

“Listening with Your Inner Ear”

Stanford University Commencement Speech by *Vartan Gregorian*
on June 17, 2006.

President Hennessey, Provost Etchemendy, members of the Board of Trustees, deans, distinguished faculty, happy graduates, proud parents and relatives, ladies and gentlemen, I have given many commencement addresses and have even received a variety of honorary degrees from assorted universities and colleges, but being here today at my beloved alma mater and to speak to you is a very special occasion for me and indeed an honor.

Commencements are special, symbolic, solemn and joyous occasions marking the end of one phase of life and the beginning of another. As I look out today at you, I'm delighted that there are so many people here to celebrate this wonderful day with you. In 1958, when I graduated from Stanford, I had no family in this country and indeed had no one to attend my graduation ceremony, so I did not march. In 1964 when I got my PhD, I was teaching, which meant I had no opportunity to attend that ceremony either. So today, it's with envy, great admiration and enthusiasm that I am participating in your commencement. In pondering what to say I decided to tell you a little about my life, not knowing that President Hennessey would tell some of it to you. I hope some of the points I'll make will be relevant to your life.

In 1959, when I was a graduate student at Stanford, the author William Bradford Huie wrote a novel that was later made into a wonderful movie starring Julie Andrews and James Garner. You may not know this movie but your parents would probably remember. It's called *The Americanization of Emily*. It was about a woman in Britain whose life and outlook are dramatically changed by dealings with Americans. Well, I may not look the part, and I definitely am not British, but I was the male embodiment of Emily here at Stanford. It was here that my Americanization began.

I arrived, as was said before, from Tabriz, Iran, via Beirut, Lebanon, where I went to high school. I came here alone without a clue about America with regard to higher education, and I certainly had no clue at all about Stanford, but Stanford, as it was mentioned, adopted me. My higher education took place here at Stanford. Here I met some of America's great scholars. California became my window to America as well as the foundation of my academic career. After all, my first two teaching positions were in California. I made many wonderful friends here, but most importantly I met and married my wife, Clare Russell, Class of '59, here at Stanford.

One thing I'm always grateful to Stanford for was that it did not try to make me abandon my past, but encouraged me to embrace it, to validate it and let my past help guide my future. My Stanford education allowed me to begin to understand the relationships of the unique and

the individual self to the social, political and cultural world around us, and Stanford also gave me the courage to think those big, imponderable thoughts that are our companions throughout our lives, such as what is our relationship to universal order? What is our place as a human being amongst the great sea of mankind? Though I have never completely answered these and other questions for myself, and perhaps they will always be unanswerable, they have helped me to create a framework for the way I have lived my life.

In retrospect, my Americanization at Stanford was, as it was mentioned, successful, because if somebody had suggested to me in 1956 when I arrived here as a freshman with a rudimentary grasp of English and complete ignorance of American society, its culture and its history, that one day I would not only graduate from Stanford but also earn a PhD degree, and then become a professor at some seven public and private universities, I would have said that such a prediction was in the realm of fantasy or lunacy.

And yet, that is what happened, and that's not all that happened. I also became only the second foreign-born chief academic officer of the University of Pennsylvania, the first being William Smith, who was brought to Philadelphia by Benjamin Franklin. I became the first foreign-born president of The New York Public Library, and then the second foreign-born president of an Ivy League university, and finally, the second foreign-born president of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The first one was none other than Andrew Carnegie, a Scotsman. I know it's a cliché to say "only in America," but in my case, that is the truth.

In this difficult time when many of us worry about our country and its direction, about its values, its promise and its future, I'm still convinced that while America is not perfect, it is still perfectible. It is still a land of opportunity for immigrants and for international students, not only Americans alone. ... Many of you in the audience today are proof of that as well. It's amazing, isn't it, that until recently two-thirds of all students studying abroad have been attending American colleges and universities?

But with the opportunity we have all had to study at America's great institutions of higher learning, comes responsibility, as well. What we have learned in school we must find ways to put into action. We cannot retreat from the big issues of society and the world and our time into the pygmy world of private piety. Nor can we become cynics paralyzed by our own disdain, and we must not become—we cannot afford to become—social, political and moral isolationists.

That is especially true for those of us who are foreign or current international students. Whether we remain here or to return to our native countries, we have the obligation to build bridges between our nations, our societies and the United States, and vice versa, especially now. And those who come from developing countries have yet another obligation, and a very weighty one, to work toward creating a better quality of life for those at home and to advance the opportunities that are available to

them. After all, you represent their hopes for a better future.

For those of us who were born elsewhere but were educated here and then became American citizens, we have reason to be doubly grateful. One, because we received our education in America, not to mention financial support. And two, because America granted us the privilege of citizenship in a country whose Constitution proclaims that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

These are lofty aspirations. Remember, however, that America has always been and will always be a work in progress. Every generation has and must contribute to that ongoing progress. As John Gardner once said, it is important to be both a loving critic and a critical lover. America needs all of us to be both.

And now let me come back to you! Stanford marks the beginning of your latest wonderful, arduous journey. It has provided you with the means to be on your way. It has given you not only an education, a profession and all the skills and confidences you need to do well in the world, but it has also given you choices and the ability to choose. Sometimes you may find you have so many choices that all the possibilities available to you will be overwhelming. This morning I'd like to share with you three lessons I have learned that may—I stress *may*—assist you in making your choices.

The first lesson, actually, is a well-known one. I believe, if I'm not mistaken, it was Sir William Osler, professor of medicine at Oxford University in the early years of the 20th century, who said that young men—and women—should be careful in the selection of their ambitions because they're likely to realize them. Since you have the education, the knowledge and the training to realize your ambitions, be as sure as you can that your ambition also reflects what you really love to do. I'm reminded of some lines from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, and I quote, "What is it to work with love? It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your own heart." I know that all of you have good hearts, bright with many colors of strong thread, and I know you'll be able to use the thread of your heart and your soul to weave many wonderful tapestries.

Speaking of your ambition, sometimes you may be masters of it, but watch out. Sometimes you may be its slave, and watch out. Other times you may be a victim of hubris. No matter what, try to bear in mind the next lesson: don't confuse a job with a career. In the past I used to say to students that in your life, you will have many jobs but only one career. Now, however, if we keep on the way we are going in terms of how long we can expect to live, many of you will be octogenarians, some of you may even be centenarians, so you may have not only many jobs, but also many careers as well. I haven't quite reached either age category as yet, but I have worked in a number of fields, as it was mentioned—academia, libraries and now philanthropy—and I can share with you the fact that people often ask me, "Which job did you like best?" But they're asking me the wrong question. I've never considered any of the positions I've held as jobs. In fact, I even think of them as more than

careers. To me, they have been missions in which teaching and learning are primary ingredients, with me as the primary student.

So even though this is probably the last thing you want to hear today, I want to remind you that whether you like it or not, in order to survive and thrive, you will have to be lifelong students and lifetime learners. And yes, there are and always will be difficult times when you will think you have come to a dead end in your life or in your career, even an apparent point of no return, but let me tell you as one who has experienced those events once or twice, when that happens, think of what the author Gabriel Garcia Marquez once said when he spoke of the condition that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers gave birth to them, but that life obliges them to give birth to themselves over and over again. Time, experience, knowledge, education, love, one's values, all these can and do affect us and change us, and enable us to reinvent ourselves. I have invented myself many times and I'm sure you will do the same thing.

For me, Marquez's words have a particular resonance because they reinforce values that were taught to me by my maternal grandmother, whom your president mentioned. She raised me. My grandmother was an illiterate peasant, a poor one at that. I don't believe that she knew where Greece was, nor Rome, nor Stanford. She certainly did not know who Plutarch was, but even so she taught me the same lesson as Plutarch highlighted in his celebrated *Lives* almost 2,000 years ago, when he said, essentially, that character makes the man and woman. My grandmother was my first teacher. She instructed me in the moral lessons of life and the "right way," through her sheer character, stoic tenacity, formidable dignity, individuality and utter integrity. She was for me the best example of what good character means. In spite of many adversities and tragedies, wartime ravages, poverty, deprivation and the deaths of her seven children, she never became cynical, never abandoned her values and never compromised her dignity. Indeed, it was from my grandmother that I learned that dignity is not negotiable. Your reputation is not for sale and must not be mortgaged as a down payment on your ambitions. It was my grandmother's living example that shaped the very foundation of my character. Between what I have learned from Plutarch and my grandmother—a combination of forces I would dare anybody to challenge!—I feel confident in telling you that in the coming years you will meet people who are more powerful than you, richer than you, smarter than you, even handsomer or more beautiful than you, but what will be your distinguishing mark will always be your character. And what will define your character? Your conduct, your ability to live by principles you believe in, even if that means fighting tenaciously for what is right over what you know to be wrong.

Nobody goes through life without encountering obstacles, disappointments, and problems. Nobody can keep from making mistakes or taking a wrong turn. Nobody can escape illness or avoid the specter of failure. Let me point out that coping with success is easy. How you deal with adversity, with failure, and with setbacks will reveal your true character. How nimble you are about getting back on your feet after some large or small disaster or defeat will help you to determine

just how far those feet of yours will take you in the world.

But that's where your upbringing, the texture of your education and your values will help you to develop a distinctive attitude toward life, an attitude that persistently seeks meaning and perspective, an attitude that exudes adaptability and resilience in a relentlessly changing and perplexing world, an attitude of moral courage and steadfastness in the face of overwhelming human need and suffering. How to develop and maintain such attitudes in an age where "individualism" has become a cult and celebrities, icons—where people are famous for being famous—is not an easy task. We must be reminded time and time again that we are not mere consumer/entertainment/socio-economic/socio-biological and information units, to be processed. We are not numbers. We are unique, rational, spiritual and social beings full of competing sentiments, insatiable yearnings, dreams, imagination, quests and ties that bind us to the past and the future.

It might be helpful to remind ourselves that it was Alexis de Tocqueville who in the 1830s coined the word "individualist," to describe the self-reliant character of Americans. But he also went on to extol Americans' generosity, their proclivity to create voluntary citizens associations and the fact that volunteers and altruists have played a critical role in preserving and strengthening what he called the modern world's first nation that did not have a ruling class. In that way, he made clear that both the private and public realm, private good and public good, are interdependent. One without the other will diminish the bonds of community and creativity. Some 125 years later, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it more succinctly: "We may have all come in different ships but we are in the same boat now."

Today we must be reminded that what is unique about each of us *should* be celebrated and cherished, that we must not forget that we also belong to a larger community, society and, indeed, humanity. As Americans and as human beings we have an obligation to contribute to the well-being of our communities; hence, to the public good.

I hope as you climb the ladder of success, you will always remember the dictum "From those to whom much has been given, much is expected."

In conclusion, I would like to offer you just one last thought about our shared human condition. Today information floods over us, and a millisecond later in comes another flood of data and information, and then another and another. Images of pleasure and pain, fear and joy, love and hate assault us from all the angles. The world around us is full of raucous chatter and noise. Amid all this cacophony, it's hard to see ourselves as part of a larger whole, a continuing eternal harmony, that music of the spheres that the ancients thought we would hear only in our inner ear. Well, today I would like to remind you of your connection to history. Try to listen with your inner ears to those who went before you, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and on and on, who all wanted to be good ancestors to you.

As an historian, educator and a fellow student, I feel bound to remind you that the time has come for you to return the favor. You have to learn

to be good ancestors to the future.

Today's commencement marks the beginning of many other beginnings for you, many other commencements in your life. Many mornings, many beginnings are before you. The future is waiting for you with open arms. I wish you good luck, great success and great humanity. Thank you very much.

