

## Commencement 2037?

Text of Ted Townsend's Central College commencement address delivered on May 13, 2007:

Imagine: By now, probably millions of people have been honored with the opportunity to address some sort of graduation ceremony, and pretty much every one of them, in their own way, said exactly the same thing. Congratulations! This is a milestone in your life. You are the future. Life is what you make it. Follow your dream.

Is there really anything different about this time, your time and my turn? The answer is yes, and my goal today is to be certain you understand why. Why is your time different from all the others?

To begin, you are pretty much the first full generation in human history to have some idea where we are. Very, very few of those other commencement speakers or their audiences had any idea. Not Archimedes, Galileo, Newton, da Vinci, Abraham Lincoln, not even Einstein fully understood that: We ride on a globe orbiting a star in a space with trillions of stars that ignite and burn out in a universe where matter is energy racing away from itself at an accelerating rate no one can explain.

It took the very best minds of several billion human beings 10,000 years of civilization to generate that sentence. It represents the current best opinion of the sharpest minds on Earth today, and at least some part of it may be completely wrong. In every era of human history, "leading thinkers of the day" thought they had things figured out. Well guess what? The sun is not a great chariot racing across the sky; the Earth is not flat, nor the center of the universe; it only takes a relative handful of genes to create a human being, 99 percent of which we share with Bonobos, 85 percent with field mice, 40 percent with flat worms and 31 percent with yeast; in the void of deep space, matter appears from nowhere to be instantaneously annihilated; life does evolve over time, cultural predispositions can be inherited and at least some females sometimes can reproduce without any involvement by a male. (That last one is my least favorite.)

The point is at least some of what today we think is undeniably true probably isn't. The acceleration of the rate at which knowledge is accumulating has gone nearly vertical just since you

were born, and the impact of the revelations in your era will dwarf all that came before, most likely changing some of our most certain beliefs. In that awakening lie spectacular, glorious, unimaginable opportunities.

Try this analogy, drawn from the spectrum of electromagnetic radiation. After spending 99.9 percent of our existence being aware of and using only visible light, scientists now recognize there's a whole lot more invisible "light." Imagine yourself behind a black curtain with just a small slit through which to view the outside world. If that slit represents optical light, the rest of the heretofore unrecognized spectrum extends miles above and below our narrow, human view. And all that information is traveling past us at 186,000 miles per second. Whatever we perceive today, the only vision humanity has ever known is based on a tiny fraction of the information that's been available every second of the day and night forever. Your class represents the first in human history with access to it all, and this analogy applies to every area of scientific inquiry. Your class will awaken humanity to a degree equivalent with adding multiple new dimensions. You must use this knowledge wisely.

By the time a child born today is half my age, the world will hold nearly 10 billion people, each expecting and deserving to be fed, clothed, sheltered and educated. How would you assess those trends today, with just over half that population? Layer on the scourge of human ignorance, meaning religious fanaticism, and it's easy to see that your time here will require more than just making the mortgage and getting your kids into a good school. At least five times in Earth's history, life has gone through a sort of ecological funnel, with large majorities of all life going extinct, leaving just a relative few to repopulate this globe. Most scientists have come to the conclusion we're entering another of these now. Global warming and burgeoning humanity's full impact on Earth are not yet perfectly understood, but they are certainly enormous and undeniable. Together, they will propel our species through this major restructuring.

The people of your day who recognize and understand this profound transformation are the ones who will emerge from that funnel to rebuild their new world. What characteristics will they take with them? That hasn't been determined yet. *That hasn't been determined yet!* In that fact lies the essence of your opportunity, your responsibility, your mission in life. And no, you don't get to choose whether or not to accept it. It's yours, like it or not. So, who do you want them to be? For know this: everything you do will help shape their minds, their time, their genomes and their children's genomes. The physical, chemical, protein interactions that generate their existence will be altered by your behavior. This is an emerging field of scientific inquiry beyond genetics, called epigenetics, and it seeks to learn how culture influences bodies and brains. This science is very new and certainly not well understood yet. But the fact that it is now proven possible changes everything, beginning with your obligations to everyone around you. This research is the soul of Great Ape Trust. Science at

Great Ape Trust seeks to understand the origins and future of culture, language, tools, and intelligence. These insights through collaborations with apes can teach us all how we influence the lives of future generations. That's amazing, powerful science – and urgently needed.

Think back to any significant event in your life more than seven years ago. For my personal example, in 1966, '68, '70, and '96, I was blessed and honored to spend a month each in sub-Saharan Africa. The emotional, psychological, life-changing impacts of those overwhelming immersive experiences have driven my choices and actions every day since. And, because of the way our bodies rejuvenate themselves, there isn't one single molecule in any cell of my body – not an atom, not an electron – that was actually there for any of it. In every physical sense, the person who was there isn't here. Why do I remember it? How does it continue to affect me so? Yours may become the first generation to answer that most profound question. Today, it's a complete mystery. You just might be the ones to solve it. How exciting is that?

Unfortunately, there are also unprecedented threats that define the uniqueness of your time. This incomprehensible body of knowledge does not guarantee wisdom. Humans' instinctual fear of others not like us, and dogmatic religious certainty, combined with advancing, ubiquitous weapons technology, now make it possible for the very few to annihilate the very many.

I read somewhere recently that half the female children born today will live to be 100. I believe that's possible, but sadly, unlikely, unless your generation actually leads lives in restorative harmony with the rest of life on Earth, human and otherwise. Knowing what to do is not enough. Large numbers of people must actually lead lives that respect each other and the single ecosystem that sustains us all. Absent a quantum shift in global human behavior during your time, your kids or grandkids may not have a happy commencement.

That is the point of the title of these remarks, "Commencement 2037?" If you want your kids to have a similar graduation ceremony, you must resolve several fundamental issues, chief among them: environmental degradation, Islamist extremism and America's rapidly deteriorating image around the world. You will also have to deal with the impact of technology and globalization, the ethics of genetic engineering, health and fitness, workforce development, unrealistic entitlements, and the national debt. Sounds like a big load, doesn't it? Well, those are the challenges of your day and you'd better meet them, because you cannot afford the luxury of living irresponsibly.

As harsh as it may sound, your generation will guide us through Earth's next funnel and how you manage that process will determine the future of this world. That's the point of Earthpark. Earthpark is here to help you learn and teach people how to live in restorative harmony with the rest of life. Its precise mission is "inspiring generations to learn from the natural world" and it will impact our state, our nation and your future.

I know our entire board is thrilled with Earthpark's close relationship to Pella and Central College, as it is perfectly in keeping with the history and values of this region. President [David] Roe and many others here have been leaders in green design, environmental education, and thoughtful, respectful development and growth. Your demonstrated concern for the land echoes perfectly the spirit our mission demands.

You understand that humanity must accept our shared place in, of and from nature as the reason we exist. Without it, we aren't here; we never would have been here; we cannot remain here. This is true no matter how life got here. However one envisions our creator, and I do believe in one, these statements are not open to religious interpretation. They are true from every religious point of view. If we humans kill the rest of life around us, if we destroy "the creation," we ourselves will die – and undeniably we are doing just that, at an accelerating rate. Your generation must fix this obviously lethal contradiction.

With The Trust and Earthpark targeting multiple, complementary sciences of human insight and restoration, the U.S. Center for Citizen Diplomacy will enable their revelations to reach out beyond America's borders. Every citizen who travels for any reason, or even communicates overseas electronically, is serving as a diplomat, whether they realize it or not. And when we welcome foreign visitors into our communities, we have greater impact on their views of America than all the efforts of every department in our government combined. These three institutions, working in concert, will assist you to address these universal threats. Alone they are insufficient; but when coordinated with other thoughtful efforts, and your unwavering determination, together you have a chance to guarantee that 2037 commencement.

Indeed, from right here in Iowa, you can lead the birth of a new American idealism. You can show the world how to live in peace. You can demonstrate how children can learn to find themselves through a restored relationship with nature. You can help define what it means to be alive. And you will set the course of history for the next hundred years. It is not hyperbole to say yes, you can save the world. And it desperately needs saving.

Here's one more idea to help locally, fully consistent with the other globally focused projects. Let's turn Iowa's beautiful natural resources, magnificent intellectual capital and optimistic dedication into a future of hope, happiness and inspiration for all.

In addition to the fairly well-known challenges mentioned so far, there are others less obvious, yet potentially just as troubling. Among these are the insulation from nature and isolation from each other brought about through the shifting methods and mores of so-called modern society. In his book "Last Child in the Woods," Richard Louv details the growing risks of detachment from our fellow man and the land that delivered us. He describes an insidious widening of multiple barriers between Americans, particularly children, and the natural world. In one generation, our cities, schools,

neighborhoods, laws, and leisures have disengaged from what forever was an intimate linkage with the real outdoors. He calls it a “nature deficit disorder,” and a majority of our nation’s population suffers from it. Millions of people think they’re “out in nature” when they mow the turf grass inside their fenced yard.

Moreover, the transition toward a technology-based bio-economy exacerbates this problem, yet is no fad. It is widely heralded, science-based, irreversible and, perhaps surprisingly, fully in league with human nature; yet still the losing touch accelerates. How can we incorporate useful technology and stay connected at the same time?

Fortunately, Iowans remain among America’s leaders in remembering and honoring the land, with an agrarian ethos steeped in local culture and traditions. These are invaluable human-centered resources that now provide a unique moment of opportunity to impact nearly all our threats, while building a state still in tune with ancient human needs. So, I recommend we adopt the movement Louv calls “no child left indoors.”

Imagine a group of independent educational attractions, working together to coordinate complementary missions, messaging, marketing and fund-raising. Imagine them all collaborating with professional educators from schools, colleges, universities and research institutions to deliver their particular focused experiences within the broader message of life. Together, they could tell the full stories of ecology, conservation, restoration, sustainability, bioethics, cognition, nutrition, science, energy and growth. Imagine neighborhoods, towns, cities, schools, farms and businesses, all eventually designed and developed by adults nurtured within this overarching theme. Now imagine the impact such a reality and reputation would have on families living here, visitors coming here, businesses and workers relocating here. We would distinguish ourselves in a fashion worthy of wide emulation, admiration and respect.

This is not a withdrawal from technology. On the contrary, it is an appeal to use the best of technology to restore our rapidly deteriorating relationship with that which sustains us. As Ray Anderson, chairman of Interface Inc., and author of “Mid-Course Correction” says, “The economy is the wholly owned subsidiary of the environment.” Most have lost this undeniable truth. Let Iowans be the people who find it, restore it, reveal it and rejoice in it.

Here in central Iowa, we are blessed with several projects, old and new, already focused around various aspects of nature. Several are now discussing how to advance while planning significant capital campaigns. A great next step would build on the model of The Audubon Institute of Louisiana. Let’s bring together the leaders of seven not-for-profit educational attractions around central Iowa, roughly along and more fully utilizing the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers: Science Center of Iowa, Des Moines Botanical Center, Blank Park Zoo, Living History Farms, Great Ape

Trust, Earthpark at Lake Red Rock, and the federally funded Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge near Prairie City.

If these institutions, successful in their own right, voluntarily agreed to jointly design their next phases of growth and expansion within the broad environmental, educational framework presented here, the future generated would enthuse and inspire people near and far. It would declare to the world Iowa's commitment to build a state where children learn to use technology rather than let it use them. It would attract quality citizens of every kind, color, and mind to make their lives work in Iowa, simultaneously lifting tourism to proud, value based, lucrative, new heights.

Friends, humanity is at a crossroads. Iowa has a chance to help our children save their world. Let's build a state together around all that we share, in tune with nature, led by science, and driven by the universal truths of dignity, compassion and love. This focused approach will let people learn by living a more natural life in preparation for their time in a new, unnatural world. What could be better? Why not here? Why not now?

If your generation will fully embrace the mission and opportunities at hand, a wave of insight and intellectual growth will flow forth from Iowa around the globe. Your loved ones will help every way we can, but you must do this job. You have the talent, the tools and, if you get started, enough time to turn the tide.

I'm also confident that when you do, the spiritual and material rewards you will have earned will extend beyond even your wildest dreams. This is another distinction for your class; you really can have it all: happiness, comfort and fulfillment in your time, with the proud relief of knowing you've prepared your kids for theirs. So, now more than ever, congratulations! This is a milestone in your life. You are the future. Life is what you make it. Follow your dream. More than any class ever to hear those words, they are true for you. Please get to work.