

Edward Larkin
Valedictory Address
May 22, 2011

Secretary Gates, Father Jenkins, distinguished faculty and guests, family, friends, and graduates, we gather here today bound by a common ending and thousands of new beginnings. We gather here bound by ritual, nostalgia, achievement. This is a time to look out expectantly into the future, a horizon framed by the extent of our ambitions and the audacity of our imaginations. It's also a time to look back at the past four years; a time to enjoy the last few laughs with our friends; to take our last few walks around the quads; to look up for the last few times as students at that golden dome that stands out so distinctively against the Indiana sky. It's a time to stop worrying about the grades; the applications; the jobs, and to think about what we have accomplished these last four years, and look forward to where we are going next.

As a high school senior, my dad gave me a little silver paperweight that said, "Do not strive to be first, but rather, be the first to strive". I didn't appreciate it at first – to be honest, I thought it was simply a trite platitude, a play on words just for its own sake. Do not strive to be first, but rather, be the first to strive. Part of this is because striving to be first is what we've always succeeded in doing, what we've known so intimately. We survived an arduous selection process to gain acceptance at one of the greatest universities in the nation. Not only did we come here, we thrived here. All the philosophy essays, senior projects and theses, tests full of chemistry mechanisms, thermo equations, and DCF models lie conquered in the past, silent tributes to our dedication and our abilities. We know, on the precipice of entering a completely different phase in our lives, that we have always excelled. We are accustomed to finding ourselves at the top; accustomed to being judged by our relative rankings to others. We are defined by numbers – percentages, GPAs, standardized test scores. This has been the paradigm that has guided our quest for the last decade. We've done incredibly well. So what is the challenge for our generation?

David Brooks, a writer for *The New York Times*, penned a couple of columns in 2010 that, for me, have been instrumental in defining our challenge. As compared to fifty years ago, college has become much more of a meritocracy. "Old boys' clubs" at elite universities are relics of the past. Average SAT scores and GPAs have risen; having parents that attended a certain institution is no longer a golden ticket. Deserving people are earning their chances to shine. So what's wrong? Well, perhaps this development has a more subtle effect about which we don't often think. Perhaps it has inspired us to adopt a cautionary, play-by-the-rules attitude. What do we lose when we obsess over grades and standardized tests? Well, maybe in our zeal to do so well, we don't challenge professors with quite so much vigor. Maybe we don't protest injustice quite so often (just ask our parents). Maybe we have a little more apprehension about unleashing that rebellious idealism, such a hallmark of youth, into the world. We are encouraged to succeed within the system, but we don't desire to break through quite so much. The problem with having such a clear roadmap is that it's easy to stay safely between the lines.

We now find ourselves at the end of our Notre Dame career, and we enter a world that values something very different. We enter a world in which the true visionaries do not necessarily strive to be first. Oftentimes, they are the first to strive. There is no longer any first place in the world; no longer one “system” to excel in. We don’t remember the valedictorians of the Harvard Classes of 1977 or 2004. No; instead, we remember two dropouts. One created Windows and is currently head of a \$37 billion charitable foundation, and the other started a visionary social network that almost all of us here today use. And while the names at the top of Columbia University’s Class of 1983 have faded with time, we do happen to remember a transfer from Occidental College, who dared to dream that the United States could elect a black president. And while we may not remember the British authors who wrote with the most acclaimed intellect or stylistic eloquence, we do remember a single mother who started a fantastical empire of 7 books on a paper napkin. These people did not necessarily strive to be first. Through ambition, through passion for an idea, through grit, they were the first to strive.

And I believe that we, as graduates of this University, are well positioned to thrive in this world. You simply can’t insulate yourself at Notre Dame. This is a school where we were necessarily immersed in the whole experience of what it means to be human—academically, culturally, athletically, spiritually. Notre Dame is not a place where pre-meds steal library books from each other – instead; they take service trips together to Appalachia. Notre Dame is not a place where business majors pursue their craft without reflection – it’s a place where business ethics is required, a place that is home to a nationally renowned business club that has a motto of “peace through commerce.” Notre Dame is not a place where spirituality is neglected – it’s practiced; challenged; contemplated; debated. Notre Dame is not a place to escape. It is a place where we were forced to confront the issues of our time – we have seen forums on immigration; sustainability; and the global marketplace. We have seen two of the greatest thinkers of our time debate whether or not religion is beneficial to society. We have witnessed the good, the bad, and the ugly in the abortion debate when President Obama came two years ago at this very time.

We have occupied a position at a cultural nexus for the past four years. And because of this, we are better prepared to be citizens of the world, to fight for what we believe, to embrace the variety of human experience to the fullest. We learn from Notre Dame the path less traveled is worth investigating, the examined life is really the one worth living. We’ve been exposed to so much here on these scenic quads that it would be hard not to find something that truly kindles us.

But whether we have been kindled is not enough. The most critical part is an embrace of that risk, a bright-eyed desire to take a detour from the straight path. When we inevitably look back in the twilight of our lives, “the last red and dying evening”, as William Faulkner said, I suspect we won’t chide ourselves for following our passions. We won’t regret taking a couple of years and trying to turn our wild ideas into real businesses, whether successes or failures. We won’t wish to go back and start our professional careers earlier at the expense of a service trip. We won’t regret the stands we took; the ideas we pursued; the people we helped; the ones we loved.

And at the end of the day, this is what it takes. This is what it takes for societies to thrive. It requires a lot of people deciding that the risks are worth it; that working for the collective good is worth it; that challenging the conventional wisdom is worth it. Greatness emerges when people engage the world of ideas and nurture their own rather than racing off to be the best.

We look back at the expanse of history, and we wonder at these hallmarks of greatness, passed down so vividly. We look upon the Parthenon, the tragedies of Sophocles and the philosophy of Socrates and ask ourselves *“Who were these Greeks, that they had such audacity to reach for the transcendent?”* We look two millennia back at a small religious sect and ask ourselves *“Who were these people, with such conviction in their belief that they were willing to die for this Jesus of Nazareth?”* We look at the founding of our country, and ask ourselves *“Who were these colonists, that they had the audacity to write so profoundly, ruminating on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?”*

So what questions will they ask about us? What will we do as a society that will fundamentally change the world? Who will we help; for what will we stand? We will all do our part to provide these answers in the coming years. We will be remembered, for better or worse. We may be remembered as the generation that failed. We may be simply a footnote of history, leaving our problems to others in a later age. Or we may use the tools at our fingertips, so unprecedented for any previous generation, and succeed.

But succeed at what? Not in being the scientists and doctors with the most publications or the department chairs in the best hospitals, but those who pursue invigorating, meaningful research; who travel to the third world and seek to allay the suffering. Not in being the lawyers with the most successful trials, but those who take principled stands and represent those who may not otherwise have a voice. Not in being the businessmen that amass the greatest sums or climb to the top of the corporate ladder, but those who most zealously try to turn their ideas into reality, those that create, manage, and nurture the next Facebook or the next Gates Foundation, uncover the next revolution. Every operation and published paper, every handshake and verdict, every investment and IPO, every success and every failure, moves the gears of our human experiment forward. So perhaps once in a while, we should ask ourselves about our own decisions: in what direction am I taking us?

And so we leave, bright-eyed, to spark the flames that will light the future. But not yet. For now, we gather here like one hundred and sixty-five classes of Notre Dame students have in the past. We gather here like the Greeks at the ancient theater; like the Romans at the Coliseum; like generations of expectant, hopeful fans of the blue and gold on autumn Saturdays. We celebrate the memories we’ve made here, the friendships, the trials, and the triumphs. They will fade slowly into the sunset, a faint picture that we’ll remember and talk about with our grandkids. To be human is to remember, and little memories will always spontaneously kindle, like the twinkling lights of a city from above. Some will make us smile; others laugh; still others wince. But no matter how distant our years here become, they have fundamentally altered us. We have spent four of the best years of our lives – four

of the most intellectually curious, vigorous, challenging, rewarding years of our lives at this incredible University. They will be with us forever.

I went back home for Easter and found that old silver paperweight lying haphazardly in my closet. Dust was visible along its edges, and the silver might not have gleamed the way it once had. But the message was untouched by those all-too-familiar forces that take the luster off everything else. "Do not strive to be first, but rather, be the first to strive." I believe we have a golden opportunity, as we depart from beneath this Notre Dame sky, to do just that. Class of 2011, congratulations.