

“Captains, Cast off your Lines”

Governor Timothy M. Kaine
University of Virginia 2006 Commencement Address
Sunday, May 21, 2006

Mr. President; Distinguished Guests; Proud Moms and Dads and the University of Virginia Class of 2006: good afternoon. It's an honor to be with you.

This spring marks my first graduation season as Governor. Just nine days ago, I had the privilege of delivering the commencement address at another university you may have heard of in Blacksburg.

In Virginia, that's what we call being “bipartisan.”

As I stand here this morning, I can't help but think about the futility of graduation speeches. I don't remember anything any of my graduation speakers ever said. In fact, I was the speaker at one of my graduations my high school graduation -- and I can't even remember what I said.

So I hold no illusions about this speech being the central memory you carry forward from today.

In fact, the only things I remember from that high school graduation where I spoke are two things that occurred in the hallway after the commencement was over.

First, my ex-girlfriend – the one who dumped me right before the senior prom – came up and gave me a big hug. I'm not sure I knew how important it was at the time, but that hug really stuck with me. Today is the last day that you will ever be in this place surrounded by this group of people. If there is something unresolved, make it right today. If there is something you want to say to someone, be sure to say it today. You may never again have the chance.

The second thing that stays with me from that day is the exchange I had with my parents after the ceremony finished. I remember thinking how mature I was and how appropriate it was to give my mom a rather formal hug and my dad a rather formal handshake.

But then I saw out of the corner of my eye a guy I knew, a mountain of a man – he was our football team's all-star center – giving both of his parents these great-big bear hugs, shedding tears of joy. All of the sudden the formal pleasantries I was exchanging with my folks just didn't seem like enough. So don't be afraid to share your love today with friends and family. They're a big part of the accomplishment you are marking today.

As we hand out tens of thousands of degrees and diplomas every spring, it's easy to forget the value of a single diploma to the person who has earned it. It's easy to lose sight of that individual achievement.

Some of you have surmounted incredible obstacles – known and unknown – to arrive here today. You have proven yourself equal to the academic challenge. But you've also had to overcome adversity, perhaps endure illness or financial hardship, fight unexpected battles, deal with setbacks and be persistent. It is a privilege to stand here and say, on behalf of the Commonwealth of Virginia, we salute you.

This is a wonderful time to be a Virginian. Tomorrow, at Jamestown, we will commence an 18 month celebration of America's 400th Anniversary. I will stand on the banks of the lower James River next to a full-scale reproduction of the Godspeed, one of the three ships that sailed from England in 1606 to come to America. And, I will shout "Captain, cast off your lines!" as the Godspeed sails off to cities along our Atlantic Seaboard to tell the story of our nation's birth.

The 104 who journeyed with Captain John Smith from England with the Virginia Company were the beginning of English-speaking civilization in this hemisphere. They came as part of a commercial endeavor—seeking economic opportunity beyond that available in the land of their birth. They helped bring notions of representative government, freedom of religious worship, and the equality of all people into aspiration and later into action in this country and throughout the world. We know today that their actions—and the deep and complicated relationships between them and Virginia's Indians and, later, African slaves forcibly brought to Jamestown—truly changed the world. We will commemorate that spirit and history in a special way throughout Virginia and American over the next 18 months.

But, on this day of your graduation, it is good to recall something else about these 104 explorers. For all the history they created that we know today, remember that they set out without knowing what they would find. They had hopes and expectations, certainly, but in a real way, a key feature of their journey was that they didn't know what they were getting into.

To bring it closer to this University, remember that May marks the anniversary month of the date—202 years ago--that Lewis and Clark – at the urging of President Jefferson – began their legendary trip to explore the western frontier and find a water passage to the Pacific Ocean.

(It helps put your college loan debt into perspective to know that Congress allocated all of \$2,500 for the mission.)

Jefferson's unquenchable thirst for knowledge inspired that expedition. But, neither he nor the leaders of the Corps of Discovery knew what they would find. The people, geography, weather, conditions and ultimate outcome of that trip were unknown. And still they sailed.

Today, as you graduate, you no doubt have plans for the next week, months and years. Travel, marriage, graduate school, work, parenthood, webs of family and friends, will fill

up the moments of your future. Most of your cell phones can now carry not only your complete list of contacts but also your schedule so that you can have a minute to minute allocation of your time always and everywhere available.

But, in the midst of an over-scheduled world, I want to recommend the simple and enduring beauty of adventure, discovery and surprise. One of the greatest joys in life is not knowing what you'll find. John Lennon said that "Life is what happens when your plans fall through." Embrace people you don't know, accept challenges you don't fully comprehend, live out stories whose last chapters haven't been written.

When I was your age, and on a very fast-paced track to go through college and law school and on into the work world, I switched gears and went to Central America to volunteer with Catholic missionaries for a year. Next to my marriage, that one decision—made one day with an intuitive gut feeling—has had the greatest impact on what I've done with my life. It has guided my faith and my daily direction for the last 25 years. It taught me, in a way no lecture or lesson could, that true happiness is found in focusing on how to use your gifts to benefit other people.

I never imagined I would be in politics (and my parents still aren't sure whether to be proud or embarrassed), but I got mad one day after I'd lived in Richmond for 10 years and just decided to run against a popular incumbent for my City Council. I didn't fill out a list of the pros and cons of entering electoral politics—my heart said do it so I jumped. That was 12 years and 6 elections ago and my life has taken a completely different path than I thought it would as a result.

I could tell you many more stories of how my plans got set aside for inspirations of the moment. The things I planned to do have usually worked out pretty well. But, the things I never thought I'd do have been truly grace-filled—times of great excitement and personal growth. Even when I've failed along the way, there's a real satisfaction to taking a noble risk and learning to accept the consequences as a natural part of life. Henry Thoreau said it well—"I love my fate to the very core and rind."

So, I'm telling you to set off today on your own voyage of discovery and relish the fact that you just don't know what you'll find out there. I tell you this because I think it's good personal advice to be bold, to do and to dare. I think some of the deepest regrets in life are the things you don't try, rather than the mistakes you make.

But, I also tell you this because our world still needs adventurers. John Smith and Lewis & Clark had new geographic worlds to explore. That will probably not be your lot. But, there are still new worlds of knowledge and research to explore. There are still new worlds of economic innovation and opportunity to discover. There are still new worlds of understanding and reconciliation between people that you can pioneer. And, the education you've gained here makes you uniquely able to succeed in these and other needed adventures.

In fact, do you know that, two centuries after the Corps of Discovery, the University of Virginia is the leading university [of its size] in this nation in sending graduates into the Peace Corps? More than 800 UVA graduates have served in the Peace Corps in its 45 year history—with more than half of that number entering the Peace Corps since 2000. With all the great success of the University's academic programs, what a great statistic this is. It says that this University excels at giving students a sense of adventure, a strong dose of self-confidence, and a passion for serving other people. That is worthy of celebrating.

2006 graduates of the University of Virginia, it is truly an honor to stand here with you today and say the most fitting words I can muster:

“Captains, cast off your lines!”