

5-26-2006

2006 Commencement Address: Bob Wright '65

Bob Wright

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Recommended Citation

Wright, Bob, "2006 Commencement Address: Bob Wright '65" (2006). *Commencement Addresses*. 8.
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2006 Principal Address

By Bob Wright '65

chairman and CEO of NBC Universal, and vice chairman and executive officer of the General Electric Company



Father McFarland ... trustees ... faculty and staff ... parents and friends ... my fellow honorary degree recipients ... and, especially, the students of the class of 2006—it is a great pleasure and privilege to be here to celebrate this wonderful occasion with you.

Forty-one years ago, I was sitting right where you are. I have very fond memories of that day ... but I confess I have absolutely no recollection who our commencement speaker was.

To prevent this from happening to you, let me just make sure you are very clear on one thing: my name is Bob Wright ... that's Bob Wright, W-R-I-G-H-T. Holy Cross, Class of 1965.

First, let me just say how proud I am of all of you. You have been given—rather, you have earned—a great gift. The gift of a Holy Cross education. It's an education that made you ask the hard questions ... it's an education that opened up your minds and your hearts ... it's an education that—in the best spirit of the liberal arts and Jesuit traditions, showed you what it means to live the examined life ... and a life of service.

As you'll discover in a few years, alumni usually think everything was better in their day than in the present. The sports teams were better ... the food was better ... the education was better.

But I've spent enough time here in recent years to know that is not the case. By every measure, Holy Cross is a better school now than it was in 1965, and you have done your part to make that happen. You are better prepared ... more motivated ... and willing to take from this college all the riches that it can give you.

You've worked hard, maybe even played hard—and now you've reached your goal. You've achieved your dream: You get to put on a long black dress and have Father McFarland give you a rolled-up piece of paper.

But that's not really what it is about, is it? The fact is, all that hard work has prepared you not just for today ... but for tomorrow and all the days after. Today marks not an ending but a beginning—a commencement!

And I see you heading into a very bright future.

But it will require some personal sacrifice.

For example, you'll have to give up your Facebook account!

Seriously ... you have spent four years, if not longer, as a Crusader, and when you leave here today as a graduate of this school, you will continue to be a Crusader.

This does not mean you put on a suit of armor and ride off on a horse.

It does not mean that you continue to represent your school in lacrosse, as the women's lacrosse team did two weeks ago, in their first-ever appearance in the NCAA tournament. Congratulations, ladies!

It does not mean that you travel to North Dakota for a historic upset of number-one seed Minnesota in ice hockey, as the men's hockey team did in March. Congratulations, gentlemen!

But it does mean that you arm yourself.

You arm yourself with the values and habits of mind you have learned here. You arm yourself with a discriminating mind and a compassionate heart. You arm yourself with a passion for truth and a respect for others.

And you prepare yourself to stand up against intolerance, ignorance, and selfishness.

Okay, but what does this mean in real, practical terms?

Well, out of all the students graduating this month at more than 2,000 colleges across the nation, you don't need me to explain this. Because you know.

This year, Holy Cross is sending more graduates into the Jesuit Volunteer Corps than any other college. Housing the homeless, feeding the hungry, serving the poor: that's being a crusader.

More than one-fifth of you are continuing your studies in schools of law or medicine or graduate programs around the nation. Fighting for justice, healing the sick, adding to humanity's knowledge and understanding: that's being a crusader.

Most of the rest of you are heading into business careers. Growing a business, creating jobs and economic value ... You, too, whether you realize it or not, know what it means to be a crusader.

But you may be wondering: Who is he kidding? Can you really jump on the career track in corporate America, and still follow the path of selflessness and integrity?

Absolutely. In fact, that's where you are needed more than ever.

The business world has seen too many people recently who were not crusaders. Did Enron's Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling take a stand against greed? Did WorldCom's Bernie Ebbers? Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski?

These examples explain why, according to a recent survey, only 2 percent of investors think CEOs are "very trustworthy." This compared to 27 percent who think President Bush is "very trustworthy." And you thought the President had an image problem!

The burden is on you—the new generation of future business leaders—to help change this image. We need the public to have faith and trust in the people driving our economic engine.

You will be tested. Pride, greed, and ambition are dangerous traps. But you have what it takes to stand firm.

I've spent almost my whole working life as a businessman. Many of you will do the same.

Approached with the right spirit, it is a high calling and a powerful force for good. Creating something of value that didn't exist before ... that is gratifying work. And it can be all-consuming.

But, as Tim reminded us, we are called to do more ... and to be more.

It isn't always easy. It takes sacrifice and sometimes difficult choices.

My journey here has been a long and exciting one. I have been very blessed in my life and my career. I married my wife Suzanne while I was in law school at the University of Virginia. I clerked for a U.S. District Court Chief Judge and practiced law in Virginia, New York, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. That's a lot of bar exams.

My experience was in litigation, labor law, environmental law, corporate, real estate, arbitration, criminal defense, and divorce ... and that is a good background for the entertainment business!

I have covered a lot of ground, both figuratively and literally speaking. With General Electric, I've traveled all over the world ... most often to Europe and Asia but in between I visited twice with Castro in Cuba and spent time in India.

Suzanne and I have three wonderful children. And I have been well paid for what I have done, and I have received some measure of fame or at least recognition.

Today, I have a dream job: I get to sit in my office and watch TV! Then I go to the theater and watch movies!

Actually, I do have to do some of that. But most of my time is spent on people development: mentoring, hiring, firing, and setting and meeting operation targets and developing our business strategies.

And I love it! If you want to be successful, you had better love what you do! But there is always a cost. I had to uproot my family and move eleven times. And none of these were job transfers. They were all done on purpose to build my career and help my family. I was lucky enough to have the support of a wonderful wife and family. Suzanne has been my partner in all these decisions.

And, as is true with everyone, there are moments when things seem to take a wrong turn. Suzanne and I lost a fourth child, Sara, who is buried across the state, in Pittsfield. And two years ago, our first grandchild was diagnosed with autism, something that has changed my life in dramatic fashion.

As Father McFarland mentioned, my wife Suzanne and I have created a foundation called Autism Speaks, dedicated to raising awareness and research funding for the most prevalent childhood developmental disorder in the nation, affecting 1 in 166 children and 1 in 104 boys.

Autism is a neurological disorder often accompanied by severe medical problems. There are genetic and environmental components. A diagnosis can be made as early as one year old but most children are not properly diagnosed until between 3 and 7, thus missing out on potentially critical early treatment.

Even though autism is the most prevalent serious developmental disorder in the nation, autism research receives only three-tenths of 1 percent of the NIH's annual \$30 billion budget!

How is this possible in the richest country in the world!?

We had to take on this challenge!

Our foundation Autism Speaks has 65 full-time employees and hundreds of volunteers in 20 states. Last year, we raised \$40 million and our goal is to raise \$100 million every year! It's a lofty goal and one that will be very hard to achieve ... but that's what goals are all about.

We are a force in Washington, lobbying Congress and the White House, meeting with the CDC and the FDA. We will call, we will write, we will lobby, we will persuade, and we won't give up until we fund the necessary research and get the answers we need.

Outside of my day job at NBC Universal, this is my—and my wife's—crusade. Why did we do it? Because we asked ourselves: "If not us ... then who?"

You will have many, many chances to make contributions of time or money to different worthy causes. In some special cases, you, too, will have to ask the question: "If not me ... then who?"

I hope each of you finds your own cause to crusade for.

But you—more than any group of young people I can imagine—don't need to hear this from me. You have learned this ... and, hopefully, live this. This is the true value of your Holy Cross experience.

I am honored to be in the company today of a distinguished group of honorary degree recipients, each of whom are themselves Crusaders ... Judge Burke, crusader for justice; Father D'Agostino, crusader for those orphaned by AIDS; Sister Keehan, crusader for the sick; and David McCullough, crusader for knowledge and historical understanding.

David's most recent book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *1776*, begins with a quote that makes for a fitting end to my remarks today: "Perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages."

These are the words of General George Washington. "Perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages."

Without George Washington's perseverance and spirit ... without his commitment to a cause much larger than himself ... without his being a Crusader ... the revolution would have failed.

You don't know yet what revolution, what cause, you'll be asked to lead—but your perseverance and spirit will do wonders.

Good luck and congratulations to you all. Enjoy this day ... thank your family and friends ... and may all your crusades be a success.

Thank you very much.