

President Austin, fellow honorary degree recipients, distinguished faculty and trustees, staff, alumni, families and friends:

I am deeply honored to be back at UConn with you today, and to receive the degree that my university has just conferred upon me.

My mother is here today and I will say publicly that I have long suspected that she winked when giving me the name that inspired jokes back in grade school, and I think I heard a few snickers here today.

After today, Mother, President Austin informs me, I can officially be referred to as "Dr. Payne...Dr. Les Payne."

So if the class of 2003 will kindly turn your heads and cough, Dr. Payne would like to offer his heartfelt congratulations.

You should indeed be proud of what you have achieved here in the last four years. OK, 5 years.

Yours is the last class to begin its journey of discovery in the 1990's and will presently graduate straddling two millennia. This glorious and long-expected day has arrived all too suddenly for you, but none too soon for your parents. To borrow a phrase from Winston Churchill on a more tenebrious occasion: This is not the end; it is not even the beginning of the end.

Your graduation simply marks the end of the beginning.

I did an Internet search on the history of the Commencement Address and found that the very first one was allegedly given in the 12th Century...in Italy... in the city of Bologna.

Since that time, the city of Bologna has been linked not only to Commencement Addressees but also to inexpensive sandwich meat.

It is no baloney, however, to say that the University of Connecticut has well prepared this third graduating class of the Third Millennium to face the challenges of a deeply troubled world.

While I was writing my speech my daughter, Tamara, instructed: "make sure you're upbeat, dad, there are not a lot of jobs out there." So don't worry, this will not be a sermon and as Liz Taylor said to her 8th husband: "I won't keep you long."

As an alumnus, who nearly four decades ago, sat where you sit now, my intent is simply to share a few tips on how to succeed in this up-and-down job market--and in life itself.

As President Austin mentioned in the introduction, I am a journalist, not a minister. The difference is worth noting, especially in the presence of my mother, who, early on, had hoped against all evidence that I would become a Baptist preacher.

Ministers bring the good news: the chariot is coming.

Reporters bring the bad news: John Ashcroft and Suge Knight are in the lobby.

Your class has witnessed more than your share of bad news.

You have watched TV coverage of the War in Kosovo; U.S. Conquest in Iraq; Famine in the Congo; the pestilence of a new disease called SARS; and the death of 2,972 people on September 11th.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse saddled up once again during your four, short years here at UConn.

One Internet site, incidentally, described the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse as the backfield of the 1924 Notre Dame football team. I refer instead to the biblical Revelation of St. John the Divine who, in the New Testament, wrote about four horses of different colors that represent: War; Conquest, Famine and Death. Each scourge is loose on earth today.

There is actually a 5th Horseman, just as destructive that you need to be concerned about--but I will get back to him in a few minutes.

In addition to these 4 plagues, your class has also had to contend with the state Senator who proposed legislation to ban alcohol on campus.

As an alumnus, let me assure you that this is nothing new. In my junior year here at Storrs, we were plagued by a Dean of Students who was also determined to smite the campus "dry." We called him, "The Sponge."

I won't reveal the Dean's surname but his first name was "Jack."

A group of enterprising students rigged up high-wattage loudspeakers and, for hours at a time and days on end, they blasted the entire campus with Ray Charles' spirited rendition of "Hit the Road Jack."

If memory serves, we got rid of Dean "Jack." Yet, despite our best efforts, my class, unlike yours, never did make Playboy's list of the top 10 drinking schools.

Today, as always, it is academic excellence that truly sets UConn apart. This flagship university is rated as the top public school in New England. This corner of the nation was built by pioneer stock and is rich in learning, steeped in tradition and justly proud of

its schools. The first public library was built in New Haven, and Connecticut established the nation's very first law school, as well as the first school for women.

Growing up in Hartford as a youngster, I delivered the nation's oldest newspaper, graduated from the 2nd oldest high school, and ended up at this university launched in 1881 with a faculty of three and a student body of 12.

Today, this university has transformed the "brain drain," into what President Austin calls a "brain gain." Enrollment has climbed 58 percent since 1995; freshman SAT scores are up 40 points and they remain respectfully higher than the national average.

As you start your careers, you will appreciate the totality of your UConn experience more fully than you do today. These four years will be pivotal to your development as a professional, a parent and as a citizen of the world.

Much has changed on campus since my years here. This hallowed Gampel Pavilion, where the great 50-cent performed a few weeks ago, did not exist back in 1964. Nor did Women's Basketball.

It is truly heartwarming to see these fresh blue-and-white banners hanging so proudly from the rafters. Three national championships in four years is a remarkable achievement. Winning a second in a row with no seniors on this year's team sounds like a Dynasty, to me.

Or is that DIANASTY?

I did not play basketball, but I ran track next door.

As a sophomore at Hartford Public High School, I had longed to write the great American novel. As the first in my family to go to college, I also wanted to eat at least one meal a day. So I enrolled at UConn, in the school of engineering. No disrespect to engineering students, but I hated it.

There was only one woman in my engineering classes. She had an IQ of about 300...thousand. Such were the unfair standards for women entering technical fields back then. This year's class is 53 percent female, which is a great and welcome leap forward.

During my junior year, I switched my major to English. I could stand here and brag that the world thus lost a great engineer to journalism, but I am an alumnus and President Austin has access to my transcript. So let's just say that I found the courage to disappoint my mother who had taken to speaking of, my son, the engineer.

The career tip here is to go the way your heart beats.

Don't stick with a job simply because it is secure and pays well. There are too many professionals holding down good paying jobs that they hate.

Find a vocation that you can throw your life into, without a sense of waste. Two young journalists dramatically reminded me recently of why commitment to one's craft is so critical--and sometimes dangerous. When President Bush ordered U.S. media out of Baghdad before the bombing attack, two of Newsday's best and brightest young journalists requested to be allowed to remain. Even as the New York Times and others were pulling their reporters out, we kept our journalists in Baghdad.

Speaking for himself and photographer Moises Saman, Matt McAllester e-mailed the following message to us at Newsday: "We continue to feel committed to being here [in Baghdad.]. We are journalists who cover these sorts of situations and risk is part of it. There are risks in every conflict and sometimes journalists pay the price, as some might here.

"I wouldn't be doing this job if I hadn't thought long and hard about all this. I have a firm intention of passing away in my rocking chair with my grandkids around me, as does Moises. But we are passionately committed to our jobs and this story.

"If we are pulled out, this story will be left to the [reporter] embeds [with the military] and the U.S. government."

That rocking chair dream with the grandkids was almost snatched away from Matt and Moises, as you may have heard in the news. Saddam Hussein's state police, the dreaded Mukhabarat, yanked them out of their Palestine Hotel room after midnight and arrested them for spying.

After 8 harrowing days, a group of six Newsday editors, working tirelessly through third parties, and by remote control, were able to get five separate probes through to the highest levels of the Iraqi government, even as U.S. bombs pounded Baghdad into desert dust. Miraculously, we were able to get Iraqi military intelligence to instruct the guards at the Abu Ghraid Prison to release our 2 journalists who were driven to freedom in Jordan.

My optimism about the future of journalism, world peace, and our liberty, even, was bolstered by the commitment of these two brave, young men, Matt and Moises. They represent the best hope for journalism in America.

It was on this campus that I first dreamed of becoming a journalist and traveling the world in pursuit of truth and adventure. Thanks to UConn, I have had a good ride.

I have dined on "bush-meat" in a mud-hut in Zimbabwe before the guerrilla army of Robert Mugabe engineered a regime change of the apartheid Rhodesian government of Ian Smith.

I have swapped stories with Nelson Mandela, sparred with Norman Mailer about boxing; rapped with Charlie Mingus about jazz; and on a slate-gray January day, I once dined with artist Romare Bearden. The great collagist rhapsodized about, how on the night that he, Isamu Noguchi and Ella Fitzgerald, received the President's Medal of Arts Award at the White House, he saw "fireflies" for the first time since he was a boy in Mecklenburg, North Carolina.

It was on this very campus that I first exercised what Robert S. McNamara called the greatest of art forms: the management of people. In my case, as president of the Northern Student Movement, I supervised a campus group that tutored kids in the North End of Hartford and sent UConn students to register voters in the segregated South.

It was here also where I honed my meager debating skills in philosophy classes and all night-bull sessions. This UConn preparation allowed me once to so dazzle Don Imus in a radio debate over his use of racial stereotypes that the shock-jock pleaded with me to return for a best two-out-of-three re-match, which I refused.

Much has changed in the world since I was a student here. The population has gone from 3.2 billion to over 6 billion. In this country, it has increased by 50 percent. A 1964 Volkswagen bug, which was all the rage back then, cost only \$1,695. The only way to open your car back then was to put a key in the door. How quaint. Now you can open your door and start your engine from the window of your 4th floor dorm room.

Some things have changed and yet remain the same. Martin Luther King, Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize that year. However, that same year, the FBI found in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the bullet-riddled bodies of slain civil rights workers: James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner and Andy Goodman.

Bent on regime change, President Johnson preemptively bombed North Vietnam.

The high for the Dow Jones that year was 891 points.

Unemployment stood at 5.2 percent--about what it is now.

With 3 children, I know what the job market is like today.

Don't worry too much about the economy it's cyclical and it will bounce back. Meanwhile, be flexible; don't hold out for that signing bonus; take that less-than-ideal job; consider a spot with Teach for America, the Peace Corps, or perhaps you may want to start your own business. Grad school is good.

The critical point is that UConn has prepared to make more of your lives than you would otherwise.

In his commencement address, Woody Allen once reportedly told students that: "We have given you a perfect world. Please don't screw it up."

While we haven't given you a perfect world, you still must not screw it up. You must go forth now and make things better for those who will come after you.

It is a truism that privilege engenders responsibility. I charge you to give back to mankind as this university has given so much to you. You may start by working to care for those less fortunate than you. It is only in this small way that the world is changed for the better.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead once observed: "Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. Indeed, that's all who ever have." Just a few caring people can change the world today.

Some of you will earn a lot of money. This is OK. It is not OK to make earning a lot of money your primary goal.

Those of you who enter my field might be alarmed by the consolidation of media in the hands of a few giant corporations. This is a dangerous threat to democracy. Yet, some media barons operate as if there is a First Amendment right to make ever-increasing, double-digit profits year after year.

We must find a way to get the media back to Thomas Jefferson's ideal of a free press.

It is perhaps foolhardy to say that the goal of business should be public service and not profits at any cost--but one should work toward this vision.

Some of you will go on to become dentists. Don't settle for simply extracting diseased teeth, as one social scientist once cautioned. You should prevent teeth from becoming diseased. Teach dental hygiene and therapy.

Similarly, the social scientist suggested that the physicians among you must not limit yourself to treating the wounded. Prevent global diseases. Discover cures. Protect the health of mankind. Dentists and doctors increasingly have no time for this today.

Your generation must reverse this trend.

Some of you will become lawyers. You must not set as your chief service the guiding of the wealthy and powerful corporations in breaking the law. Too many laws are placed on the book, some under the banner of Homeland Security, that undermine civil liberties, allow for the pollution of air and water, and discriminate against the poor.

In the field of law, as in my field of journalism, one must see that justice is done. Ernest Hemingway once dismissed as unworthy any writer plying the craft "without a sense of justice and injustice."

A half-century ago, the social scientist W.E.B. DuBois posed:

"Why should a man study law but to see that justice is done." Today, as DuBois observed back then, "our jails are still bursting with prisoners who have no one to defend them even when they have committed no crime."

The teachers among you have the greatest responsibility of all. The success of our entire society rests on the shoulders of our teachers in schools--and those who instruct the young in the workplace.

At the New York Times, we have recently witnessed the results of a failure to guide a single, young journalist in the proper conduct and standards of gathering and writing the news. It didn't help that the young reporter was an accomplished con artist.

In our cities each day, we see the results of the failure of our educational system to properly instruct our children.

Teach them as if they are your very own children; They will make you as proud as if you were their parent.

Each of you should enter your life's work as if the future depends on it. Work like you don't need the money. What distinguishes greatness, all things being equal, is the expenditure of energy and a willingness to take risks. You see this risk and energy in the Picasso-Matisse show at the Museum of Modern Art; you see it in the art of Gordon Parks in the science of Dr. Henry Lee.

Don't be afraid to work hard and to take risks.

In my opening I mentioned the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: War, Conquest, Famine and Death.

The power to defeat these threats is in the hands of those of you in this building. Out of this class may well come the scientist who will help cure the AIDS pandemic that is wasting entire villages in Africa and other parts of the world.

Your class may well produce the next statesman to turn this country away from preemptive wars and preferential regime changes in sovereign nations.

This university, with its rich tradition in agriculture, may well solve the problem of hunger that still plagues large portions of the world.

And I am hopeful that out of this graduating class will come a future president of the United States--and she will indeed be tested.

"Hold fast to your dreams," wrote poet Langston Hughes, "For if dreams die, life is a broken winged bird that cannot fly."

I'm optimistic that the four scourges of the Apocalypse will be put to flight because of the resolve of your generation.

I promised to get back to the Fifth Horseman riding with: War, Conquest Death, and Famine.

In addition to these threats, your generation have to stand ever vigilant against the 5th Horseman of Indifference.

The scourge of Apathy must also be ridden down and driven away. To accept it is to welcome defeat and tyranny. The world may change for the better, for example, if the 49 percent of eligible voters who stayed home in 2000, decide to go to the polls and vote in next year's presidential election.

Each of us must stand ready to struggle against indifference.

As that Great Liberator Frederick Douglass once said:

"Where there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of it many waters... We may not get all that we pay for, but it is certain that we will pay for all that we get."

Class of 2003, I wish you peace; I wish you happiness, and when life gets you down--
dance like to do when nobody's watching

Thank You.