

## **Roosevelt University Commencement Speech,**

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What an honor and pleasure it is for me to be here today. I was born and raised in this great city, and I still think of myself as a Chicagoan, like most of you. The city symbolizes many things for me. I think of it as strikingly beautiful in its geographical situation and its architecture, as a city of immigrants, the home of a multitude of races, religions, ethnicities and foods, and as a community open to the development of individual talent and self-expression. Alas, for me Chicago is also the home of professional sports teams who have mostly made me miserable over the years. 2002 has been all too typical for those of us who are Cubs, Bulls and Bear fans. But enduring disappointment is character-building for Chicagoans -- or so I keep telling my son and grandson, to whom I seem to have passed this affliction. But, hey, let's play two!

I was 11 years old in 1945, and my family had just moved from 3400 North to the North Shore. '45 for me at the time it was the year in which the Cubs won the National League pennant and Phil Cavaretta led the league with a .355 batting average, though of course we lost the World Series to Detroit. How many other Chicagoans in this room remember that Series?

I remember many other things from that year, among them the announcement of the establishment of Roosevelt University. This great university has always seemed to me to capture an important part of the essence of Chicago. It was founded at the conclusion of the Second World War, at a time when the United States and its allies had triumphed against what all Americans then accepted as the "axis of evil," but also at a bittersweet moment in our history. We had after all only just begun to learn about the Holocaust, and we had only just lost our great leader, Franklin D. Roosevelt, the prophet of modern democracy in the United States. But 1945 was a year of social and political hope, and the founding of this explicitly democratic and inclusive university was an expression of the conviction that all Chicagoans were entitled to and capable of college education.

This university was also founded in the belief that higher education should serve the public interest, and should serve the causes of freedom and justice, both domestic and

international. Franklin Roosevelt's democratic idealism inspired the founders of Roosevelt University, and its trustees to this day have striven to achieve goals inspired by it. Their announced goals now are: "to provide a quality education for all students," "to provide a supportive environment for nontraditional students," "to serve as an intellectual and cultural resource to the community," and, through doing all of these things, "to promote a more humane and just society."

But you should know that this University was created in an act of political courage by students, faculty and trustees. Originally named Thomas Jefferson College and quickly renamed after the sudden death of FDR, Roosevelt University grew out of a dispute concerning minority admissions at a small private downtown college. The Dean of that college, along with 92% of the faculty and 97% of the students, moved to the new institution, and pledged to make it open to all. Those pioneers were aware that their actions might be seen as radical by the Chicago community, but they were undeterred. The Dean of Faculties proclaimed in December, 1945 that "If it is radical to teach future labor leaders, as well as future businessmen, the mysteries of accounting; if it is radical to supply Jews, Poles, Japanese and Negroes as well as Anglo-Saxons with the tools of language, then Roosevelt College is radical." And President Edward J. Sparling told the first group of students in September, 1945 that the college ". . . was founded so that you and those who follow you could be free to learn and to seek the truth: so that your professors could be free, not only to seek the truth, but to teach the truth as they find it."

There were in 1945 and there are now two fine examples of the best in traditional elite higher education in Chicago, and they have served the city well. But Roosevelt was designed to carry out a different function and to serve a different constituency, and it has done so distinction. Graduates, you are lucky to have discovered this institution, just as it has been fortunate to find you. I hope you will remember its history.

The founders of Roosevelt also understood the importance of architecture and location. Look at the magnificent structure in which we are meeting today. It was acquired and possibly saved from destruction by the University in 1947. Chicago is America's outdoor museum of architecture. I have always loved Chicago's buildings, and I am filled with pride when I walk newcomers through the Loop to show off our rich history. Although some of our greatest structures have not survived post-World War II downtown real estate development, the Auditorium has. I consider this Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan building of 1890 the finest of our city's architectural monuments. I am always moved by the sight of it astride Grant Park and confronting the lake. I can remember well, even though I had just entered my 'teens, the association of this bold new university with this noblest of all Chicago buildings. Of course I never dared to think that I would one day speak from the stage of the Auditorium Theater, and I am so grateful for the opportunity. But I recognize that I

am one of the few barriers between you and the receipt of your degree, and I will not try your patience for long.

First, let me remind you of the words of the philosopher of the New York Yankees, Yogi Berra, who is alleged to have said that "you need to be careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there." Wise Yogi was of course attempting to paraphrase Aristotle's dictum that "everything that is necessary is necessary upon some hypothesis." Not all universities are clear about where they are going, or what their hypothesis is, but that is not the case with Roosevelt. This university has asserted since 1945 that it needed to open its doors to everyone with reasonable academic accomplishments who desired higher education. They also believed that they should take all of their students seriously and that they should not condescend to them. The bargain here was that if you want to be a student here, we will provide you with a quality education and hold you to the highest standards of academic accomplishment - and you must strive to meet those standards if you are to receive a degree. We are here today because the university has upheld its part of the bargain - and you have upheld your part. Every graduate here richly deserves his or her degree.

Why did you come here? Why did you seek a higher degree? Why have you (and perhaps your families) struggled to pay for such an education, for Roosevelt is not an inexpensive place to go to school? I am sure that for most of you the choice was very practical - you thought you would enhance your employment and income prospects with a college degree. And you were right. All studies of higher education demonstrate that holders of baccalaureate degrees earn significantly more than those who did not go beyond high school or the G.E.D. - and that the socio-economic prospects of their children are similarly enhanced. Some of you are about to enter a tough job market, and your chances of finding a desirable job are infinitely greater than your peers who have not completed a college degree. Many of you are already employed and have worked your way through college. You, too, will find your prospects enhanced, in part your because of the specific knowledge and skills that you have obtained at Roosevelt. I am sure that the university has served you well in that regard. All of you will be a better fit for the job or profession you are striving for.

But you will also be better at whatever you do because of the general education you have received at Roosevelt. This university insists upon high standards of academic quality and rigor in all of its courses and from all of its students. No doubt at times you encountered serious difficulty in coping with what was being required of you academically. You have surely encountered many ideas, and read many books and articles that you have found wildly inapplicable to your vocational concerns. Useless concepts. But if you haven't realized it already, you will at some point in your life discover what the philosopher George Santayana meant by what he called "the utility

of useless knowledge." This utility consists in your heightened capacity to consider new ideas and initially outrageous thoughts, in your ability to reason your way through intellectual dilemmas, and in your capacity for reflection. These are habits of mind that cannot be taught directly, but that accrue over time to an educated person. You will discover that Roosevelt's gift to you is not so much a specific body of knowledge as a heightened consciousness of truth and capacity to reason.

But a university with a social conscience, and Roosevelt is profoundly such a university, intends more than intellectual training, and expects more of you than academic competence. This is precisely because the university was conceived in the spirit of social justice and has always seen an important part of its mission as training people to play constructive roles in the creation of a just society. All higher education aspires to just education to some extent, but Roosevelt's commitment is specific and historical, as I suggested at the beginning of this talk. Just as we have discovered that the best learning is "active learning," in which the student plays an affirmative role in acquiring knowledge, most of us who study the subject believe that the essence of citizenship is that it be proactive. Citizens must engage with the problems that confront society, rather than expecting institutional mechanisms, such as the state or the market, to solve them. This is to say that the flip side of the benefits of citizenship are its duties, and that these go far beyond obedience to the law and the casting of ballots.

I imagine that many of you are either immigrants to the United States or the children of immigrants. If so, you will keenly appreciate the difference between a mature democracy such as we have in this country and the travails of much of the rest of the world in its transition to democracy. Freedom and democracy remain contested and uncertain in the underdeveloped world, the post-communist world, and in those places where "democracy" is thinly veiled authoritarianism. The United States and other post-industrial nations have made strenuous efforts to assist transitions to democracy in these parts of the world, and we have made some progress.

But democracy cannot be imposed, for it is a state of mind and a conditioned behavior rather than a straightforward political institution. Many countries have developed formal democratic institutions, especially more or less free voting, without developing democracy. There is a big difference between votocracy and democracy. One of the reasons for this is that democracy requires healthy civil society - the existence of communities that have strong internal bonds, that relate peacefully to one another and that work constructively to develop solutions to common problems. The miracle of successful democracy is that it enables civil society, diverse peoples and communities to work with one another and to agree upon social agendas. Democracy, Taylor Branch once said, is "having faith in strangers." Think about that for just a moment.

We are gathered here today because the founders of this university believed that a diverse and complicated city, a city of many peoples and divergent interests could develop democratically if its newcomers and those traditionally excluded from positions of power could have access to a rigorous and fair-minded college education. This is the lesson, ironically, they drew from the life experience of that great patrician democrat, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The composition of this group of graduates is almost certainly even more diverse than what the founders could have imagined, and it is also substantially older and more experienced. I do not know a single one of you, but I feel quite sure that you collectively fulfill their hopes.

I began by quoting Yogi Berra, but let me conclude by quoting an even wiser man, Rabbi Hillel, who long ago asked "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, then who am I?" That is the question I would like you to ask yourselves in the coming years, for it is a question that needs to be put repeatedly. If you are to fulfill the highest hopes of the remarkable group of people who began Roosevelt University nearly sixty years ago, you will need to ask what you, an educated person and a college graduate, can contribute to democracy and civil society. I feel confident that your answers will be constructive and responsible.

And so I wish you and your families all the best for happy, healthy and successful lives. Be proud to be educated men and women, and be proud to be democratic citizens.