

UNIVERSITY OF N. H. KEENE, N. H.
Leadership award banquet 4/27/03

(Thank you for that kind introduction, and for the invitation to celebrate this award banquet for Leadership that you are being given this evening. I am honored to be a part of this event recognizing your achievement. I know you have all worked very hard to get to this moment and I admire you for that. Life is much more complex and fast-moving than when I went to school, and things were already hard enough back then.

I know you are all grateful to be on campus and safely away from all your grandparents and aunts and uncles who have been asking you what you will major in, what career you have chosen, and where you plan to retire and be buried. Older people are stuck in a view of the world that is quite rigid. You go to school - according to this view - to learn a trade or a profession, get married, get a house, raise kids to take your place, have a well-attended funeral, and then do your part to increase New England's insufficient topsoil

The institutions of great New England schools like

Franklyn Berra
the University of N. H. are so reliably longstanding that they create a mirage of constancy, when in fact the world is changing rapidly and the plannable world of your parents and your aunts and uncles is being swept away.

For you, college will be a lifelong affair. You cannot learn enough here in four years to get you through your entire life. Your life will be about constant learning and growing through a number of related or unrelated careers, and that is a dramatic improvement in the condition of human beings—if life is about maximizing our potential, which it indeed is.

You will have a number of personal relationships in your life. I am glad to have had one marriage to one husband, but your life may well be quite different. While I recommend loyalty, I know the statistics today. The bright side of this difficult emotional terrain is that you will have the opportunity to experience enriching pain and you will have the advantage of essentially living several lives, to my one.

Of all the shifting sands your tents will be pitched

upon, perhaps the condition of the earth's ecosystem and its democracies will present you with the greatest changes and challenges. If the great present division persists between the world's poor and rich, I assure you that you will live in a violent world, and that the tragedy of September 11 will be remembered as the beginning of such things in your experience. If the great exploitation of the earth's resources persists at the expense of sustain ability, you wil experience the flooding of Venice and other great seacoast cities and treasured beaches, and you will curse my generation that let it happen without trying harder to end the corruption and the selfish misuse of resources. You will learn to adapt and to fight for the planet's survival. Your career and your life will be about this struggle, one way or the other.

Yours may be the most privileged generation to ever have lived upon earth. I don't mean that you have soft advantages, but that you find yourself in a time when your individual contribution will have an heroic importance to the world. This may sound overblown. It may make no sense to you for an old woman to stand here and tell you that you, personally, are the hero or heroine whose actions

will decide things for a troubled world. But I think that may indeed be the case. Our lives are more beautifully linked than you can imagine, and the genius of one life can affect all the others in unimaginable ways.

You must become the hero or heroine of your own life in any case, and that is enough for your happiness, regardless of your degree of extension into the world.

Finding your genius is some times a hard trick. Sometimes it is easily spotted, embraced and nurtured. But some of you will not find it until you are old and gray. Some of you will never find it, though it was always there for you to find, I assure you. Sometimes we see it and do not want to find it quite where it pops up. "Well, yes, I happen to be very good at that, but Dear Lord, I don't want to be that for life." Indeed, you may turn away from your own genius many times before it comes knocking with a baseball bat on some dark night of the soul.

Be open to your own genius. Fearlessly try everything in life. See what gives you energy

instead of taking your energy away. Discover the things that keep you joyfully up until 6 A.M. Sex, of course, doesn't count, because we are all geniuses at thinking about that. It's a given.

If you can't get excited about anything in the way of a first career, do not despair. Keep exploring. You are on a Grail quest, and your quest will be rewarded if you keep combing through life, looking for the thing that sparkles for you. It is there, believe me. It is your soul It is your life's work.

Finding your soul is a great project. But it is not the only happiness to be enjoyed in your life—especially in these glory days of your youth. Take time each day to look at the beautiful lives around you. Look with love from above at these lives, and be a force for good in them. There is no better way to find your own heart than to look with kindness to the needs of others. We cannot find ourselves except through friendship and love and serious respect for the lives around us.

I wish you all a happy life. I hope you have a high opinion of yourself, and that you will understand that you are worth the trouble you have invested in