

COLGATE UNIVERSITY
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President Langdon, Chaplain Brown, my dear colleagues here on the stage, dear friends crowded in at every post and corner, and fellow classmates of the Class of 1983, I'm delighted to be with you here this morning.

I want to share some thoughts with this class because these are times when each one of you, I think, is thinking long thoughts. Thoughts of where you're going, what you're going to be doing. But perhaps the thought that is most important today is how meaningful will your life be.

Up to this point you've been getting input from every side from the time you went to preschool or kindergarten and now some of you are still going on to graduate study and professional schools or out to work. But I think the thought that's on all of your minds today probably is "how meaningful will my life be? A lot of people have spent a lot of time on me, how meaningful will my life be?"

I have a thought that few people remember what's said at their baccalaureate so I have a little help for you today. I'm going to speak about three Cs, and three words beginning with C, and they are difficult in ascending order.

First, the word is competence, and I don't have to say much about that here because I take it for granted that you're graduating today from Colgate, you are competent. Whether you stay competent depends on whether you stay curious and eager and studying and reading and learning the rest of your life. I'm a lot older than you and I hate to think of a single day that passes that I'm not learning something new. If I'm not a better university president today than I was 31 years ago I've been sleeping, and believe me I've lost a lot of sleep along the way but I've learned a lot too. Someone said I may die tired but not illiterate. I want to commend you to keep working on the competence you've gained, wherever you go, whatever you do, keep learning. First it makes life worthwhile and makes your life meaningful, but it makes you so much more able to serve others and that is the heart of what I'm trying to say today: to serve others well. That's the only way we can really love God, is to serve him and his least brethren and when you come against that big commencement up ahead you know the only real test you're going to face is whether you love God and your neighbor.

It's hard to love God, we've never seen him. But in Isaiah we read that God doesn't want our prayers and sacrifices as much as he wants us to care for the widow and the orphan in the land. And that he wants justice from us in our lives as we deal with others. Competence is important because the opposite of it is a mediocre, poor performance. God simply is not served well, nor are mankind, humankind, men and women served well by incompetence. And I think today you're graduating into the elite of competence and do keep at it. That's the easiest thing, that's the simplest of the three Cs but I emphasize it because it's terribly important. I've known so many people who rushed out to do good but they're not competent

to do anything. And all they do is mess up the landscape. They don't really do much good or help many people. They may be on a great ego trip but it doesn't help. If you want to help people with poor housing you've got to know something about housing. If you want to help people that are sick you'd better know medicine, and if you want to help people that are being deprived of their rights you'd better know the law well and how to practice it well.

The second word I want you to remember if you would is compassion. And if you know some Latin that means to suffer with. The reason I mention this word is that the world that you and I have lived in is not the real world. I'm not just talking about the world of academia. I'm talking about the world of the western hemisphere, at least the United States/Canadian part of it, plus Europe plus Japan. That represents that mass of people, about 20% of the world's population; we represent 5% of it. And we have at our disposal roughly 80% of all the resources, human resources in the world: 80% of the good communications, 80% of medical care, I could go down the list. But that's simply not the way the world is. I would have to remind you today that the real world, the world of the 80% out there, most of whom are not white, that part of the world has a billion people who can't read and write or simply are cut off. They might as well be blind. They're cut off from all the wonderful things that you have read and learned. They might as well be blind, they can't read. You give them a package of seeds, they can't even read what kind of seeds and how you plant them or when. There are a billion of them that are hungry, right now. They were hungry yesterday and they'll be hungry tomorrow. They've always been hungry. They get up hungry and they go to bed hungry. About 500 million of them, if you can follow the United Nations statistics -- and I don't have any better ones -- about half of that billion, 500 million people, have chronic hunger which means that they are really undernourished, malnourished and they are open to all the kinds of sicknesses that malnourished people get. One out of every 5 children in that part of the world dies before the age of 5. And most of them die because they don't get enough to eat and they're open to all kinds of diseases. We don't think of it but every other day for the children of the world is a Hiroshima or a Nagasaki. Eighty thousand of them die every two days.

That's a part of the world we don't know about. If you have children, and I hope you do, you will not have to worry about them dying before the age of 5. Most of the people that I've seen in that part of the world, the underdeveloped world, never see a doctor from the day they're born until the day they die. They're lucky if they get a midwife to be born and they die often alone, hungry, cold, naked, all of the things that we're told to serve the Lord in serving. You can have compassion if you know what the rest of that world is like. If you know that billions of them, about 2 billion of them, live in what we call real poverty. And I don't mean real poverty in the sense of they don't have a bank account. Their total earnings for a year is what most of us would spend to come here this weekend. There are hundreds of millions of people that don't make a hundred dollars a year and they have to live on that -- food, clothing, housing, education, whatever they have -- for a family. We can't even imagine that but that's true; that's what happens throughout many parts of Latin America, Africa and Asia. The real world is a world that's hungry, it's a world that is largely homeless. I can think of a dozen places I've seen on earth in Latin America, Asia, Africa where, literally, people live much worse than any farm animal in this valley. When it's cold they're cold and when it's warm they're warm and when it rains they get wet because they're living in a cardboard hut made of

wattles and mud. The terrible thing is not that people are hungry, or that they're homeless, or that they're naked or that they're sick. The terrible thing is that they don't have to be that way. They are that way because people don't care. They are that way not because there isn't enough food to feed everybody; there is, in actual fact, right now. A lot of it is stored. They are that way because people simply don't care. In other words they lack compassion.

You remember the famous story in the Gospel where the man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. I've walked that road. It's hot, dusty and the lower you go down to the Dead Sea which is off at the end of Jericho, the hotter and the dustier it gets. And a man was making that trip and he was set upon by robbers, you recall, and they picked him clean, they beat him up, they darned near killed him, they threw him on the side of the road, they took his clothes, they took his beast of burden, they took anything he had that was worth anything and left him there bleeding. And we're told a priest walked by and a Levite walked by and they kind of shuffled to the other side of the road: they didn't want to get involved. And then we're told that that hated of all people at those times, the Samaritan, came by and they said he was moved to compassion when he saw the man. And he stopped and he did with what he had. He poured in some wine to disinfect the wounds, and then he poured in some oil to soothe them, then he put the man on his own beast of burden and he walked and he took him to the inn. He didn't just dump him, that wasn't the local Red Cross and they had no hospitals at that point. He just took him to the only place there was, the inn, and he said to the innkeeper, "Here's some money, do what you can for him and when I come back this way I'll pay whatever else I owe you."

He was moved to compassion and what I would say to you today, the world, wherever you're going, deserves one thing from you if you really believe in practicing your religion. It deserves your compassion. You've got to learn to suffer a little bit as John Donne said so beautifully in a poem, "No man is an island, neither is any woman." We are all affected by the ills of all. And you have to go through life with your eyes open and see that the world that so many of us inhabit so many hours of our days and nights is not the real world. The real world is a suffering world for which we should have compassion. We must learn to suffer with it. But let me tell you that even if you're competent and if you are compassionate, that won't do it. And that's when I get to my third C which is really something that comes hard for all of us and that's commitment.

Commitment just means that when you see something wrong you're willing to get involved. You're willing to do something about it. You are not just moved to compassion, you're moved to action that is compassionate. And the world today -- so many people just live in this dream world of luxury and power and pleasure and wealth and all the rest -- but the world all around that is suffering just goes right over their heads. They don't pay any attention to it at all; they don't want to be bothered. And they're the people who, if they see the fellow in a bad wreck by the side of the road, they kind of slide over and get by in a hurry because they don't want to get involved. And they let the poor guy, like that poor man between Jerusalem and Jericho, lie there with his wounds; no one to lift a hand to help. Or they see people getting a terrible deal from the government and believe me there are people suffering in this country as well as in Asia, Africa and Latin America, a lot of them. Or they see people who are prejudiced against other people and they don't do anything. Or they see someone abusing someone else and they kind of slide by. Or they hear a cry out in the alley and

they don't want to get involved and they put the window down.

Now we can't live in a world like that and say that we love God because he said whatever you do for my least brethren -- he didn't say my best brethren, for my least brethren -- you do it for me. Or as he spoke to his chosen people, take care of the widows and the orphans and the alien in the land. Those are the least brethren. So I say to you, learn something about commitment. You know, Dante said that the worst place in hell was saved for those people who are neutral at a time of great moral crisis. Believe me, with the suffering in the world today we're all living in a world of great moral crisis, and if you're just neutral about it, if you're neither compassionate nor committed to do something, then I think you're in trouble if you want meaningful lives.

Let me give you three examples. The first example I'll take is one of our own graduates, closer to your age. He graduated probably 15, 20 years ago. He was one of those fellows that had everything: I mean he was handsome, he was talented, he was a good linguist, he was a great horseman, he was a good athlete, he could play the piano beautifully, he was one of the few people I know that learned how to speak French at Notre Dame. I noticed you have a Spanish and French House here, I assume you do better. But anyway, the fact is that this fellow could have been a great society doctor on Park Avenue but something happened in his life.

We never know what God has planned for us but things do happen to us and if our ears are open and our eyes are open sometimes we get the message. Anyway, he had to go in the Navy and of all places they sent him to a place called Vietnam, this was before the war began. And there were two million refugees streaming over that border from north to south and he was dumped in a place called Haiphong which was the port city. Since he was the only doctor in that area and since he was a naval officer they just put him ashore and gave him all the medicine they had aboard his ship and he spent 16 months there, a year and a half, on the shore. And during that time 80,000 people went through his hands. Some of them had literally been crucified, they had nail holes in them; some of them had spikes driven in their ears; many of them had been tortured in many ways and some of them were just sick and malnourished and full of bugs. But anyway he took care of 80,000 people during a couple of years. Then he started a couple of orphanages and he was an active fellow and as I say he could charm the birds out of the trees and he had everybody working for him. He was stealing medicine on all sides and he really made a great impact but then he was finished with the Navy and he went home.

Now he could go to Park Avenue and make a million dollars and not have to work all that hard. You know what? He was so touched by what it meant to be a physician and to have those people in his hands that he picked up and got a few of his corpsmen in the Navy to go back with him and he went back to Vietnam and then to Cambodia and finally in Laos. When he went to Laos he was the only doctor in an area with 2 million people. And you can imagine how busy he was day and night.

I was with Tom Dooley on his 34th birthday, it was at Sloan Memorial Hospital, New York City and he died the next day. And I thought to myself, 34 years, not very long to live. And yet he had taken care of millions of people. He had started 12 hospitals in places all over the world that were abandoned. He would come back to this country for a month and raise a million dollars giving talks at places like Notre Dame and Colgate, going coast-to-coast

talking to the students and getting money from them and it all went into these new hospitals. But that didn't happen because Tom was a good doctor and he was a good physician. It didn't happen because when he saw people suffer he was sensitive enough to suffer with them. It happened because he was committed, he did something about it. He picked up and went there and did something about it, while most people just looked at it and walked away.

The second person I'd like to tell you about is a woman, she's still alive. And this woman is a very unlikely candidate for what I'm talking to you about because she grew up in a peasant family on the Dalmatian Coast in Yugoslavia. She joined a European religious order in Belgium. She was sent to India to teach middle-class Hindu girls English, which wasn't exactly the most inspiring thing in the world to do but that was the job she got in the order. But it happened that she lived in a convent and had to walk to the school every day and as she walked to the school every day she found herself stepping over bodies of people who had died the night before in the street. And she found herself looking at babies that had been thrown in the gutter because they weren't wanted and they had died during the night too. And the trucker used to go by every day and pick up these bodies and throw them outside the city of Calcutta so they could feed the birds. You know, she was like all of us I guess. She was competent at doing what she was doing in the school. She didn't know much about doing anything else: she was a poor peasant girl, not as well educated as all of you are right now. She certainly was compassionate, no one enjoys stepping over bodies, I've done it in Calcutta, it's not much fun. But one day she said "I can't do this anymore, I just can't give my life to teaching these girls English when this terrible thing is going on under my eyes." And so she got a dispensation from her vows, she left the order, she walked out of that convent with a sari on, literally, and three rupees in her hand which is less than a dollar, and no place to go. And she went to the poorest part of town. She didn't knock on a door because they don't have any doors on those shacks. She just said, "May I come in and live with you, I'm poor."

One thing about poor people, they're good to each other. And they said "of course."

She said "I've got three rupees, you can have the three rupees."

"What are you going to do?"

She said, "I'm going to do something about those people in the street who die at night and are abandoned." She went all over that town, all a Christian community, a religious community, nobody had any room. They thought she was crazy. What could one woman do with no money, nothing? Well, she finally went to Temple of Kali which is a Hindu god, not a very good one. And in the back of the Temple of Kali they have an L-shaped room which is about the size of the room we have in this chapel, I've been there. And there were levels there where you could lay bodies if you wanted to or people. And the people, the priests of the Kali Temple said, "You can have that back room, nobody's using it. What do you want it for?"

"I want it so people can die in dignity." And she started literally begging money, picking up these people, carrying them in. She got a Mohammedan to cook some mush because these people had no teeth left and they couldn't chew anything. And when you asked her, "what are you doing?" -- the day I walked in there I saw 200 men and women and they were so emaciated you couldn't tell who was which, I mean they were just bags of bones, 80 pounds, 70 pounds -- she said, "I don't think a person should die like a dog. I wash them up, I

put some clean clothing on them, I give them some warm food and then I hold them in my arms while they die."

And she said "I know that's not going to change the world but people shouldn't die like a dog, they ought to die with a little human love and warmth." She went on from that to taking care of the babies that were being thrown away and beginning to get some orphanages started. I think they're probably 20,000 men and women today doing that work. Taking care of both ends of the spectrum -- the babies that are thrown away and the old people that are dying without any human warmth or love. They're working in the poorest parts of this world. There are some working in Harlem, there are some working in Washington D.C., there are some working out my way in Chicago. I find them everywhere, in Panama, in Chile, Brazil, but always in the poorest place in town. And they're helping people who nobody cares about, people who are powerless, people who are suffering and they're doing it for the love of God. Otherwise what worth is it? It's incredible though that when you think that this woman who had nothing -- no organizational skill, no money, no position, no clout as we say -- gets the Nobel Prize for peace. There would have been no chance of that ever happening to her if she kept on walking over those bodies on the way to teach school every day.

The last person I want to talk about is a marvelous fellow, no longer alive, but who also is a Nobel Laureate for peace. He had three careers facing him and he was even smarter than Tom Dooley by a long way. He could have been a great Protestant theologian, he could have been a concert pianist or he could have been a great faculty doctor at one of the great medical facilities in Europe. His name was Albert Schweitzer. He picked up and went to one of the most improbable places on earth for him, a place called Lambarene in what was then French Equatorial Africa, a sleepy village on a turbid river flowing through the jungle -- an unreasonable place for a man of that talent. He brought his organ with him, a little portable organ that he pumped. He used to go into a little room after the day's work in the hospital that he founded there. He used to play the organ at night but as time went on and the mice got into the works the organ music got less and less of concert quality. And he spent long nights in there with long sheets of paper and he used to put them up on a nail on the wall as he finished these long sheets -- maybe three or four feet long -- writing books of theology. But the theology books got less and less good because, after all, he was far away from libraries and from conversation with great theologians and you have to inspire each other.

But one thing that didn't weaken was his love of God, shown in his love for the less fortunate. And this man from that forgotten village so far away from everything was also plucked out to get the Nobel Prize for peace because he was for many a symbol of service to the least fortunate. His contribution for peace was giving himself totally and unselfishly for all his life and what he gave up that he might have had in some other capacity. I'm sure if he'd become a great concert pianist or if he'd become a great medical research man in Tübingen or Berlin or Munich or someplace, if he'd become a great Protestant theologian, that would have been wonderful, but he wouldn't have gotten the Nobel Prize for peace which in a sense is the world saying to you, "Good, well done."

My thought for all of you today is that I don't think anybody expects you to take off for Laos or Lambarene or Calcutta, that's not important. But I will promise you that wherever you go or whatever you do you're going to find some least brethren around that need something that you can do for them. And I can't tell you what that is and no one else can. But if you're sensitive, you can use what competence you have to do whatever you can do -- and that amounts to many, many different things in a class like this. If you're sensitive enough you will see the suffering and not walk by and look the other way -- you will be compassionate. In particular, be willing to commit yourself, not to see a bad situation and walk by it, it's so easy to go through life walking away from trouble instead of wading in and helping. The best advice I can give you today as you are having your long thoughts about the meaning of your life is, don't be hopeless because you can all do something. I don't care whether you're a man, woman, or whether you're handsome or not, or whether you're wealthy or not. You can all do something. There is something out there that you can do and you can do it if you're compassionate and if you're committed and if you're competent enough to do what you can do.

Secondly, you shouldn't be nervous that what you are doing is humdrum. Nothing is humdrum in life. Washing the dishes is not humdrum if you do it competently and with a little bit of panache. I'm an old dishwasher so I can say that from the heart. I used to have to wash dishes for two hundred people and the only thing I tried to do is get done before they got up from the meal and I felt I was really working fast. But you can make money and there's nothing wrong in that. You can achieve power, political power, commercial power, any kind of power and there's nothing wrong in that if it's used well. You can have pleasure. God intended there to be pleasure or he wouldn't have created it, provided it's a responsible pleasure. Gandhi once said that the worst thing is pleasure without responsibility or politics without principle or wealth without work.

The things that I want you to remember simply are those three things: to be competent, to be compassionate and to be committed, not to be afraid to commit yourself. Don't be afraid to commit yourself to love, commit yourself to giving, commit yourself to dedication, commit yourself to devotion.

My final words for you would be words that Albert Schweitzer gave to a graduating class like yourselves. And I think it's still good advice. He said to them, "I don't know where you're going, all of you, and I don't know what you're going to do with your lives, but I'll tell you one thing: unless you set aside some corner, large or small, of your life to do something about those who are suffering, those who are powerless, those who are despised, those who no one cares about, your life will not be meaningful and it will not be happy because it will be tied up with yourself and believe me, that's hell."

That's the best description of hell I know is to have just yourself and nothing else as the center of your existence. So love, certainly, give, certainly, but love and give with confidence and love and give with a big heart which means compassion and especially do it gladly and willingly and meaningfully and you will have a meaningful life. God bless you all, safe journey.