

The 1998 Commencement Address: University of Pennsylvania

The Things You Cannot See

Thank you very much.

As you may know, my wife, Rosalynn, and I build houses with Habitat for Humanity one week a year. The other 51 weeks we work at The Carter Center in Atlanta, which is not as well known.

We have programs, for instance, in 35 African nations. Just last month, we visited South Africa, where our oldest grandson, Jason, who finished college last May, is serving in the Peace Corps. I told Jason that I was going to give the commencement address at the University of Pennsylvania and asked him for his advice. He said, "Remember four things: Be brief, tell a joke, speak to the graduates, and keep in mind that they're not going to remember anything you say."

After visiting Jason, we were going to go see Nelson Mandela. Jason learned about this visit and asked to go with us, because, he said, he wanted to visit a politician who was in office before he went to jail.

So, I'm going to try to combine those four elements of advice from my grandson in my commencement talk to you.

I'm very proud of this great university, and I've been filled with admiration for what has been done here in the various fields that you represent as graduates.

I grew up in the South, in southern Georgia, during a time that is now a source of embarrassment for me and many others, not only in our region of the nation, but also in other states of America, a time when racial discrimination was accepted not only by the bar association and the Supreme Court, but also by the Congress and the people of the United States. We bore a millstone of racial prejudice around our necks, both the white people and those of African descent.

My wife and I, on this last trip, visited our 125th nation since I left the White House. We've been able to judge the problems that exist in many parts of the world. Racial discrimination is not the worst kind we've seen.

We have major projects in Sudan, a country in which 1.5 million people have been killed in a war based on ethnic strife, with a fundamentalist Muslim government fighting basically a Christian revolutionary force. Ethnic and religious discrimination is not the worst.

The worst discrimination on earth is rich people against poor people. This is not a deliberate discrimination. It's not filled with hatred or animosity, but it permeates the human race.

Who are the rich people? I would say that everyone in this stadium, by my definition, is a rich person. A rich person is someone who has a decent home, who has a modicum of education, a reasonable level of health care, at least a prospect for a job, is not afraid to go outside (at least in the daytime), and feels that the police and judicial system are on our side. We think that if we make a decision, it will make a difference, at least in our own lives. Those are the rich people.

There are a lot of poor people around the world, and even next door to where we live, and it's very rare that we break down the chasm between us who have everything and others whom we ignore and fail to

get to know. How many of us actually know a poor family — even our maid’s family or the guy who mows our lawn — well enough to go to his house or her house, have a cup of coffee and learn the names of their teenage kids? Or, God forbid, invite them to our house, and let their children get to know our children? Not very many.

I want you to remember this, and I will use Jason’s advice, so maybe you will remember it, and I’m going to tell a joke.

I’m an author; I’ve written 12 books. My wife wanted me to announce that all our books are still on sale.

A book that I wrote the year before last is called *Living Faith*, and I included in it a joke about a man who died very proud of himself, went to heaven and was met by St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, “Tell me why you think you’re qualified to go to heaven.” The man replied, “Well, I made a lot of money on Earth, I had a beautiful home, I was excelling in every degree. I had my name in the paper often, I was a regular attender at church, I gave heavily to my church, and I attended services regularly.”

St. Peter said, “Yes, but what did you do for other people?” There was a pause, and then the guy said, “Well, I remember back in the Depression years, a hobo’s family came by my house, and I told my wife to fix up some sandwiches for them. And she fixed a big paper sack, and the family really enjoyed those sandwiches. I guess, in those years, it was worth at least 50 cents, maybe even a dollar.”

St. Peter said to an angel, “Go down to Earth and see if this is an accurate story.” In a few minutes the angel came back and said, “Yes, he told the truth. What shall we do about it?” St. Peter said, “Give him his dollar back and tell him to go to hell.”

If you don’t remember about rich vs. poor, remember about the dollar being given back.

Another thing I want to caution you about, or encourage you to remember, is an encapsulated environment. There is an inclination in all of us to build around ourselves a secure place to live, where we are surrounded by people whom we can trust, whom we know, who are almost just like us, who look like us, dress like us, drive in the same kinds of automobiles, go to the same places. And quite often, we have a tendency to be very proud of what we do.

I’m proud of the University of Pennsylvania. I’m proud of Emory University, where I’ve been a professor for 15 years. But my work mostly is in Africa. A few years ago, I was asked to make a speech to the Southeastern Region presidents of universities. I had been in Africa, and I had to come back to New Orleans to make the speech.

I was at a table that evening at the final banquet with a group of African leaders, and I had a little tape recorder, and I asked them a question: “How much do American universities mean to you?” I wrote down their answers, and I’ll read them; they’re very brief. These are actual transcripts of what was said.

One minister from Seychelles, who happened to be the minister of finance, said, “American universities are rarely relevant.”

A woman who still serves in office from Uganda as the agriculture minister and also now the vice president said, “What is known is not shared with those needing to know. Information is just exchanged among academics who never witness hunger or have personal knowledge of torture or see a denuded

landscape. How many university presidents have ever been in a village where river blindness is prevalent or Guinea worm is a constant plague? We cannot even get our agricultural research scientists to go out into the fields because they look on extension workers and farmers as inferiors.”

The prime minister of Ghana was there. He said, “We know that almost everything is connected – health, nutrition, environmental quality, political stability, human rights. Some leading educators understand this, but that information is not even shared with our government ministers, whose decisions control the lives of our people. “

A minister of health from Zambia said, “Universities should be where the highest ideals are preserved, but we witness little interest in our problems.”

On the way back home, I rode with a scientist who may be well known to some of you. His name is Bill Foege, perhaps one of the greatest public-health servants in history. I asked him the question as well, and he told me, “In the education of my own children, I would want them to acquire three things:

- “First of all, an inquisitive mind, always exploring new ideas, questioning old ones, not afraid to challenge the status quo.
- “Second, I would want them to know that there is a cause-and-effect relationship. This is not a fatalistic world, inhabited by people whose suffering is inevitable and whose problems cannot be solved.
- “And third, I would want my children to know that they are world citizens. Their lives are inextricably tied to those in other nations. I would want them eager to learn foreign languages — even force them to, if necessary.”

That’s the second point I want to make. Don’t believe that we live in an encapsulated or parochial world where our own interests are paramount and our own beliefs are necessarily accurate. I tried to think of a story to illustrate this.

I was born in 1924. In that same year, Texas had a woman governor whose husband had been governor before her. They called her Ma Ferguson. In Texas that year, there was a hot debate, which is still going on in California, Texas, and other places, about whether you should use English only, or Spanish, in the elementary-school grades where the kids don’t really speak good English. It was a hot debate. Ma Ferguson finally ended the debate. She held up a King James Version of the Bible, and she said, “If English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it’s good enough for Texas.”

You remember what Ma Ferguson said, and don’t believe that we know all the answers.

The last point I want to make is that we should continually stretch our minds. In the modern, fast-changing, technological world, we’re inclined to think that maybe all the major discoveries have been made. Some of the honorees behind me have proven that that’s not so. There is a need for an individual human being, including every one of you Penn graduates, to remember this. Let’s stretch our minds, try new ideas, and not put a limit on ourselves.

Following Jason’s advice again — Jason is going to be famous after this speech—I tried to think of a story to illustrate this.

As a professor at Emory, I come across some wiseacre students who think they know more than the professors. I can’t deny that quite often they’re right in my class.

There was this student, a freshman, who had the reputation of proving that he knew more than the professor did. One of the final examination questions in a physics class was, "How do you use a barometer to measure the height of a building?" The student, instead of answering the question, said, "There are a lot of ways, Professor. I don't know which way you want it."

The professor called him in and said, "Look, wise guy, you said you could use a lot of ways to have a barometer determine the height of a building. I want to know one way." The student said, "Well, one way is you take a barometer on the ground, you measure the air pressure, you go up to the top of the building, you measure the air pressure changes, and you can compute the height of the building."

The professor said, "That's right. How about the other ways?" The student said, "Well, you take the barometer, you put it on the ground, you measure the height of the barometer, you measure the height of its shadow, you measure the length of the building's shadow, and you can compute the height of the building." And the professor didn't say anything.

"Anything else?" And the student said, "Yes, sir. You can take the barometer to the roof, tie a string on it, lower it to the ground, measure the length of the string, and that gives you the height of the building."

By that time, the business dean came by, saw things were going badly and told the student, "If you can tell me a way to measure the height of a building using business principles, we'll give you an A." The student said, "That's easy. You take this nice barometer, go to the building superintendent on campus and say, 'If you tell me the height of the building, I'll give you this barometer.'"

The point is, you can see, always try new ways to resolve difficult or intransigent problems.

I would like to close my remarks by talking about one word that's my favorite. That word is "transcendence." Transcendence: Doing more than is expected, above and beyond the call of duty.

We live in the greatest nation on Earth, an unchallenged superpower. When I was president, it was also the greatest nation, but there were two superpowers, because of the nuclear arsenals. Now the Soviet Union is basically dissipating.

What are the characteristics of a superpower — the optimum, transcendent characteristics of a superpower? I would say they're shaped by the combined or conglomerate desires, hopes, dreams, aspirations, moral standards, and ideals of the American people. I think the United States should be the unquestioned champion of peace—not just for ourselves, but for others around the world, and not just in nations that have oil that we can use or things that we can benefit from, but in the smallest and most isolated countries.

In those nations that I visit around the world, our country is not looked upon as a champion of peace. We're looked upon as a nation with great military power that it is sometimes eager to use. Our nation should be the champion of freedom and democracy.

The Carter Center, for instance, has observed elections 15 times in this hemisphere that were opportunities to bring about a change from a totalitarian government to a democratic government. Sometimes elections resolve disputes.

The final characteristic, I would say, is commitment to human rights and the alleviation of suffering.

Speaking of suffering and the alleviation of it, I want to refer to the reason I came to Penn University today, and that's Roy Vagelos, the chairman of your board of trustees.

The Carter Center, working with Bill Foege, whom I quoted a few minutes ago, tries to alleviate suffering around the world. About 10 years or so ago, Roy Vagelos, then the chief executive officer of Merck & Co., came to our center and said, "We found that one of our veterinary medicines that we sell profitably will also prevent a terrible human disease called onchocerciasis, or river blindness, and if The Carter Center will develop a system for distribution on this medicine — ivermectin, or Mectizan®, as they call it — we'll give you the medicine." And we did so.

Later, Roy Vagelos and I went with my wife, Rosalynn, and his wife to a little village in southern Chad, where everybody in the village had river blindness. But one tablet developed under Roy Vagelos' leadership will prevent river blindness. The person never becomes blind. Last year, we treated with Merck's medicine, given free of charge to every village in the world in perpetuity, 21.5 million people who will never be blind. And I want to thank Roy Vagelos for that.

I also would like to say that our country should set an example, even including the most recent news from India and potentially from Pakistan. I know India quite well. My mother served in India in the Peace Corps when she was 70 years old. And I think I'm the last president to visit India, the greatest, biggest democracy on Earth.

People look toward the United States with great admiration, but also for guidance, and we have not been fair in trying to keep people from developing nuclear weapons. We have about — it's secret — but about 8,000 nuclear weapons; we insist that India not have one. We have failed to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, but we insist on India doing this.

We have ignored the opportunity and even contravened the overwhelming attitude of the world in insisting that we still plant land mines, the most devastating weapon against innocent, non-participating civilians. I would hope that our country could see that our example can be the greatest deterrent to the spread of death, destruction and war.

Finally, I want to say just a word to you about transcendence. I think that all of us look upon ourselves as being blessed by God with one existence on earth. We want to make something of it. If you hadn't you wouldn't have come to Penn.

But what kind of priorities do we set? It's not a matter of how much money we make, how secure we are in our old age, how many times our names get mentioned in the news media. There are other things. This has been a question that has been on the minds of people for many centuries.

Two thousand years ago, the people of Corinth asked St. Paul this question: "What is the most important thing of all?" The way they expressed it was, "What are the things in human life that never change?" Paul gave a strange answer. He said, "They're the things you cannot see." You can see money, you can see a house, you can see your name in the paper. What are the things you cannot see that should be paramount in our lives? You can't see justice, peace, service, humility. You can't see forgiveness, compassion ... and you can't see, if you will excuse the expression, love.

Thank you for your attention, and congratulations.

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