

**“The Love of Learning”**  
**Address to the Graduates**  
**by David McCullough**  
**Commencement Exercises**  
**Boston College**  
**May 19, 2008**

President Leahy, eminent fellow honorees, distinguished trustees, faculty, and alumni, proud parents, grandparents, friends, and members of the Class of 2008, I am profoundly honored by so high a tribute conferred by Boston College, and to take part in this glorious celebration. We haven't a lot of ceremony left in American life, alas, but commencements do go on, year after year, and in the grand tradition, with full, appropriate panoply, bringing together, as we see here today, people from all walks of life, all parts of the country, and indeed of the world, to pay tribute to genuinely worthy accomplishment. The importance of education has been a prevailing theme in American life from the beginning and may it ever be so.

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Information. Information at our finger tips. Information without end...

The Library of Congress has 650 miles of shelves and books in 470 languages...Napoleon was afraid of cats ....A porcupine is born with 30,000 quills.... A mosquito beats its wings 600 times per second.... Coal production in the United States is second only to that of China...

It's said ad infinitum: ours is the Information Age. There's never been anything like it since the dawn of creation. We glory in the Information Highway as other eras gloried in railroads. Information for all! Information night and day!

... A column of air a mile square, starting 50 feet from the ground and extending to 14,000 feet contains an average of 25,000,000 insects.... James Madison weighed less than a hundred pounds, William Howard Taft, 332 pounds, a presidential record.... According to the World Almanac, the length of the index finger on the Statue of Liberty is 8 feet.... The elevation of the highest mountain in Massachusetts, Mount Greylock, is 3,487 feet.... The most ancient living tree in America, a bristlecone pine in California, is 4,700 years old...

Information is useful. Information is often highly interesting. Information has value, sometimes great value. The right bit of information at the opportune moment can be worth a

fortune. Information can save time and effort. Information can save your life. The value of information, facts, figures, and the like, depends on what we make of it -- on judgment.

But information, let us be clear, isn't learning. Information isn't poetry. Or art. Or Gershwin or the Shaw Memorial. Or faith. It isn't wisdom.

Facts alone are never enough. Facts rarely if ever have any soul. In writing or trying to understand history one may have all manner of "data," and miss the point. One can have all the facts and miss the truth. It can be like the old piano teacher's lament to her student, "I hear all the notes, but I hear no music.

If information were learning, you could memorize the World Almanac and call yourself educated. If you memorized the World Almanac, you wouldn't be educated. You'd be weird!

Learning is not to be found on a printout. It's not on call at the touch of the finger.

Learning is acquired mainly from books, and most readily from great books. And from teachers, and the more learned and empathetic the better. And from work, concentrated work.

Abigail Adams put it perfectly more than 200 years ago: "Learning is not attained by chance. It must be sought with ardor and attended with diligence." Ardor, to my mind, is the key word.

For many of you of the graduating class, the love of learning has already taken hold. For others it often happens later and often by surprise, as history has shown time and again.

That's part of the magic.

Consider the example of Charles Sumner, the great Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, whose statue stands in the Boston Public Garden facing Boylston Street.

As a boy in school Charles Sumner had shown no particular promise. Nor did he distinguish himself as an undergraduate at Harvard. He did love reading, however, and by the time he finished law school, something overcame him. Passionate to know more, learn more, he put aside the beginnings of a law practice and sailed for France on his own and on borrowed money, in order to attend lectures at the Sorbonne. It was a noble adventure in independent scholarship, if ever there was. Everything was of interest to him. He attended lectures on natural history, geology, Egyptology, criminal law, the history of philosophy, and pursued a schedule of classical studies that would have gladdened the heart of the legendary Father Thayer of Boston College. He attended lectures at the Paris medical schools. He went to the opera, the theater, the Louvre, all the while pouring out his excitement in the pages of his journal and in long letters home. Trying to express what he felt on seeing the works of

Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci at the Louvre, he wrote, "They touched my mind, untutored as it is, like a rich strain of music."

But there was more. Something else touched him deeply. At lectures at the Sorbonne he had observed how black students were perfectly at ease with and well received by the other students. The color of one's skin seemed to make no difference. Sumner was pleased to see this, though at first it struck him as strange. But then he thought, as he wrote, that maybe the "distance" between blacks and whites at home was something white Americans had been taught and that "does not exist in the nature of things."

And therein was the seed from which would later arise, in the 1850's, before the Civil War, Charles Sumner's strident stand on the floor of the United States Senate against the spread of slavery. From his quest for learning he brought home a personal revelation he had not anticipated and it changed history.

But perhaps, overall, John Adams is as shining an example of the transforming miracle of education as we have. John Adams came from the humblest of beginnings. His father was a plain Braintree farmer and shoemaker. His mother was almost certainly illiterate. Because a scholarship made possible a college education, the boy discovered books. "I discovered

books and read forever,” he later wrote and it was hardly an exaggeration. At age 80, we know, he was happily embarking on a 16-volume history of France.

When I set out to write the life of John Adams, I wanted not only to read what he and Abigail wrote, but to read as much as possible of what they read. We’re all what we read to a very considerable degree.

So there I was past age sixty taking up once again, for the first time since high school and college English classes, the essays of Samuel Johnson and works of Pope, Swift, and Laurence Sterne. I read Samuel Richardson’s Clarisa, which was Abigail’s favorite novel; and Cervantes -- Don Quixote -- for the first time in my life. What a joy!

Cervantes is part of us, whether we know it or not. Declare you’re in a pickle; talk of birds of a feather flocking together; vow to turn over a new leaf; give the devil his due, or insist that mum’s the word, and you’re quoting Cervantes every time.

“I cannot live without books,” Thomas Jefferson wrote to Adams late in life, knowing Adams would understand perfectly. Adams read everything -- Shakespeare and the Bible over and over, and the Psalms especially. He read poetry, fiction, history. Always carry a book with you on your travels he advised his son, John Quincy. “You will never be alone with a

poet in your pocket.”

In a single year, according to the U.S. Department of Education, among all Americans with a college education, fully a third read not one novel or short story or poem. Don't be one of those, you of the Class of 2008.

Make the love of learning central to your life. What a difference it can mean. If your experience is anything like mine, the books that will mean the most to you, books that will change your life, are still to come. And remember, as someone said, even the oldest book is brand new for the reader who opens it for the first time.

You have had the great privilege of attending one of the finest colleges in the nation, where dedication to classical learning and to the arts and sciences has long been manifest. If what you have learned here makes you want to learn more, well that's the point.

Read. Read, read! Read the classics of American literature that you've never opened. Read your country's history. How can we profess to love our country and take no interest in its history? Read into the history of Greece and Rome. Read about the great turning points in the history of science and medicine and ideas.

Read for pleasure, to be sure. I adore a good thriller or a first-rate murder mystery. But take seriously -- read closely -- books that have stood the test of time. Study a masterpiece, take it apart, study its architecture, its vocabulary, its intent. Underline, make notes in the margins, and after a few years, go back and read it again.

Make use of the public libraries. Start your own personal library and see it grow. Talk about the books you're reading. Ask others what they're reading. You'll learn a lot.

And please, please, do what you can to cure the verbal virus that seems increasingly rampant among your generation. I'm talking about the relentless, wearisome use of the words, "like," and "you know," and "awesome," and "actually." Listen to yourselves as you speak.

Just imagine if in his inaugural address John F. Kennedy had said, "Ask not what your country can, you know, do for you, but what you can, like, do for your country actually."

The energetic part so many of you are playing in this year's presidential race is marvelous. Keep at it, down to the wire. Keep that idealism alive. Make a difference. Set an example for all of us.



Go out and get the best jobs you can and go to work with spirit. Don't get discouraged.

And don't work just for money. Choose work you believe in, work you enjoy. Money enough will follow. Believe me, there's nothing like turning to every day to do work you love.

Walk with your heads up. And remember, honesty is the best policy; and yes that, too, is from Cervantes.

Travel as much as you can, and wherever you go, before checking out of a hotel or motel, always remember to tip the maid.

My warmest congratulations. In the words of the immortal Jonathan Swift, "May you live all the days of your life."

On we go.