

Senior Orator  
Afternoon Commencement, May 12, 2012  
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Ladies and gentleman, distinguished faculty, friends of the college, family members and those of you who found a ticket on the black market known as Facebook: Welcome to our 2012 Commencement ceremony.

Like many of you, I'm a scientist. And I would argue that the most significant scientific achievement in our lifetimes has been the sequencing of the human genome. It is because of the Genome Project that we are able to read the score of the human symphony. The most remarkable thing that came from interpreting the human genome data was that, at least from a DNA perspective, all human beings are 99.5% identical. Five tenths of 1% is what makes you, you. Now, with 6 billion letters in your genetic code, that five tenths is certainly statistically significant. But when you look deeper and analyze moral, social and philosophical fibers of our existence, the science doesn't seem all that significant.

I personally can't fathom the idea of being more than 99% identical with someone like Bill Cook. He's like Geneseo's Mick Jagger. (I was kind of tickled yesterday, joking with the Provost about "how in the hell am I going to follow Bill Cook?" I might not be able to match the quality, but she gave me this lei so I could at least dress the part!) But it's true. And half of 1% is what dictates the differences that you have with anybody in this room or in this planet. It's also astonishing when you think about the way history has been shaped and the amount of lives that have been lost and the amount of blood that has been spilled because of people focusing nearly 100% of their time on that small piece that makes us unequal.

As we move forward, I would urge you to ponder that 99.5% of your being. Because if our generation is to overcome the obstacles that we now inherit, we must embrace the idea that regardless of our individuality, our amazing talents and incredibly important diversity, our common humanity matters more.

Being a busy college student, I don't have a lot of time to read for fun, although I would like to, but over winter break I read a book called Nonzero by Robert Wright. The central premise is that from the earliest Neolithic civilizations up until the one we currently inhabit, the interactions within and among people of societies have grown increasingly complex, making us more interdependent. Interdependence is a good thing but it requires the problem-solvers among us to strive for something derived from game theory known as a non-zero-sum outcome. Whether or not you know it, you're all familiar with zero-sum outcomes, which is the way a political contest or sporting event ends. There is a winner and a loser, and more importantly, in order for one side to win, the other *must* lose. A non-zero-sum outcome is a symbiosis, like a peace accord or sound business agreement. In order for one side to win, the other has to win as well. While the zero-sum outcome works OK on the playing field, it does very little to move us forward in 2012. In order to do that, we have to come up with ways that allow more people to win.

But how? As painful as some of the classes may have been for some of you, and as Dr. Cook has alluded, I think that Geneseo's Humanities curriculum has endowed all of us with a far more critical worldview. In these courses, we would read all the famous texts about democracy, wars, disputes, hatred and conflicts. And at the end of the day, the biggest thing that I took away from "Humn" is a simple lesson that one man's dignity does not have to call for another man's disgrace, one man's act of God, another man's heresy. By channeling what we share, that 99.5% if you will, as a guide to the decisions we make, we could use those unique talents, abilities and knowledge that we have harnessed here at Geneseo as an avenue to attain the progress that this world needs.

And among you guys there certainly exists a wide array of abilities. Those going into health care or psychology will help and console those who are struggling, and will stand up against the exploitation of the disenfranchised. Those of you going into speech pathology will help our recently returning war heroes, many of whom have traumatic brain injuries, once again be able to tell their kids they love them or express themselves. Those of you going into business or finance or public policy will work to create a market environment that allows opportunity *to* all, but demands responsibility *from* all, effectively narrowing the unfair gap that exists between the high times on Wall Street and the hard times on Main Street.

Over the past year I've had the pleasure of playing a role in a new campaign designed to reinvigorate Geneseo. It's called "Shaping Lives of Purpose" which is what our amazing faculty members and administrators are in the business of doing. We had a launch event at the historic Gotham Hall in New York City earlier this year. I was asked to go along, and share with the audience some of the examples of how Geneseo has allowed me to attain success in the field of medicine and how it has allowed all of us to reach new heights we never could have imagined attaining.

After the event was over, a couple approached me. They own a biotechnology company. The following night, they were hosting an upscale dinner for their latest business venture. In attendance would be some of the world's most renowned biomedical scientists -- my heroes -- a few of whom worked to sequence the human genome. Would I like to come? It didn't take me very long to say yes!

I'm a schmoozer. After a wonderful dinner with these fascinating people, we eventually ended up at a party in their lawyer's penthouse apartment. There were several big name people there. One of them was Bono, which was very cool. He didn't stay long, but because I'm a U2 fanatic, I sort of creepily loitered around him. He eventually picked up what I was putting down and came over to strike up a conversation. He became interested in my work because he has done so much for various AIDS initiatives in Africa and he shared a few stories with us. As he was getting ready to leave, he came over to me. He looked at me through those purple sunglasses he never takes off and said, "You know I truly hope that the young people of your generation do not have to first travel to the poorest corners of the earth and experience that deprivation and genocide, to understand that our similarities are more important than what divides us." As I was thinking about

that on the plane ride home, I realized that a major consequence of our rapidly advancing Western world is the temptation to conveniently forget about our interdependence and to turn a blind eye to the world of those who aren't as fortunate as we are.

So I will leave you with this thought that is really more of a challenge. Try to spend more of your time getting in touch with what unites us. Avoid the temptation to believe that the half of 1% that makes you incredible, that brought you here and that will bring you anything you want in this life, is the sum of all that you are...that you deserve the entirety of your good fortune and others deserve the entirety of their bad fortune. While we've worked very hard to get to this day, we've also been blessed, and as my mom says to me, "To whom much is given, much is expected." We are now called to reach out to others and afford them the same opportunities that we maybe took for granted along the way.

It won't be easy. There will be doors slammed in our faces and people telling us that we're wasting our time. But as President Clinton has said: "Nobody remembers the nay-sayers. In the end, all who endure are the builders. And in the very end, even the builders are forgotten, but what always endures are the ripples of what they built." We, the college graduates, the generation that now has more tomorrows than yesterdays, are now the builders who are called to achieve more non-zero-sum outcomes that will allow all of us to prosper. So today, as you stand on this fulcrum in your life -- the past at our backs and the future with a capital F in front of us -- think about all that you have learned at Geneseo. Harness the qualities that we have forged to help us all move forward.

So as you celebrate this day, embrace what makes you incredible, your unique talents, your meaningful diversity, your profound individuality, but always remember that our common humanity means a whole lot more. Congratulations and Godspeed on your journey. Thank you.