



## **The Graduation: A Convocation of Speeches**

Over the past few weeks, several friends and family members from India have been coming to America to attend the graduation ceremony of their children, the months of May-June being the season of convocations and commencements. It's quite a remarkable development from even as late as 1980s, when most Indian families, save the super-rich, could barely scrape together enough money to send their kids to colleges abroad. Those who can afford it are still in a small minority.

But being digitally empowered, today's kids are a lot more resourceful, and find ways and means to head out abroad, even if it means borrowing the \$ 100,000 or so required to bankroll their education. Which is why there are more than 100,000 students from India in the U.S college system any given year. However, a growing number of Indian parents can afford to fund this foreign degree enterprise out of their own pockets and assets. Evidently, going by the traffic this year, some of them are wealthy enough that they can even make the journey themselves to the U.S to see their wards graduate, the commencement being a big deal in the United States, unlike in India.

Commencement speeches are a great U.S collegiate tradition. Each year, often months in advance, schools (a term Americans use interchangeably with colleges) book inspirational celebrity speakers to give one last pep talk to graduating students. From the U.S President himself to Nobel laureates, CEOs, entertainers, journalists, sportsmen etc., pearls of wisdom are dispensed by the famous and successful to bright-eyed, bushy-tailed youngsters stepping out into the tough world.

This year, President Obama gave at least three commencement speeches, including one at the U.S Naval Academy and another at Morehouse College, an all-male, historically black school in Atlanta. Also out and about were President Clinton, Vice-president Joe Biden, CEOs and founders of tech companies such as Twitter and AOL, and heads of brick and mortar giants such as Domino's Pizza and Whole Foods, not to speak of celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, Steven Colbert, Robert Redford, Julie Andrews etc. From our part of the world, the Dalai Lama gave a commencement speech at Tulane University this year, as did Deepak Chopra (at Hartwick College). Indian-American graduation day speakers in previous years include CNN's Sanjay Gupta, New Yorker's writer-physician Atul Gawande, and journalist Fareed Zakaria.

Most commencement speeches are soon forgotten, but in this day and age of social media and digital forever-ness, some of them become timeless. The address can be project a grand idea, even global doctrines and foreign policy principles: e.g, John F Kennedy's commencement speech to American University in 1963 where he spoke of world peace ("Our problems are man-made -- therefore, they can be solved by man...No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings") or George Marshall outlining the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe at his Harvard Commencement speech in 1947.

But they can also be quirky and off-beat, while at the same time imparting important lessons. Invited to speak at Knox College some years back, the TV host and comedian Stephen Colbert's advice to students included this gem: Being pre-approved for a credit card does not mean you have to apply for it. Another speaker listed "Back-up your hard drive" as a key lesson in life (doubtless, before the advent of cloud computing). Yet another prescribed, "For every 30 minutes of TV you watch, read one poem out loud." Not all comedic speeches are goofy or zany. The late-night TV host Conan O'Brien's address to Harvard 2000 was a heartfelt chronicle of his failures in life with the parting wish to graduates to experience the bad as well as the good. "Fall down, make a mess, break something occasionally. And remember that the story is never over." he told them.

In fact, failure, not success, is a recurring theme in U.S commencement addresses. Most of them first ask graduates to be ready to face failure as a steppingstone to success. "In order to succeed spectacularly, you must be ready to fail spectacularly," Twitter co-founder Biz Stone said in one recent graduation day speech. The actor Denzel Washington was more elaborate on the subject in a 2011 address to University of Pennsylvania graduates: "First... you will fail at some point in your life. Accept it. You will lose. You will embarrass yourself. You will suck at something. There is no doubt about it," he warned. "That's probably not a traditional message for a graduation ceremony. But, hey, I'm telling you -- embrace it. Because it's inevitable." Gee, thanks, Mr. Washington; how did you rescue all those people from trains and planes?

By most accounts, the best commencement address ever is credited to Apple's Steve Jobs (Stanford 2006), although Time magazine put the novelist and essayist David Foster Wallace's speech (Kenyon 2005) above all. Does it have something to do with the fact that they both died relatively young (56 and 46 respectively) and might have wrung the best out of life with a sense of urgency that most people lack? One feels a bit morbid reading or listening to their speeches now because of the kind of foreboding it contains. "It is not the least bit coincidental that adults who commit suicide with firearms almost always shoot themselves in the head. They shoot the terrible master," Wallace told graduates, explaining the power of the mind, three years before he went on to commit suicide.

Jobs' now legendary address was as bleak. "No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to Heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true," he told the young, expectant graduates. But

then he delivered a message that he lived: "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma -- which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition ... Stay hungry, Stay foolish."  
Amen.