

# “Embrace change – but hold on to your values”

Humboldt State University  
2010 Commencement Speech  
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President Richmond, faculty, parents, family, friends, supporters of Humboldt State University ... and most of all ... proud graduates of the Class of 2010:

Thank you for the honor and privilege of speaking here at this great event and in this marvelous setting. Every time I come here, I wonder why they played so many football games *at night* in the Redwood Bowl. Could there be any better setting anywhere, with the brush strokes of daylight and mist against the redwoods, and the richest air on the planet?

Not in my view.

I've come back to this gorgeous campus twice in recent years to memorialize one of my professors ... most recently two weeks ago, to honor the late Pete Wilson. I will spare you the details of the gathering ... or the stories I shared with my fellow alums who, in many cases, traveled many miles to get here. After all, this *is* your day. But I *will* offer you one thought. In the 33 years since I left this campus, the words of wisdom I received in class here have resonated in my ears many, many times. This is not so much the place where I learned journalism; this is where I learned to think like a journalist ... to absorb its values of accuracy, ethics ... and the joy in pursuing the story. In the years since I left, there have been times I have called my former professors for advice, or they have called me to see how I was doing ... and each contact has been precious. I like to say that this is a university where my education came with a 100,000 mile warranty. It's unusual. It's extraordinary. It's a gift.

Graduates, if you haven't already done so, thank your professors before you leave here. And make the effort to stay in touch. Professors: Return their calls. The loyalty you nurture *will* be appreciated ... and will enrich the university.

I don't want to sugarcoat the backdrop to this occasion. This is a precarious moment to be entering what we call the “real world.” I don't have to remind any of you that ... we remain mired in the most severe recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The United States is embroiled in military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We remain in an overarching war against terrorism that may not end with any clarity in any of our lifetimes. Our national deficit has reached the trillion-dollar level.

I know what some of you are thinking: “Why are we listening to a newspaper guy on graduation day? Isn't that a failing business? Isn't this a day for good news? What was President Richmond thinking?”

Actually, I come with a message of optimism ... about change ... about communication ... about holding on to your values in this world of change.

There are two things I can predict with some certainty:

**One:** Your generation will determine whether this nation, this world, can course-correct from the messes that mine, and the generations before me, have left for you.

**Two:** You will encounter change you never could have anticipated. Trust me on this. Some of you, perhaps most of you, before your careers are finished, will find yourselves in jobs that do not exist today.

So here is the silver lining:

Your generation has lived through a period of great change ... in technology ... in the way we work and travel ... in the status of the United States in the world. Lots of folks in my generation are struggling with change. You embrace it, you expect it ... you are ready to create it. This is one of your greatest assets as you go into your respective professions.

My business, the news business, is just one of many industries that must change ... as a matter of survival. Change is also likely to define your world ... whether you are leaving here with a degree in oceanography, forestry, child development or sociology.

I am in a business that has gone through about as much change as any this side of the U.S. auto industry. Just look at the “news *about* the news” in the past year. Bankruptcies. Mergers. Buyouts. Circulation drops. More layoffs than one could imagine. It’s painful. We’ve lost a lot of good people. Some left voluntarily, some did not. But if there is one common thread among those who have chosen to remain – or been allowed to remain – it is that each and every one of them has embraced change.

I love the newspaper, the printed word, but I realize this is not our future. Our business model changed as readers and advertisers migrated to digital methods of communication. For some of you ... maybe most of you ... the newspaper itself has become as obsolete as the Sony Walkman or the VCR. But the demand for new songs did not go away just because college students started downloading music for “free.” To me, as an editor, our real challenge is to keep producing content that people want and need ... and the technology and the business model will follow.

See, I really am an optimist.

My goal in life is to preserve the *standards* and *values* of journalism. As one of my professors here, the late Howard Seemann, used to tell me: Don’t be co-opted by the culture of the organization you’re in ... if it involves shortcutting quality or lapses in ethics. Set your own standards, the *highest* standards, of the organization you *want* to

work for and the person *you* want to be. This approach will never fail you, he assured me. He was right. In my 33 years, it never has.

As I look around the nation, at the collapse of public faith in our institutions – banking, government and, yes, sadly, in too many cases, journalism – I only wish that others were exposed to the wisdom of Howard Seemann.

The way people communicate with each other is something that I think about all the time ... and not just because I'm in the communications business. I'm also a parent, and I marvel at the way our speed and method of communication has evolved. It's amazing how easy it is to stay in touch. I love getting text messages from my daughter in college. Of course, I also wince from time to time when I see those Facebook postings from Saturday night.

I would not turn the clock back if I could. Modern communications offer us ways to create communities – and even fight repression – with a power that could not be imagined not long ago. I think about the protesters in Iran, and how they used their mobile phones to stay in touch. Technology can be a great friend of democracy.

But there are downsides to this remarkable era: There is a danger of falling in love with technology. It can even be hazardous to your health. A recent story in my newspaper surveyed orthopedists who are seeing a whole new wave of injuries resulting from hand-held devices ... from the rather obvious – the BlackBerry thumb – to spinal strain caused by people constantly looking down to send text messages. And, of course, the increasingly apparent dangers of calling or texting while driving are leading to new laws in many states, including ours. Laws that seem to be widely ignored.

And there is the issue of the content itself that flows so freely today.

The age of information is also the age of disinformation.

Consider:

- Conspiracy theories and outright falsehoods gain unwarranted credence on an unfiltered, unaccountable World Wide Web. Think of all the times you've heard someone cite "I saw it on the Internet" as evidence of something. It may be right, it may be distortion ... it may be outright fabrication. Hold on to your values. Don't lose your skepticism.
- As amazing as technology can be, it can dull us to the experience of real life. I think about the times I have seen someone on a backwoods hike with music roaring in their ear buds ... missing all the subtle sounds of nature. Or the times someone in the next row at the ballpark is texting messages or chatting on the phone instead of interacting with the people they came with. I think about those scenes with President Obama in a rope line and all the cell-phone cameras rising above the crowd from people more determined to get a snapshot ... than to experience the fleeting moment of real human eye contact they can never

recapture. (Just as an aside: For all of you who have taken a cell phone shot of this speech: Don't get me wrong. I *am* flattered. Thank you)

- Finally, it has been said that 80 percent of life is showing up. But is being virtually connected the same as showing up? No. A thousand Facebook friends is not equivalent to having one friend who will sit there, and listen to you, in a moment of need. Genuine human interaction does not always fit within 140-character tweets. Sometimes your silent presence can be as powerful – as reassuring, as comforting – as the fullest email in-box in the world.

Embrace change, be an agent of change, but hold on to your values.

I've been out of school many years, but no so long that I've forgotten the impatience of waiting for a party. So I won't hold back the celebration much longer.

But, please, indulge me one more point:

Don't be afraid of failure.

It can toughen you. It can strengthen you. It can motivate you. It can create the turning points that define your career.

It took me what seemed like forever to get my first job after graduation from this university. I had dreams of the Los Angeles Times or the San Francisco Chronicle spotting my brilliance and hiring me right out of school. It did not happen. Two months and scores of applications later, I had a stiff dose of humility ... and my first break: With the Red Bluff Daily News, circulation 8,000, at \$160 a week, which was not a lot of money even then. As I drove my beat-up Volkswagen Bug toward the Central Valley on Highway 299, I openly wondered whether I had failed before I started. Would I ever do anything in the profession I chose? Did I even pick the right career? I had similar doubts with each setback of my career. Each one made me tougher, savvier, more motivated.

Remember that. I know it's a tough job market out there ... and for those of you who have found jobs ... a hearty congratulations. For those of you who are still looking: Know that your career will not be defined by what happens out of the starting blocks.

If you're lucky enough to have a straight upward trajectory to where you want to be, God bless you. But if it's not, know that you still have a chance of being commencement speaker here three decades from now.

For all of you: Don't look at those lists in business magazines of "the 10 hottest careers for the next decade" when choosing your calling. Follow your heart. If you do something you truly enjoy, then 9-to-5 is not a burden ... but a fulfilling segment of each and every day. There is nothing better than doing something you enjoy ... something that matters ... and not having to really work for a living. If you embrace change, push for change – instead of fearing it, or resisting it – then your education was not even close to being completed today. That is a good thing. You will learn ... and you will prosper ... and you

will attain the success that you've worked so hard here to pursue. And that is truly something to celebrate.

Congratulations, Class of 2010! This is your day.