

Commencement Address for a Centennial Class

1913 – Humboldt State University – 2013

May 18 ~ Redwood Bowl



President Rollin C. Richmond, the Baron Alexander von Humboldt, and President-Emeritus Alistair W. McCrone pose before the CNRS Ceremony

(Photos: Kellie Jo Brown, HSU Marketing & Communications)

Notes

The 2013 HSU Centennial Commencement speaker was the Baron Alexander von Humboldt, as portrayed by Stephen F. Cunha, Chair & Professor of Geography. The Baron's remarks were drawn from his voluminous books, essays, and letters, after a year of research by Stephen Cunha and Mary Cunha, Geography Lecturer & Kosmos Lab Manager.

Approximately 80 percent of the Baron's remarks are direct or slightly edited quotes from von Humboldt's original works. From these, Stephen weaved the extracted words into the commencement narrative.

The *Introduction*, presented by President Rollin C. Richmond, was designed to complement the Baron's *Address*. Professor Lilianet I. Brintrup from World Languages & Cultures, and an expert on the life and letters of von Humboldt, contributed significant content for the *Introduction*, and recommended key bibliographic sources used in drafting the remarks. We wanted our university community to become more familiar with this remarkable explorer-scientist.

Once completed, Mary Cunha, Elaine Cunha (Editor-in-Chief, Arcata High School *Pepperbox*), Frank Whitlatch (Associate VP, Marketing & Communications), and Mary Kay Hartman (Special Events Coordinator, Marketing & Communications), edited the presentations.

HSU Theater Alumna Denise Ryles provided the Baron's clothing and hairstyle. Finally, HSU Alumna Mary Hackett from the President's Office coordinated the logistics and communication that made this unusual contribution possible.

In the year 2113, we encourage the reigning HSU President to invite Baron Alexander von Humboldt to speak at the 200th Commencement of Humboldt State University.



Introduction

President Rollin C. Richmond

As we begin our Centennial Year, it's my privilege to introduce you to one of the most important explorers, scientists and humanists of all time—the Baron Alexander von Humboldt.

Even from the start, all signs pointed to discovery: Alexander was born in Berlin on September 14th, 1769 – with the shine of a comet streaking across the night sky.

Alexander was raised in the family estate near Berlin, with his brother Wilhelm and a private tutor. But he yearned to go out into the world and emulate the great explorers. He went on to study at the University of Göttingen.

After completing his studies, he supervised the Prussian Ministry of Mines. He travelled often and was sent on diplomatic missions.

As the 1700s drew to a close, von Humboldt gained permission from the King of Spain to undertake scientific exploration of the Spanish colonies of the Americas. His ensuing five-year journey remains what many consider to be the most remarkable scientific expedition of all time.

From 1799 to 1804, von Humboldt and French botanist Aimé Bonpland explored Venezuela, Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Mexico. They focused on the Amazon and the Andes, collecting more than 60,000 plants, climbing volcanoes, and paddling uncharted rivers.

His journey and subsequent writings opened up our map of the New World, along with new fields of inquiry. Von Humboldt became the very prototype of the scientific adventurer. Lugging their instruments and boxes of specimens across a continent, he and Bonpland slogged through unmapped jungles, and over some of the tallest mountains in the world. Attempting to climb the volcano Chimborazo, they reached a height of over nineteen thousand feet, setting an altitude record that would stand for nearly three decades.

Through it all, science was an equal partner with the customs, politics, languages, and economies of the countries they visited. And he insisted on the need for accurate, systematic data collection.

He created the fields of plant geography and climatology.

His studies of New World volcanoes reshaped geology.

He confirmed that the earth's magnetic field changes with latitude, and located the magnetic equator.

His advances in map-making remain in use today.

He remade the maps of Latin America by fixing the latitude and longitude of hundreds of places and by charting the course of the Orinoco River.

As a devoted humanist, he pioneered the study of indigenous American cultures, and was the first to advocate for their human rights and political freedom.

He also brought science to the public. He believed in the leveling influence of education—in its ability to improve the life of every member of society regardless of social class or gender.

Today, over 1,000 plants, animals, mountains, and rivers carry von Humboldt's name; along with universities in (Berlin), Lima, Caracas, and Arcata.

On this day, 244 years after his birth, we take time to hear some of his thoughts.

Please welcome the man Charles Darwin called “the greatest scientific traveler who ever lived,” the Baron Alexander von Humboldt.



“I wanted to find out how nature's forces acted upon one another...about the harmony in nature.”

***Finding the Harmony in Nature:
Words of Wisdom from Alexander von Humboldt***

Baron Alexander von Humboldt

Thank you for such a welcome on this day of great celebration, here in the redwoods where I have so long wished to visit.

Why, I haven't felt this alive in 150 years.

You are the Centennial class—the last to graduate during Humboldt State's first century. We clarify this because for certain parents, it seems that *some* of you took a 100 years to finally graduate.

I recall my days as a student, first tutored with my brother Wilhelm, then later at universities in Germany. I enjoyed most of it, but passed many days dreaming of exploring the real world away from school.

For each of you graduating brings true freedom, but also a challenge. You are no longer a *student*. You must forge a new identity. You must find a new place in the world, in a different environment, and with different associations of people, plants and animals. This will also require fresh shelter—preferably one different from where your parents now reside.

Your remaining life is an hourglass. Once the sand grains begin to fall, you cannot return them. So, you need to make *every* grain count.

Here are some ideas to help you along.

First, I urge you to think expansively, beyond the field of study that appears on your diploma. From here, begin a lifelong pursuit of more knowledge in *many* different fields. The key to understanding our Cosmos is combining every branch of science with philosophy, history, geography, literature, and the humanities.

Seek to comprehend the phenomena of the physical world, and to represent nature and human society as one great whole, moved and animated by core forces.

My interaction with highly gifted people led me to discover that, without an earnest striving to gain knowledge of many special branches of study, all attempts to give a grand and general view of the universe would be nothing more than a vain illusion.

Do not fear association with those that the elites of society and government disregard. Instead, be drawn to them and their ideas. Knowledge progresses over time. Do not be stationary in your thinking.

In due time, some truths that you have learned here will be disproven. This is accomplished through systematic collection *and* documentation of data around a central theme. The smallest of things can *collectively* lead to the largest of ideas.

I have come to realize that there are three stages of intellectual discovery: first people deny it is true; then they deny it is important; finally they credit the *wrong* person.

Second, let me propose an exertion that will nurture the soul and fire your imagination.

Travel.

Travel across oceans and continents. For example, follow my footsteps into the Caribbean, Amazon, Andes, and Mexico. Sleep in the jungle where there is no need of blankets. Smell the florae and heed the constant drone of insects.

Ascend into the Andes where plants wholly adapt to the volcanic soil and cool air. Continue upward where glacial ice thrives on equatorial heights. On clear mornings one can gaze eastward to the vast Amazon below.

I understand this obligates money, which may be in short supply right now. But take a desire to travel when pursuing employment.

As soon as possible, seek distant places where the customs, language, climate, food, religion, agricultural practices, settlements, and every other aspect of daily life are different from your own.

We departed for South America to collect plants and fossils, and with the best of instruments, to make astronomic observations. Yet that was not the main purpose of that journey.

I wanted to find out how nature's forces acted upon one another, and in what manner the geographic environment exerted its influence on animals, on plants, and on the people who lived there. In short, I wanted to find out about the harmony in nature.

This cannot be achieved by dwelling in one place all the time, and in one intellectual field.

Move freely by abandoning your national loyalties, and adopting the customs of your hosts. Be at home everywhere and nowhere.

Travel transforms you into a merchant of knowledge, because you will learn new ideas, new language, new customs, and new relationships between humans and their different environments.

Traveling will teach you that races form one great human family. And since environment is crucial to understanding how human unity flowers into such diverse societies, the only way to understand a people is to immerse in their landscape.

Culture cannot be judged from afar. People who stay in one place all their lives say foolish things. Living among different societies promotes questioning the very ideas and ideals that form your own society.

It will instill suspicion towards the politicians who unfailingly believe that colonizing other societies *they* view as inferior is doing them great rightness.

But they are wrong. In fact, the most dangerous worldview is the worldview of those who have *not* viewed the world.

A third consideration is to combine your diploma field with a *humanistic* approach towards people and nature. It is not enough to be a great scientist or writer, or one who makes a fortune selling goods.

You must also develop compassion for others, and an understanding of their struggles, that are often *our* struggles too.

Life can be difficult. I am more and more convinced that our happiness or unhappiness depends more on the way we meet the events of life, than on the nature of those events themselves.

Happiness stems not from our accumulated wealth and position, but in how we approach and interact with others.

While we maintain the unity of the human species, we should at the same time repel the depressing assumption of superior and inferior races. No society is nobler than others. All men and women are in like degree designed for freedom.

Far too many imperialists regard some nations as more susceptible of cultivation, more highly civilized, more ennobled by mental cultivation than others.

I hope your education and travels allow you to overcome such prejudice—and to explore the ways human and natural history shed mutual light on each other.

Sadly, in my time, colonial imperialists, global capitalists, and the industrial revolution were remaking the face of nature and societies that I came to love.

Your completed studies are a strong foundation for what lies ahead. This Centennial Class will now scatter with the winds. I hope you remain united by the genuine belief that curiosity is important, that the world is far harder to understand than it first appears, and that intellectual humility is a vital grace.

Keep asking yourselves what are the truths by which men and women have lived in at various times and places, and which might bear on our life today?

How have these truths been represented in literature and art, buildings, technologies, and social systems? What ethical obligations and limits does a good person observe in a free society?

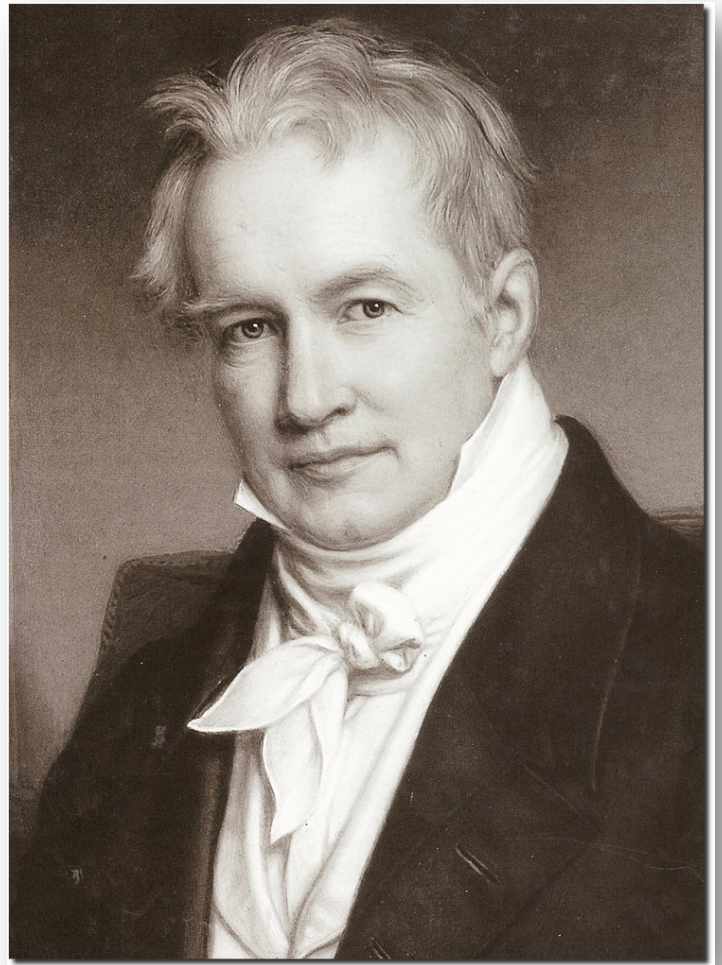
These questions are worth asking, and you will be the better for the very attempt to keep formulating your personal answers to them.

Wherever life takes you, remember that nothing conquers our own self-inflicted ills better than well-educated men and women.

Spend each grain of sand searching for and promoting the harmony in nature and between societies.

And plan to meet here a century from now, *with me*, to celebrate the 200th Anniversary of this fine institution.

Thank you, and good luck.



Alexander von Humboldt (Vanderbilt University)