

Boston University Commencement 2010
University Professors Program (UNI) Convocation

Sunday, May 16, 4 pm

Metcalf Trustees Conference Hall, 1 Silber Way, Boston 02215

It's hard to follow Hans Kornberg, and Sir Hans knows that. That's why he gave me a copy of his convocation remarks from last year. Just copy these, young fellow, he patted me on the back.

It's sage advice. But Sir Hans also knows that I am incapable of following orders.

I think his invitation was due to my affection for UNI and BU. But as a scientist, he may be as yet unacquainted with the study of history, which would have dissuaded him from such folly. Last year I was privileged to speak at a Boston College graduation event and had the graduates just about in tears about their life prospects, talking about how corrupt our institutions have become, and the difficulty of the work ahead if we are to restore our state and country to a favorable footing.

But, unlike BC, I like BU and love UNI – and won't do that to you. So, in preparing for today, I read through commencement remarks of really remarkable people—people like Guy Kawasaki, Steven Jobs and, of course, Hans Kornberg. As I'm sure you know, this sort of occasion lends itself to a formula. I say something funny or self-deprecating, I talk about myself, and then tell you how to improve the world.

I'm going to skip talking about myself. I'm willing to bet you care less about who I am than about who you are right now and how to make your way to success in your respective fields and in life. I first want to congratulate you, on your preparation as free individuals—prepared by the hand of your parents, your schooling, and your own personal growth. UNI was a uniquely rich locus to complete that work.

I wish you lots of success, wealth and well-being. Often these occasions downplay wealth—but that is the luxury, perhaps the hubris, of a country that has been wealthy for so long. It is not our god-given right to be wealthy, and I sincerely hope you are. I also hope you build businesses and give people work, for supporting oneself through work is a source of dignity that no government can provide.

But I came here today with a purpose. I came to remind you of BU's mission, embodied in its motto of *Learning, Virtue, Piety*. And I want to restate that motto in the form of a charge you can carry forward.

(1) Learning and virtue are inextricably linked. An increase in both throughout your life will require, however, that you jettison a common wisdom of our day, which tells you to “be yourself” or “be who you are”. A weirder tautology man has never made—and its meaning is a far cry from the Socratic “Know yourself.” It's also a bunch of baloney. Do yourself and me a huge favor and scrub the Romantic pablum about

identity from your brain. Throw away those god awful books by Emerson your lit teachers made you buy. The search for who you are is a fool's errand. Literally.

Not because you won't like what you find when you get there, or that you are in some way insufficient. That's hardly the case. You're a UNI grad. You're smart and talented. Your work and study habits are impeccable. But we expect—and we need—greater things from you.

As someone who is built to learn throughout your life, your identity will necessarily be a moving target. What I mean is best explained by way of example. Think of Ben Franklin, who lived at a time of unimaginable uncertainty, stress—and opportunity. He aspired to two things: to know and to be a patriot. Every day he woke up with his list of “things he was working on”, “Self-improvements,” and new “learnings”. His daily regimen would force him to engage every part of his being and his becoming with the world. The “learning” in the *Learning, Virtue, Piety* motto should mean for you “*Don't seek who you are—quite simply, strive to be better than you are today and everyday.*”

- (2) Which brings us to *Virtue*: Again, urging you to leave the navel-gazing of Romanticism to others, I'd ask you to consider the following assertion: The narrative of human life is only meaningful in terms of how much you have lived up to your principles. *You are your principles, and your principles are you.* Focus on them, because they are the only thing that remains constant throughout the vicissitudes of life, the successes and failures, the loves and the losses. The strength of your principles will serve you well in the days ahead, which will be some of the toughest we will face as a nation.
- (3) Which brings us to *Piety*. Piety, from the Latin *Pietas*, is following through on your responsibilities to other people, to the gods and to your society. During the fight to create a home free from tyranny, our founders' piety quickly took the form of a commitment to a fledgling nation. Two and a half centuries later, with our institutions in shambles, *I ask you to re-commit to that patriotism – to rebuild our institutions.* In doing so, long to be BU's long-serving leader, John Silber. Dr. Silber took on Boston University at a time of great strife in this country. He never flinched. He walked this campus, head held high, and asserted the principles of academic excellence and ethical behavior. When he was done with that, he changed the course of our public K-12 schools, insisting on those same principles.

You've lived the difference in quality at BU. Many of you don't know that he made a sea-change in the lives of a million school kids in Massachusetts a year. With the takeover of the Chelsea Public Schools in the late 1980s, BU began piloting reforms. With Dr. Silber's role as chair of the state's Board of Education in the 1990s, that focus on academic excellence took our students, who scored below the national average on the SATs in the 1980s to being today number one on national assessments and in the top handful of countries in math and science.

UNI embodied that same vision of academic excellence. It set the bar for creative and ruthless inquiry. I smile because I am looking at my doctoral advisor, Liah Greenfeld, who herself set that bar for unyielding questioning and was so important in shaping my and so many others' abilities. I personally bemoan its passing—and ask what it means for the university's mission.

Let me close, however, with praise for you, for what you have accomplished. But don't be satisfied being yourself. In learning, be Ben Franklin improving yourself every day. Define yourself through virtue even if the principles at work have been largely defined by your forebears. There is no shame in that. And demonstrate piety by committing to rebuild our institutions with the same seriousness of purpose and patriotism as Dr. Silber.

Today we meet at 1 Silber Way. The name indicates more than a simple street name. We need so many other roads forward like this—and you are just the right people to forge those new paths. You are fortunate to have had this wonderful institution to provide a map. I am an optimist by nature, but I am no fool in trusting that you are up to the task.

Congratulations to one and all.