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University of Connecticut

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It is good to be back in Connecticut. I used to live near here, in Wallingford. My wife and my first child were born in Meriden, as was our favorite singer, Rosa Ponselle. Hartford is for me the intellectual capital of America because Mark Twain lived here, that fount of wisdom. When people like Senator McCain tell us that America is, by constitutional mandate, a Christian country, I remember Twain's response to his friend Andrew Carnegie when Carnegie said that whether you like it or not, America is a Christian country. Twain's reply was "I know that, Andrew, but so is hell – and we do not boast about that."

Looking at these graduates on their important day, I want to express my sincere and deep admiration for the complex, laborious, multiply-interwoven achievements that this event represents -- my congratulations to the hard-working students, the hard-sacrificing parents, and the hard-driving teachers who have forged this conjoint miracle of large-scale education. None of this happens easily or of itself. It reflects planning, tradition, innovation, discipline, and investment. You students have invested much of your young life in this enterprise. Society has invested many of its resources – intellectual as well as financial – in your rise toward new opportunities and responsibilities. This has been your privilege and it now becomes your challenge. What will you do with the tools you have acquired?

It may seem that you have closed a chapter, but you haven't. That you have got your education, but you haven't. You might think that you have mastered the past and can now look just to the future; but that is not true. It is true that you have drawn on accumulations of past knowledge. But knowing is not a lump of accumulated data. It is a process; and it never ends without ceasing to be knowledge. It must be renewed and expanded in order to exist at all. If you do not keep up your knowing, you cease to know. Your teachers have failed you, and you have failed yourselves, if you think the education process is ended, if you do not go on learning, testing what you know, expanding what you know, refining, deepening, exploring.

You have not mastered the past. None of us has. You cannot leave it behind. There is a parable of this in Milan Kundera's novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being. Young people in the Czech republic, during the Soviet invasion of their country in 1968, tried to confuse the invaders by tearing down direction and name signs on roads, towns, streets, train and bus stations. In effect, they effaced their country in order to preserve it. But years later the lovers in the book try to go back to a Spa town they enjoyed early in their relationship. The occupiers have renamed everything and now the lovers are the ones disoriented, wrenched from their earlier associations, confused about their bearings. Kundera says that "the past they had gone there to find had been confiscated." They had to flee the place in dismay. By not maintaining a continuity with their past, building on it, they had irretrievably lost it, and that muddied their present and their future.

Ask yourself who are the most interesting people you know around you in your daily life. Odds are they are the ones still learning, still curious, still seeking. I just

went to the 96<sup>th</sup> birthday of the oral historian Studs Terkel, who says that curiosity is what keeps him going. Referring to the old adage that curiosity killed the cat, he said he wants his tombstone to read, “Curiosity did not kill this cat.”

One of the more interesting friends I had was the libertarian autodidact Karl Hess, who used to write Barry Goldwater’s speeches. We were arrested together during a demonstration against the Vietnam War, and we spent a night in the same jail cell. I had with me my Greek New Testament. He asked why. I said that I read it every day, and it is the most influential book in Western culture. Yes, he said, but why in Greek? I said, of course, that it was written in that language -- but also that the most economical intellectual investment one can make is in learning Greek. If you are interested in epic, lyric, drama, oratory, history, philosophy, or constitutional theory, you are constantly going to come across references to Homer, Sappho, Demosthenes, Thucydides, Plato or Aristotle, who began it all, and it is best to check these sources in the original. At the next demonstration Karl and I went to, he came over to me and said, “I hope we end up in the same cell tonight.” Why? “I have been studying Greek, and I want to go over verb forms with you.” (Alas, we were separated at the fingerprinting stage and went to different cells).

Another friend of mine was the journalist I. F. Stone, who told me he was going to learn Greek when he retired – and he did. We were both night people at that time, and I would get phone calls at two or three in the morning, wanting to know how to construe this or that sentence. It is not surprising that my radical friends wanted to go so far back into the riches of our tradition. After all, Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, the

great changers of the modern world, were all classically trained. If you want to change the future, know the past

I do not claim, of course, that you must learn Greek or Latin. But to stay intellectually alive you must keep learning something. It makes you a more interesting companion, or spouse, or parent. Henry Kissinger said that power is the great aphrodisiac. He was wrong. Knowledge is the great aphrodisiac. People were interested in Kissinger for his ideas long before they were interested in him for his appointments or offices. It is essential to keep playing with ideas, acquiring them, refuting them, mastering them, being mastered by them. That is not an assignment. It is an enticement. It is fun. So, in conclusion, my best advice to you is -- have fun. Know things.