

*The 157th Commencement of The City College of New York*

**Friday, May 31, 2003**

*Address by President Gregory H. Williams*

Senator Schumer, Vice Chancellor Maccari, Mr. Cook, Miss Arredondo and Miss Ou, distinguished honorees, members of the faculty, staff and alumni of the College, graduates and family members – it is a pleasure and a privilege to welcome you all to the 157<sup>th</sup> Commencement of The City College of New York.

I am particularly pleased to share the dais with the eminent men and women whom we are honoring here today. Each of you honors *us* by your presence. Each of you has taken care of the world around you, and moved our very civilization forward. We are proud and grateful to welcome you into the City College family.

It is also a special privilege to welcome the family members and friends of the graduating class of 2003. As a parent, I know how proud you are today: However uncertain this happy outcome may have seemed at times over the past years – today your best hopes for the future have been met. As an educator, I know that your support and your encouragement have been absolutely essential to the success of the graduates that we celebrate now. It is your success too, and we applaud you.

Most importantly – to the graduating class of 2003 – congratulations! This is YOUR day. You have worked long and hard to get here, and PROUD to see you carry on the long tradition of excellence makes The City College of New York the nation's flagship college of public higher education.

Now, you may well think of this day as an ENDING of sorts, undoubtedly with a mixture of fondness and relief. And of course it is. Over the past weeks and months, you've completed a series of "lasts:"

- the LAST all-nighter you will have to pull to finish a paper...
- the LAST exam in that core course you put off until your final semester...
- the LAST chemistry test, or portfolio presentation, or 20-page critical analysis...
- the LAST frantic trip to the library to find a few additional references for your bibliography...
- the LAST time you'll lock up a lab...or see the sunrise after a marathon film-editing session... or walk up that seemingly unending hill from the subway...

However final these vignettes feel, however, this day is called your *commencement* for good reason. It is not only an *end* but also a *beginning* – not only the *culmination* of your hard work and good fortune, but also a point of *embarkation*.

But what, exactly, are you "commencing?"

The short answer to that question – and it's not all that reassuring – is simply: I don't know.

You are launching yourselves into a time of great uncertainty, and possibly great peril. In recent months and years we've seen the world turned upside down again and again; the nightly news brings a steady drumbeat of terror alerts and terrorist acts, war, corporate greed and SARS. At

home and abroad, sometimes off the radar screen but all too real, poverty, injustice and ethnic hatred cramp the lives and dash the hopes of far too many people. Closer to home today, the economy that you are graduating into hardly seems to offer the possibilities that so many of you have worked so hard to earn.

A recent headline in *The New York Times* ran: “College Students Lower their Sights in Today’s Job Market.” Like so many others, the article talks about students who started school when the economy was strong and a college education promised a good job and a challenging career, only to find that the jobs they were prepared for were just not there. As one graduating senior put it: “We definitely picked the wrong time to be graduating from college.”

This is *not* the world you were hoping to graduate into during those long nights of studying; of taking the classes you didn’t think you needed in order to get into the ones you wanted; of juggling the sometime impossible demands of jobs and schoolwork and family to earn your degree.

My sympathy is very much with you – the more so as I have a daughter who finished law school last year and was surprised to find the job market already crimped.

But my challenge to you is unambiguous: *do not lower your sights. Raise them.*

Now, I daresay every person sitting on this podium, every faculty member that you’ve ever admired, every friend or family member that you love and respect, has at some point taken a job that did not meet his or her early hopes and expectations. There is no shame in that; in fact, there is great honor in doing what you have to do to take care of yourself and your family.

But you must not get discouraged if your immediate prospects do not seem to live up to your careful preparations. More importantly, you must not *settle* for any suggestion that *who you are* and *what you can accomplish* are defined by the vagaries of the job market, or by the bonds of inequality and injustice that are chronicled on the nightly news.

*Raise your sights.* Whether you start work on Monday, or are just beginning to look for a job in earnest, or are preparing for graduate school or medical school or law school, *now* is the time that you must open your hearts and minds to new possibilities – because I promise you that your life will unfold in response to your ability to seize opportunities that you did not plan for.

American poet and philosopher Eli Siegel wrote: “*Intelligence* is the ability to *welcome* the *new*.” More than any exam or any paper – more even than the degrees that you are justifiably so proud of today – your ability to welcome the new will be the measure of how *smart* you really are.

Now, much that is “new” seems hardly comfortable, or even friendly, so what does it mean to *welcome* it?

It certainly does *not* mean to discard the past. You spent years in school, (and many of you will spend more years in school), analyzing, debating and absorbing some of the accumulated wisdom that great civilizations have deemed worth preserving. You have learned from many cultures and many peoples about ways of seeing the world that you never dreamed of. And along the way you changed the way you see the world.

Whether you took the absolute minimum number of science credits or spent all of your spare time in a laboratory, you learned some of the habits of mind of the scientist – how to ask the right questions, evaluate evidence, prove or discard or transform your hypothesis. And I hope and

believe that even the most thorough scientists and engineers among you found some poetry, or music or literature that met the deepest needs of your soul.

In fact, perhaps without knowing it, every one of your successes here at City College – every time you took a fact or an opinion into your mind and a new passion into your heart in order to “master” it, you *welcomed the new*.

It’s how you got here today. Outside the classroom as well as in it; from those you respect as teachers, or love as friends, and even from those you never liked; in the quad and the cafeteria as well as in the laboratory and studio – every person and every place and every program that you learned from at City College opened you up to new possibilities, and enabled you to grasp opportunities previously closed to you.

“Welcoming the new”, then, is a kind of eagerness to engage the future – starting with jumping into the present with both feet, *no matter what* the present may entail – to find out *more*, to push *further*, to see *beyond* the here-and-now.

Welcoming the new is taking *pleasure* – on the job, or reading the newspaper, or talking with a friend – in finding out what is *true* about things, and taking pleasure in following that truth no matter where that leads you. It means asking over and over again, and with a full heart, and with no limit on your desire to know – what is *true* here?

- What is your *evidence*?
- Who *says* – and who *benefits*?
- *What if* things were different?
- What is this *related* to?
- What *difference* does this make?
- What difference can I make?

The answers to these questions are much larger than that job you are now looking for, or that graduate degree you are pursuing – but they will make that job, or that graduate in ways you cannot now guess.

The answers to these questions may lead you even more resolutely down the path that you plan to follow today. Or they may derail you completely, to the passionate pursuit of something that you thought was only a side interest, an evenings-and-weekend thing – or something you never even thought of at all.

I do not know, then, what you are “commencing” today – but I know that you have the *chance* – a chance that you have earned through hard work and perseverance, but a *chance* nonetheless, not a guarantee – to begin something *remarkable*. And in the course of it, to transform our world.

Now, I have spoken a lot about “the new”—but I want to conclude with a reference to the past, because like all academics, I believe that the past and the future are inextricably, (and in the final analysis, happily), bound one to the other.

Some of you may know that today we celebrate not only your commencement, but also the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of The City College’s *first* commencement class – the class of 1853. That first class consisted of 17 young men. And you will no doubt appreciate the fact that that class of 17, with their families and friends, comprised a group too large to graduate in the chapel of our original college building on 23<sup>rd</sup> street; therefore they celebrated their commencement in a beer garden – a situation short on pomp and circumstance, but probably long on good cheer.

So, 150 years ago, 17 young men were the first to gain an education under the truly radical idea at the heart of City College, an idea articulated by the first president of City College, Townsend Harris, who said:

“Open the doors to all. Let the children of the rich and the poor alike take their seats together, knowing of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct, and intellect.”

The very *foundation* of City College was *revolutionary* – a welcoming of the new on a grand, democratic scale that would change the course of higher education. Of course, we all know that ideal was imperfectly realized in 1853. You have only to remark that they were all *men*; it would be well into the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the student body of The City College of New York truly reflected the rich cultural, ethnic and economic diversity that those ringing words, “open the door to all,” take in.

But as you look around today at your fellow graduates, who come from all classes, all cultures, all corners of the globe, you have a chance to see that City College’s democratic ideal has come a very long way.

It is *still* a revolutionary idea – and you are all revolutionaries. I am very proud to be a part of it – and we are all *very proud* of you, and what you have achieved. Even more – we are proud and confident of what you *will* achieve – as from today you take up the challenge to welcome the new. Congratulations, and good luck.