phone, many of which now include their own miniature cameras. And, judging by the fact that our University of Delaware students pour out of classrooms and immediately dial up friends, I have to conclude that their courses are so stimulating that they feel compelled to share details of their exciting classes immediately.

The blackberry, once a symbol of summer ripeness, has a new meaning now as the accessory of choice—linking us to friends, family, e-mail accounts, and information from around the world. And sometimes that is a good thing.

Since my time as an undergraduate, we have gone from black and white televisions, with few shows worth watching, to flat-screen, high-definition televisions with wrap-around sound, still with few shows worth watching.

Then, scientific research was on the macro scale. Today, we are conducting scientific inquiry on the nanoscale—using instruments and high-speed computers that were once only the dreams of science fiction writers.

The web we learned about in those days was in our entomology classes. Today, the World Wide Web has become an essential part of our lives, providing faculty and students a wealth of opportunities to learn, to study and to communicate.

And yet, as much as I know things have changed over time, I do not really have a sense that I am growing older. That I attribute to the wonderful opportunity I

have had to spend my adult life working on college campuses.

The focus of my every day relates in some way to the educational needs and goals of individuals largely between the ages of 18-25. Classes come and go, but we faculty, staff and administrators are always working with a group of young people who are involved in shaping their futures and achieving their dreams. Their energy, enthusiasm, creativity and sense of wonder are truly invigorating and contagious. The college campus is, I believe, as close as we can come to a fountain of youth.

And, indeed, while much in the world of higher education has changed, much remains the same. Two things in particular stand out for me: the value of education and knowledge, and the formation of lasting relationships.

Education does make a difference in the lives of individuals and in our culture. It is education that enables us to communicate effectively, to bridge cultures, to share, celebrate and delight in the human experience.

The transformation of the individual from a citizen of a town or region to a citizen of the world is proof of the power and value of education. Discovering the limitless possibilities of our existence ensures that the truly educated person never stops learning.

And then, there are the wonderful relationships. I hope that all of you have had a mentor such as I had with Al Filano. And, I have since learned that serving as a mentor to others is an equally powerful experience. It turns out that the mentor relationship is doubly rewarding—mentors not only teach, in fact they also learn from those they mentor.

As president of the University of Delaware, I've played host to 32 Commencement ceremonies (we

have two each year), awarding 70,000 degrees. And I have heard many speakers share their thoughts on what the graduates should do next. No commencement speech would be complete without some witty advice and a few quotes from learned scholars and philosophers, and I will not break with tradition.

One of my favorite American philosophers is the National Baseball Hall of Fame catcher, Yogi Berra. His quotations have received as much or more attention as his baseball accomplishments. For instance, Yogi advised us to “always go to other people’s funerals; otherwise they won’t come to yours.” And he said, “I am not going to buy my kid an encyclopedia. Let him walk to school like I did.”

Yogi was, if nothing else, a man of direction. He once said, "If you don't know where you are going, you might not get there."

And he also said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

As to the first, I am sure each of you knew exactly where you were going when you stepped on this campus as freshmen—well, perhaps not.

Certainly, some lucky few had a clear sense of direction, but for many the experience of higher education was a path of exploration unto itself. Many of you, I am certain, have wound up somewhere else from where you expected, as a student and as a human being. And that is not a bad thing.

You opened yourself to the many opportunities higher education provided and, when you came to a fork in the road, you took it.

My hope is that you will carry the experience of higher education into the world around you, and that you will continue to open yourself to experiences that can shape your path and your life.

The other quotation I bring to you today comes from a Commencement ceremony at the University of Delaware when our speaker was distinguished historian David McCullough. As you leave the academic world behind, it is not uncommon to be told, "Welcome to the real world." David's response was that the real world is not just career and commerce. "Remember," he said, "that great libraries and symphony halls are the *real* world.... Poetry, music, painting, architecture, philosophy, the world of the spirit and of the mind are the *real* world." As you make your way, remember to keep that part of your mind open and engaged. The rewards will nourish you your entire life long.

This great university has prepared you well for the challenges of the future. It has provided you an education and a thirst for knowledge, and it has provided you a place in which to form lasting bonds

with fellow students, with professors, and with the institution itself.

I wish for you great things in the years ahead as you explore and question your world, and build upon your own relationships.

As alumni, you are now in a special relationship with your alma mater, one that will continue in the years to come. As honors accrue to this institution, they will reflect on you as graduates, just as your achievements and accomplishments will reflect on Soka University of America.

And, as a believer in and advocate for higher education, I urge you to continue an active relationship with your alma mater, with your support—be it through gifts of time or gifts of money.

As Yogi once said on the occasion of a Yogi Berra Appreciation Day held in his honor in his hometown of St. Louis, thank you for making this day necessary.

Thank you for allowing me to have a special relationship with the Class of 2006 and to share this important day with you.

Congratulations, and all the best to each and every one of you in the years ahead.