



**Graduate Commencement Address - May 6, 2005**

**Lionel M. Raff  
Regents Professor  
Chair of the General Faculty**

**Graduates, Members of the Faculty, Administration and Board of Regents, Ladies and Gentlemen, my remarks today are addressed to our graduates.**

**Approximately 20 years ago, each of you began your formal education in a kindergarten class either in the United States or overseas. On that day, if you were like me, you were probably nervous and uncertain about being away from home for so much of the day. It is unlikely that any of you ever thought that the course of study that you were to begin that day so long ago would lead to this moment in G/I Arena at which you will be receiving advanced degrees in your chosen field of study. In fact, I bet many of you thought this day would never come, which just goes to show that “The longest journeys do indeed begin with but a single step.”**

**Today, your loved ones, the individuals you value most in your life, your spouse, your children, your parents, grandparents, fiancée, girlfriend, boyfriend, your closest friends have all gathered to experience along with you the joy of this moment...to offer their congratulations and their best wishes for**

**your success in the years to come. Their presence here today is just one more thing in a very long series of things that they have done for you to make this day possible.**

**As you enjoy the moment, each of you should reflect on all that they have done. Remember that first day of school when you were so frightened? Your parents were there to reassure you that all would be well. Recall those multiplication tables that were so hard, those history lessons that seemed to comprise an unending series of disconnected facts, those science classes that seemed so impossible to comprehend. Throughout all of those moments, they were there for you, picking you up, lifting your spirits when you needed them the most. When the expense of your education seemed too heavy to bear, they were probably there at those moments as well. These gifts of love and education that they have freely given are priceless. Don't forget to say "thank you" and, most importantly, be certain that you pass on those same gifts to your children.**

**While we are considering the individuals who have participated in bringing you to this point in your careers, don't forget to credit the teachers who guided you through grade school and high school. They played a major role not only in conveying knowledge but also in conveying the excitement of learning. Your undergraduate professors and those who have directed your graduate studies should not be overlooked. As the years pass, drop them a card...let them know how you're doing. They really do care!**

**Now there is good news and bad news. The good news is that you are going to graduate tonight. At least, I haven't heard of any M.S. or Ph.D.**

committees that plan to reconvene to reconsider their decisions. The bad news is that the graduate degree that you will receive tonight will mark you for life. Those holding these degrees are expected to be the leaders, the problem solvers, the go-to persons in all organizations. The problems that others are going to bring to your attention will not be easy...they will be, in fact, the problems that others cannot solve. But you will be expected to find solutions. Does that thought make you at least a little nervous...or maybe a lot nervous? If you heed the advice of Sir William Osler, it shouldn't... "The best preparation for tomorrow is today's job superbly well done."

Doing today's job superbly well requires that you adopt what is perhaps a different view of what your degree represents. There is a natural tendency to think of your degree as the culmination of a long journey...the tangible evidence that your journey is over and that you have successfully reached your final destination. Such a view is erroneous, wrong headed, enormously counter productive. Your degree is not a certificate of completion...it is, instead, a ticket entitling the holder to board the train of knowledge, experience and learning that will take you on a journey unlike any you have ever imagined. The passengers on this train spend their entire lives gathering knowledge, experience, understanding, compassion such that at the end of each day, they have more of these items than they had at the beginning of the day. This expanding experience, this expanding knowledge produces power... not the type of power wielded by politicians and administrators.... but power to do things that others cannot do... it is the power to solve incredibly difficult problems, the power to change sickness to health... hate to love... bigotry to understanding... slavery to freedom. It is no less than the power to change the

**world. And make no mistake... one person... one voice speaking with that power and with courage can do that.**

**Many years ago, one of my acquaintances remarked that a graduate will never know as much as he or she knew the day they passed their examinations for their graduate degree. I was both shocked and sad when I heard this... shocked because the statement was incorrect to the point of being absurd... sad because I realized that for him, it was probably true. He had never cashed his train ticket...he had allowed the train to leave the station without him. There are a lot of people like that. Don't let their fate be yours. The train is in the station right now...waiting for you. Enjoy the day...celebrate your signal achievement with your loved ones and then get on board for the ride of a lifetime.**

**During your journey on this train, you will be passing places that, at the moment, you do not know even exist. You will meet individuals unknown to you now. Many of these people will be in need, crying out to you for help. You will observe situations and conditions that are not honorable, not fair...conditions that degrade human existence and human dignity, conditions that need your attention. Moreover, you will possess the power to help these individuals in need... you will have the power required to effect a change in the conditions. All you will need to do is muster the courage to act...to speak...**

**“Speak... Act”... easy to say...not always easy to do. As I speak, men and women in our military forces are stationed around the world in the line of fire risking their lives in our behalf. Their dedication makes it possible for us to be here today to celebrate your signal achievement in safety and security.**

**Fortunately, it is not always that difficult to act and speak, but it is always hard. However, it becomes much easier if you remember that your train ticket has one very unusual feature...there is no return ticket. This train only goes one way. The people you pass along the way, the conditions and situations you encounter, you will pass only once. You will not pass this way again. The train will never return. Fail to act... fail to speak... and you fail for all time. There will never be a second chance, and the bitterness and regret for having failed to act... to speak... will be with you always. But speak and act with courage using the power your knowledge and experiences will give you, and your journey will be filled with an immense satisfaction that will last a lifetime.**

**In a few moments, you will be receiving your degree... your ticket for a journey unlike any other. I cashed my ticket 43 years ago, and it has been and remains an exhilarating ride. So... get on board... join me and my colleagues for a lifelong journey. There's a seat right here beside me.... and you know what... it has your name on it. Don't let the train leave the station without you. I promise you, there is nothing like this journey.**

**Now...as Chair of the General Faculty and on behalf of the entire Faculty I extend to each of you our congratulations and best wishes. Get on board...those of us who cashed our tickets are waiting for you.**

**I invite all of our guests to stand and join me in applauding our graduates. They have all most certainly earned it.**