

Robert M. Herbert
Pomona College Commencement 2009
May 17, 2009

Thank you so much. It is a great and wonderful honor to share this occasion with you. So thank you, President Oxtoby and the trustees and the faculty. And my profoundest congratulations to you, the graduating class of 2009, and to your proud families.

I see a lot of tears in the eyes of parents. They're so happy.

I don't know if it's because all you guys are graduating, or they're just thrilled that those tuition bills will finally stop coming.

I also want to congratulate the first Posse at Pomona, which is graduating today. My wife is Debbie Bial, the founder and president of the Posse Foundation. She's sorry she couldn't be here today, but she sends her congratulations and her love.

I love those stupid criminal stories you find on the Web. One of my favorites is about a guy in South Carolina who became impatient as he was coming to the end of a four-month prison term.

With just three hours left before he was to be released, he thought it might be a good idea, seeing the opportunity to escape, to seize that opportunity. So he bolted from a recreation session and fled.

That is a quintessential example of bad decision-making.

The escapee was soon captured and sent back to jail for another six months--two months longer than his original sentence.

Then there was the ex-convict who robbed a bank and was surprised when the police showed up at his home a short while later to arrest him. "How'd you know it was me?" He asked. "I used the juice."

The cops didn't know what he was talking about. It turned out that he had rubbed lemon juice on his face, because someone had told him that that would make it impossible for the security cameras to record his image. He went into the bank thinking of himself as the invisible man.

One more. A guy stole a car. When the victim described the car to the police, she told them it had a phone in it. So, a cop called the number. The thief answered, and the cop said: "I saw your ad in the newspaper and I am interested in buying your car." Sure enough, they made an appointment--the thief showed up with the car and was arrested.

(Obviously these criminals never went to Pomona.)

These are amusing examples of utter incompetence. They're funny because the consequences are not too horrendous.



Things seem a lot less funny when we watch a great nation like the United States fall into a state of crisis, which is what we're in now, largely because of the neglect and bad decision-making of its leaders and citizens alike.

I'm going to keep this short. A commencement speaker is a little like a guy who's standing in the doorway in front of a crowd that is stampeding toward the exits. So bear with me here. And remember that old adage about being kind to your elders.

I want to leave you with two messages that may at first seem contradictory. They're not.

The first message is that in addition to pursuing your own dreams, you have a very serious obligation to help pull this country out of circumstances that are as bad as any that I've seen in my lifetime.

The second message is that you should have an absolute blast while you're doing it. Being serious and being happy are not mutually exclusive.

When I look around at the state of affairs that my generation is handing off to you guys, I have to cringe: Two wars, global warming, an economy in shambles, the newspaper industry (our main source of information) going up in smoke, the automobile industry up in smoke, the automobile industry (which powered the economy for so many decades) evaporating before our eyes.

The economic recession that we're in is one of the longest and deepest since the Great Depression. Even people with advanced degrees are not immune to the drop-off in employment. Poverty and homelessness are increasing. And we are stockpiling budget deficits that may last for generations.

That is not the kind of environment that my generation inherited. In the mid-1960s, when the first wave of the baby boomers were about your age, the United States seemed like a nation touched by magic.

Unemployment was low. Wages and profits were high. And the nation's wealth was distributed in a way that was remarkably equitable by today's standards. The middle class was growing, and it was not yet a mortal sin for a politician to mention the poor. A first-rate college education was eminently affordable.

For all of its problems, and there were still many--it was the height of the Cold War, after all. Racism, sexism and homophobia were rampant. And Vietnam was a disaster. But for all of its problems, the U.S. seemed to be moving briskly in the right direction.

Not even the murderous violence that greeted the Civil Rights Movement could stem the optimism. James Farmer, one of the great leaders of the Civil Rights era, once told me: "They could kill us. But they couldn't stop us."

So my generation inherited a rich and flourishing landscape. It still required a lot of work, but it was filled with immense promise.

We were not good stewards of that landscape.



Somehow we allowed the United States to morph into a country that hollowed out its manufacturing base and sent the jobs overseas, that refused to maintain and rebuild its own infrastructure.

That would not establish a first-rate public school system for all of its children. That spent more money per capita than any other country on the planet for health care, but still could not cover some 50 million of its citizens.

It became a country that fought wars but had no idea how to win them or pay for them. A country that let a great city like New Orleans drown rather than protect it with an adequate system of levees.

It's a country in which a bridge on an interstate highway in Minneapolis collapsed at rush hour, hurling cars, vans and trucks into the Mississippi River 80 feet below.

This is the landscape you guys are inheriting.

And what I would ask you to do is the same thing I've been asking of everyone in speeches around the country: become more engaged in the civic affairs of this nation. We cannot continue to squander the greatness of America.

I don't want you to put your personal dreams on hold. I know you have dreams of professional success, and raising big, rollicking flourishing families, and some of you may even be dreaming of changing the world.

If anything, my tendency is to advise people to dream bigger.

Just know that the realization of your dreams depends to a great extent on the kind of society that surrounds you. And perhaps more than you realize, you will be responsible for the shape of that society--for better or for worse.

You have to decide what kind of country you want the United States to be, and what steps you're willing to take to bring that kind of society about.

Just voting every now and then is not enough. Those of you who care about the kind of society you are creating for yourselves and will be leaving to your children have an obligation to do more.

If you don't shape the face of this nation as we move further into the 21st century--your century--somebody else will. And you may not like what you end up with.

The American dream is already on life support. For the first time in memory-- maybe ever-- parents are worried that their children will not live better lives than they did. Men who are now in their 30s earn less money than their father's generation did at the same age.

Somebody has to figure out how to revive the dream. And that somebody is you.

I don't buy that the problems are too big or too entrenched for ordinary people to make a difference. I look out at this crowd of graduates at this fine school and I can see that we

haven't even begun to tap into the intelligence and the explosive creative energy embedded in the heart of this new generation on the American scene.

That's right. You guys.

Don't sell yourselves short. You already have a hell of a lot more clout than the Blacks who refused to ride the segregated buses or tolerate the segregated lunch counters in the 1950s and 60s. And they changed the face of the nation.

You have a hell of a lot more clout and much more in the way of resources than the women, many of them housewives, who stood up and threw off the shackles of sexism decades ago and brought about the feminist revolution that gave young girls and women the freedom and opportunities that they have today.

There are things you can do. And as corny as it sounds, your country, which we should try to think of more as a family, needs you.

You can start by keeping yourselves well-informed about the important issues of the day, and then discussing those matters with colleagues, co-workers, friends, relatives. Pick out an area of particular concern to you, and then pursue it with a real sense of purpose. Offer your services as a volunteer where you think you can make a contribution. Join a local civic organization, or start one. Protest. Demonstrate. Don't just vote for candidates you admire, help them. Work in their campaigns. Run for office yourself. Write letters, articles or speeches. Write a check.

I know that some of you are already active in civic affairs. Become more active. Or help persuade some of your less committed friends and associates to step up. You may find yourselves stunned to see how exhilarating, how exciting and, yes, how much fun it can be to plunge headlong into the important affairs of the day.

Now, while I'm urging you to make this energetic effort to help re-shape and re-direct the destiny of our nation, I'm also going to suggest that you do something that may sound like just the opposite.

I want you to take it easy.

One of the things I've noticed over the past few decades is that life in America has been getting ever more frenetic. A few years ago Americans surpassed the Japanese as the hardest working people on the planet. Many of my friends and colleagues in a variety of professions and occupations have been working longer and longer hours, giving up part or all of their weekends, often sacrificing vacations, and sometimes holding down two or more jobs.

We've got cell phones and Blackberries, and we're emailing and text-messaging and Twittering--actually, somebody told me it's not Twittering, it's tweeting. Whatever it is, it sounds like a nervous disorder. I was reading a newspaper article the other day that asked, "Are you a Facebook user who also tweets?"

It's out of control.

There's no end to the frenetic behavior. Sometimes it really weirds me out.

I was flying from Pittsburgh to New York a few weeks ago and there was a young man sitting next to me with a laptop computer. He was playing a video game in which the object was to kill as many people as possible. This kid was into it. He shot people who were walking along the street, riding in elevators, climbing out of windows, emerging from garages, driving in cars. It seemed like he killed thousands of men and women before we finally landed at LaGuardia airport.

That was a young man who needed a moment to relax. I was tempted to loan him some reading material, but I didn't think he would appreciate it.

When I watch the news on television, there are additional stories being scrolled across the bottom of the screen, stock market results blinking on the right of the screen, and promos for upcoming programs in the upper left-hand corner. There's barely any room left on the screen for the anchors.

We've got more data—information--available to us than ever before in the history of the planet. But the sheer volume of that information has to diminish its quality.

How do we distinguish between good information and bad? What's important or essential or even just interesting about the messages we're sending out and receiving, and what's just nonsense?

My assistant at the [New York] Times went to an engagement party recently. She said it was lovely. A delicious lunch, plenty of champagne toasts. But all the guests had their cell phones on the luncheon tables and text-messaged their way through the entire event.

It's almost as if an idle moment is tantamount to a crime, even in a setting in which you're supposed to be having fun.

It's crazy, all that frenetic behavior.

I thought it was a joke when a neighbor of mine in New York told me that four- and five-year-olds were being given entrance exams for preschool and kindergarten, and that children in some kindergarten programs were being given homework.

We need to slow down, already. Take a deep breath. Let's put down at least some of these technological tools and spend a little time just being ourselves.

Enough with this unholy freneticism. I know people who have zillions of friends on Facebook and are close to no one.

Enough with these technological intermediaries, and with working for the sake of work, and with stealing the childhood from children by trying to make them little overworked, stressed-out versions of ourselves.

One of the essential problems of our society is that we're losing sight of what is human in ourselves. We're quick to go to war, and quicker to attend to our technological imperatives, and quickest of all at forgetting the truly human needs that are all around us.

And that includes our own individual needs--those very special, mostly non-material things that would fulfill us, give meaning to our lives, enlarge us and enable us to embrace those around us.

There's a character in August Wilson's play, Joe Turner's Come and Gone, who says everyone has a song inside of him or her, and that you lose track of that song at your peril. If you get out of touch with your song, forget how to sing it, you're bound to end up frustrated and dissatisfied. As this character says, recalling a time when he was out of touch with his own song, "Something wasn't making my heart smooth and easy."

I don't think we can stay in touch with our song by constantly Twittering or tweeting, or thumbing out messages on our Blackberries, or piling up virtual friends--trophies--on Facebook.

The time wasted sending a hundred emails about nothing could be time spent holding one person's hand.

I don't want kindergarten kids doing homework. I want them playing. Skylarking, my father used to call it. I want them asking spontaneous questions. Not checking some standard bureaucratic multiple choice box. They should be able to spend a fair amount of time doing nothing, except maybe developing their capacity to wonder.

I remember as a kid just lying in the grass in our front yard, watching the sky--for what? Sometimes a plane would fly over and that was cool. But if there was no plane, I was just as content. I didn't feel like I was waiting for anything. I was just there, lying in the cool fragrant grass, under a beautiful sunny sky.

We need to reduce the speed limits of our lives. We need to savor the trip. And paradoxically, that will give us a better grasp of how so many things have gone haywire.

Leave the cell phone at home every once in a while. Try kissing more and tweeting less. And stop talking so much.

Listen.

Other people have something to say, too. And when they don't, that glorious silence that you hear will have more to say to you than you ever imagined. That's when you begin to hear your song. That's when your own best thoughts take hold.

That's when we really begin to think about what to do with our lives and with the rest of this crazy world.

Thank you so much. Good luck. I hope you have wonderful, wonderful lives--each and every one of you.

About Robert M. Herbert

Bob Herbert joined *The New York Times* as an op-ed columnist in 1993. Twice a week, he writes about politics, urban affairs and social trends. From 1991 to 1993, he was a national correspondent for NBC, reporting regularly on *The Today Show* and *NBC Nightly News*. A founding panelist on Sunday Edition, a weekly discussion program on WCBS-TV, he was also the host of *Hotline* on WNYC-TV, both beginning in 1990.

Previously, he worked at *The Daily News*, beginning in 1976, where he was a general assignment reporter, national correspondent, consumer affairs editor, city hall bureau chief and city editor. In 1985, he became a columnist and member of the editorial board. His column continued to appear in *The Daily News* until 1993.

He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in journalism from the State University of New York (Empire State College). He has taught journalism at Brooklyn College and the Columbia University School of Journalism. Over the years, he has won numerous awards, including the Meyer Berger Award for coverage of New York City, the American Society of Newspaper Editors award for distinguished newspaper writing, and the David Nyhan Prize from the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University for excellence in political reporting. In 2005, he published *Promises Betrayed: Waking Up from the American Dream*. He is married and lives in Manhattan.