

President Bassett's Charge to Degree Recipients

May 18, 2008

Those of us who are remaining in Worcester after today look forward to seeing you graduates take the meaning of Clark University out to the larger world. We know that you and Clark are inseparably bound. Your memories of Clark University will always be sources of inspiration, renewal, and rededication. Remember to visit Clark; send new students to Clark; remain loyal to a university that made a difference in your life. But also demand the best from this university for the generations who follow you here.

The world will need you to "make a difference," to make our planet a better place for all who live in it. I challenge all graduates, each in your own way, first to build on your education productive careers in which you make the most of your natural gifts; second to build a richly satisfying personal life with room for laughter but strength to confront sadness; third to make a commitment to grow and continue learning for the rest of your life; and fourth to engage with your own community to make it a better place for your neighbor and yourself.

You go forth with plenty of opportunity to challenge convention and change your world for the better, to make a positive difference. Go forth also with Clark's original motto, "Fiat lux," or let there be light as a challenge not only to bring the light of truth to others but also as a humble reminder that you, like your teachers and like me, still have new things to learn, new ways to understand your world.

The seniors receiving diplomas may remember that in the first talk the current president ever gave to them, in August of 2004, he told them—in a moment of sheer insanity—that they would never forget they came to Clark the year the Red Sox won the World Series. Two months later, at a midnight donut-and-cider party behind Harrington House, a dozen of you came up to me and said, "Do you remember what you told us back in August?" "No," I quite honestly replied. When they reminded me of my brash and foolish if luckily brilliant prediction, I could only reply, "and I didn't make a penny on that prophecy."

The experience of a thousand students bonding on the Harrington green was special and unique but also typical and symptomatic of the community on this campus. It is a bonding that carries forth into Clark students' commitment to their community in Worcester, in their home town, in other countries. Your will to make a difference in your communities is desperately needed.

You are entering a world that is economically and politically unstable, fraught with national and religious and tribal and class conflicts that are explosive even as weapons available to hostile parties have become more lethal than ever before. It is a world where medical research has gone beyond our wildest dreams

of a half century ago, but where the delivery, the economics, and the ethics of health-care pose questions that call out for creative new answers, and where much of the world lacks the most basic systems of public health. You can help to change that.

It is a world whose economy has grown in leaps unimaginable a generation ago and has become so globalized that existing political and social structures are unable to govern it effectively. You can help to govern it better. It is a world with tremendous opportunities for young people who want to make a difference, to be creative, to be entrepreneurial, to provide leadership, and to solve problems.

Clark graduates, with your understanding of the global nature of our society, with your appreciation of responsibility to your community, and with your ability to analyze problems and to communicate your knowledge to others—you enter this troubled but also very beautiful world with some real advantages. You also enter a world that faces serious challenges.

You enter a world where the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow. You will be in a position to do something about that.

You enter a world where the gap between the education available to poor youth and that available to those with means is enormous and growing. We are wasting whole generations of Americans. You will be in a position to do something about that.

You enter a world where people in positions of power and authority do not always use that power and authority responsibly. Corruption is not limited to corporations—whole countries rely on corruption; and sometimes there is far too much evidence that, as Lord Acton once said, “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” I call on you not only to use whatever authority you have in an ethical and responsible way but also to hold leaders in business, labor, education, and government to the same high standard.

You enter a world where, even as we become more of an international community living in one world and serving as fellow stewards of one environment, we find ourselves divided by parochial hatreds and continually destructive of our environment. I call on you to be good citizens of your community and your world and to protect your environment as if it is the only one we have. Because it is. The University’s commitment to environmental sustainability needs to be reinforced by the individual actions of each member of our community.

As you go forth to challenge convention and change the world, in good Clark fashion, I charge you to be those men and women who use your Clark education to make a positive difference, to be those who speak truth to power, to

be those who—like our honorary degree recipients—bring to your work the courage, vision, and discipline to make your corner of the world a better place when you leave it than when you arrived. Have the vision to imagine what you cannot yet see; have the discipline to make real what you imagine; have the courage to stand up for that vision; but also have the courage to change if you learn you are wrong.

Occasionally in the past I have concluded my remarks with a comment from the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. I find it especially relevant this year and so will repeat it. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression and with a world war impending, Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr appealed to young people to draw on their *passionate idealism* but to connect it to *constructive action*, in effect to challenge convention and change their world. He knew that to be effective, that is really to effect positive change, you must be rational and realistic enough to control your passionate idealism. He also knew, however, that too often reason and realism take over the lives of people before their idealism has any impact at all. Our belief in a perfect system of justice for all may be an illusion, but it is an illusion in which we must believe for a while, or else we will not be driven to achieve more justice for more people.

So, I invite you to go forth with ideals but not to be rigid idealists. Without ideals you will not passionately make a difference and create a better world. As a rigid idealist, however, you may be driven to sacrifice your sister and brother for an abstraction, when the ideal becomes more important than the people. Too easily people today will sacrifice their sisters and brothers for what they call ideals but are really fanatical political abstractions, or fanatical religious abstractions, or projections of their own ego. In any case, millions die or suffer.

I call on you to work for justice, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to educate the child—to believe in ideals but not to make the ideals themselves more meaningful to you than are those diverse and imperfect and at times lost human beings for whose lives the ideals have their only significance. Thank you!