

# COMMENCEMENT – 2015

**DR. BRIDGES**

## **OPENING OF CEREMONY**

Good morning! As President of Whitman College, it's my honor to open Whitman's 129<sup>th</sup> Commencement ceremony.

Thank you Brad McMurchie, for your entertaining welcome and for your leadership of our governing boards.

Thank you also to the Walla Walla Valley Band led by Director and Whitman Alumnus, Jackson Maberry. That was a beautiful processional.

Today's Commencement ceremony marks a distinct and momentous achievement in the lives of each of our graduates.

Congratulations, class of 2015, on a job well done. You are joining the ranks of 128 distinguished classes graduating before you – like the class of 1965 seated to your right, whose members are celebrating with you today.

I am truly impressed by your accomplishments and the fact that you are completing your degrees on time. After all, as this is my final year as Whitman's president, I too am

graduating, but it has taken me 10 years to get here!

Nearly 10 percent of you are the first members of your family to attend college, a substantial achievement that will impact your family and its future legacy for generations to come. Knowing that many of you overcame significant obstacles to reach this moment today, we join your families in expressing how much your accomplishments inspire us all.

Class of 2015 you also represent 8 foreign countries, ranging from Iraq to Japan; and 34 states from Alaska to Florida and California to Vermont. The graduating student who traveled the farthest to attend Whitman is from Lesotho, more than 10,000 miles away.

Your academic accomplishments are significant. This year 20 of you graduated with the honorary designation of Phi Beta Kappa, a distinction that indicates you met not only Whitman's expectations, but also the highest national scholastic standards.

And thus far in the selection process, 16 of you are recipients of prestigious national fellowships, scholarships and grants. Six of you have earned Fulbright awards for research and teaching around the world. One of you is a Watson Fellowship recipient, and one of you is a National Institutes of Health IRTA

recipient. Four of you are French Teaching Assistant Program fellows, and one of you is a Princeton in Asia fellow. More will follow; the list goes on.

Fully 75% of you graduates performed community service as students here – reaching out to agencies, organizations and schools in Walla Walla to live your life for others. That you managed to fulfill that commitment along with academic coursework is stunningly impressive and a source of pride for all of us.

And in addition to your academic and community work many of you competed in varsity athletics in what is one of the toughest athletic conferences in the country.

Ten of you were selected as All-Americans and three teams won conference championships, with each advancing into the national championship tournament for their respective sport.

Further demonstrating your success, men's tennis captured its eighth straight conference crown and women's tennis added its fourth consecutive conference title.

Together you have taken Whitman to an entirely new level of excellence in national competition, one that is comparable to the excellence of our academic programs.

In 2007, Whitman’s athletic teams as a group were ranked near the bottom of the more than 300 Division III college athletic programs in the country in terms of overall competitiveness. But thanks to you, each of you (and your coaches) Whitman’s teams have risen since then to the top 15 percent of all Division III schools in terms of competing at the highest levels. From the bottom to the top in just 8 years. Congratulations and thank you. And I can assure you that our alumni who were themselves varsity athletes are immensely proud of what you’ve accomplished.

**[Pause]**

Members of the class of 2015, I invite you to return again—in 50 years to celebrate the class of 2065, just as our class of 1965 has returned today. I’ll likely have another commitment then and won’t make the ceremony—but I encourage you to return time and again, repeatedly, to enjoy the beauty of this place, to reflect on your experiences here, to reminisce and reconnect with classmates and friends, and to renew your ties to Whitman College.

Pause

Before I introduce and acknowledge a few individuals and groups here today, let me note that we have stations to my right and left with drinking water. If you become thirsty at any time in the ceremony, feel free to make use of them.

**DR. BRIDGES****CONTINUED OPENING REMARKS**

Parents and grandparents, I've come to know these students. Looking at them now, they are actually taller, stronger and smarter than we were at their age and also now, perhaps smart enough to take our mistakes as their messages, to make our weaknesses their lessons, and to make our examples – the good and not so good – part of their education.

They understand complexity, and have a depth of perception that, perhaps, we didn't have. A sense of truth that is deeper and less fragile than ours. I, for one, have come to conclude that the graduates before me today are the best reason for hope that our country, perhaps our world, knows.

They are believers and doers. They will take what we have passed on to them to create lives and realities better than those we have known.

We all share pride in who they are, and confidence in who they will become.

**[Pause]**

For a moment, I want to look back to 1965 and those returning for their 50-year reunion.

The Commencement Speaker that year was Arjay Miller, President of the Ford Motor Company. He spoke about the changing nature of American society and the skills graduates would need in order to have successful careers and fulfilling lives.

Given how we live now, some 50 years later, his observations seem both ironic and visionary. Miller predicted some of the challenges and the opportunities that arose after the 1960s; most notably, the rise of computing technology (then in its most embryonic stages), and the effects it would have on everyday American life.

Many people in the early and mid-1960s had grave concerns about the adverse effects of computing and computers. These fears persisted through the 1970s for some, who demonized computer use in the workplace and daily routines. Those critics suggested that technology would reduce all of us to “a string of digits with zip codes, social security

numbers and digital dialing telephones, creating a totally numeric world.”

Thank goodness they didn’t know about Facebook, Linked in, Yik Yak, or what about Whitman Encounters.

Can you imagine their reaction! We are not just a numeric world, but thanks to computing technology, we have become a much more connected and transparent world. Our lives are open for all to see and privacy, at times, is hard to find.

Miller’s broad vision of technology in 1965 anticipated many opportunities of the digital age. He noted that “most technological advances introduce a need for higher order, rather than lower order, thinking and skills” and he observed “that technological advances open new avenues for creativity.”

Miller was right. Creative advances and opportunities he never imagined have accompanied developments in computing and computing technology. Our intellectual pursuits—the way we think about and gather information—and our social lives have been utterly transformed.

As society changes, so must our academic curriculum. Whitman will continue to develop programs of study – all in the liberal arts and

sciences – that enable our students to thrive in this dynamic world. The analytic and communication skills of Whitman’s graduates, today and in the future, will be critical to resolving challenging societal and global problems we face.

Like Miller 50 years ago, we cannot imagine what the next 50 years will bring. Yet the presence of the class of 1965 here today reminds us that Whitman’s educational foundation endures. I am comforted in knowing that today’s graduates will have a comparably profound, creative impact on the world of the future that our 1965 graduates have had.

Graduates, as you begin this next chapter of your lives, each of you leaves Whitman with new knowledge, new habits of mind, and the curiosity to explore questions and understand problems from multiple perspectives.

You face “Great Expectations.” Much has been given to you and much is expected.

You have received a rigorous education from our distinguished faculty. They take great pride in each of you.

What will be asked of you after Whitman? Hard work, informed by the intellectual skills and ideals instilled in you here. Nothing will be handed to you.

Each of you, like graduates before you, now begins a journey full of challenges and opportunities. Be fearless and take risks – you are among the most capable college graduates in our country, and you are poised to have meaningful and successful lives.

Whatever your future path, we hope that you discover a noble purpose to guide your journey. And whatever your purpose, we hope that it will be far more consequential than simply getting a specific job or obtaining additional academic degrees.

Let me be clear, at least for your parents' sake. Get a job. Become independent of their support. You can and you will. Don't worry. And if additional degrees will help you get an even better job, pursue them.

But we expect and want you to find purpose and meaning in your lives that extends beyond your work, purpose that inspires passion within you and that pays forward the investments made for you. The investments of your parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, faculty and staff members who have supported you – all of whom have provided enormous time, energy, love and personal treasure.

I am reminded of an elderly friend of the College – Lois Dusenbury, a person of few

words but a great heart. She gave the gift of her lifetime to Whitman when she endowed a scholarship to support a student who would, in Lois' words, "change the world."

Each of you has the potential to be that person – someone who will "change the world."

But without a guiding purpose, a set of values and beliefs that shape and are integral to your decisions, or a clear vision of the person you seek to become, you may toil tirelessly for small victories in your adult lives and enjoy only the fleeting satisfaction that such victories bring.

Friendships enable us to discover and live out our purpose.

Do you remember the work of Seneca that you read four years ago in Encounters, his letters on morals to his friend Lucilius. In these he refers to the crucial importance of friendships in living a fulfilling life,

"I am not a friend unless whatever issue arises affecting you is also an issue for me. Friendship between us makes a total partnership in all things, and nothing is favourable or adverse for one of us alone: we are living for a common purpose. Nor can anyone live happily if he only observes

himself and turns everything towards his own advantage: you must live for someone else if you want to live for yourself."

At Whitman you have developed qualities of thought and understanding -- in Seneca's words – through deep friendships with others, those with whom you have shared a common purpose. Over these four years, your classmates, our staff, and our faculty have lived for you, shaping what you have learned, how you think and the people you have become.

These relationships will sustain you in the years ahead – they represent a source of continuity and support upon which you can rely in moments of confusion and turmoil, as well as in periods of clarity and wellbeing.

Your friends at Whitman are your extended family – we will embrace you and support you over the years. Each of us here feels honored to have shared this critical moment in your lives with you.