SENIOR CONVOCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF DALLAS  
May 22, 1968  
Dean June Welch

President Cowan, Members of the Administration and  
Faculty of the University of Dallas, Mr. Buttross, Seniors  
of the Graduating Class of 1968, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The name of the game is commencement. And the portion  
we are now playing is called "putting into words all the hopes  
and dreams you have for those young people who sit before you."  
It is the part of the game which immediately precedes the phase  
denominated "saying something they can carry away from this  
thousand acres that might remain with them and sustain them when  
the green water tops the flying bridge."

Nothing has pleased me more during this memorable year  
than the invitation to speak to you today. Had I not had good  
counsel, my inflated self-esteem might have caused me difficulty.  
The faculty assisted me in maintaining my perspective. And those  
diligent scholars, the students of the History of the Americans,  
did their part to keep me humble. One suggested that the reason  
I assigned certain outside reading just had to be that I was on  
the payroll of the publisher. Above all there were the quiet  
words of a great philosopher to hold me steadfast. I refer to  
Michael Baca and his First Law of Nature, which is, "When thy  
cup runneth over, watcheth out."
Now, President Cowan has given a great deal of thought to the nature of the academic discipline. He tells us that we may change profession or occupation several times. But, he says, we do not change our discipline, for that is our way of perceiving life. A discipline is achieved when one has opened himself, and in a sense surrendered, to a subject of study or a system of learning. It is a combination of points of reference, a pattern of thought against which we compare phenomena and derive interpretations and judgments. I think President Cowan is correct in his analysis. And you will each see this disciplinary effect at work in your own life if you haven't already observed how your discipline has shaped you.

"Education is," a wise man said, "what remains after the facts are forgotten." For our purposes we might substitute "the discipline" in place of "education," for that is the principal tool in our workshop.

Henry Ford was not an educated man, that is, he was not formally educated. And yet, he had a discipline, in that he submitted himself to the mysteries of mechanics and tinkering almost to the exclusion of all else other than earning enough to stay alive and buy the parts and materials he needed to construct the automobile that was taking shape in the shed back of his home. The coin in which Henry Ford counted was production of machines and their operation at the highest level of efficiency. And so, when the conversation turned to the question of death, Henry Ford said, "Death is when a part has worn out."
This disciplinary effect was demonstrated to me this morning as I rode out here. The "Mrs. Robinson" song was on the radio. I knew thousands of others were listening to that same song and thinking about the sound and the beat, but I was considering as a lawyer, whether Joe Dimaggio had a cause of action against the writers and the performers, for after all he retired from ball playing years ago, and now he has been lifted out of the obscurity he sought by lines which say, "Where have you gone, Joe Dimaggio? A lonely nation turns its face to you. Boo hoo hoo." There is nothing libelous there but he is made to appear rather ridiculous. And, as a historian, I was wondering whether there was any precedent for dealing with such an atrocity.

The thoughts I seek to convey to you today are not pure and undistorted as would be the image falling through a perfectly made and polished lens. Rather, I speak from experience filtered through the discipline of the historian. It is modified by that of the lawyer, but the modification is only slight, for the attorney must, to state what is the law at a given time, turn back to see what it has been in the past.

The historian does not deal immediately with the subject as he finds it: he must first make a greater or lesser appraisal of its background. And here you must bear with him, for he is oftentimes tedious and not infrequently loquacious as he discovers the place of beginning. Here, again, I fear he resembles the attorney.
Now, where are we in point of time? Well, first we are sixty-eight-and-a-half per cent of the way through the twentieth century. It has been seven hundred and fifty-three years since Magna Carta, four hundred and seventy-six since the first voyage of the Admiral Don Cristobal Colon. It has been three hundred and sixty-one years since the settlement at Jamestown, and one hundred and ninety-two since the Declaration of Independence. Substantial figures, all. One hundred and ninety-two years is a long time. Yet, is it really? A man I know is ninety-seven years old, more than half the age of the nation. Had he been born on the same day that another man who had attained his present age died, then those two lives would have exceeded easily in time the whole history of the United States of America.

The last Indian raid on North Texas was only a hundred years ago. Within the life of my friend, buffalo hides were stacked fifteen feet high on ten acres of the Texas and Pacific Reservation in Fort Worth, and bones and horns and hooves, destined to be ground into fertilizer, covered many more acres. Geronimo—who had nothing to do with that last incursion into North Texas, by the way—has been dead less than sixty years.

The point is that we are very young, as bodies politic and nations go. We are putting men into space and taking close-up photographs of the moon, when we are only sixty-five years into the age of flight. These United States are in the morning of life, as countries go, as the one hundred twenty-nine of you are, as people go.
You are the most recent beneficiaries of the progress men have made through the ages, and you leave this special place at a time when events move at a velocity undreamed of heretofore. The opportunities for you are large and numerous. There is work to be done and goods available in plenty to satisfy needs and desires.

The hazards are also substantial, because of the pace we have established and the complexity of the system we have constructed. The greatest of these dangers may be the loss of objective. You leave here with the finest this University had to give you—and in years to come I think you will know that finest was very good, indeed. You have been exposed to excellence, with the best that has been thought and written presented by professors who are masters of their respective disciplines. Most of all, this has been offered to you within an atmosphere of love and respect, within an environment where the specific density of caring is greater per square inch than any place I have known or can imagine.

And what is this objective that I fear may be lost? It is the stuff of living, not the means, but the end. It is the seeking after answers to the ultimate questions. It is the habit of pursuing truth, for its own sake. The Greeks enjoined us to "Know thyself." And Shakespeare, regardless of what we might think of Polonius, wrote "to thine own self be true." And Solomon asked for what he deemed the greatest gift, the understanding heart. Implicit or explicit, all this and so much more was there for you to ponder through the stilly night watches in those undergraduate years.
This University is a special place, and your sojourn here a special time. We might, without taking such a very long view from a point in history, wonder mightily at a scheme of things where it is possible for a substantial segment of the populace to be excluded, for a time, from the labor force, to be freed from the business of concern for today's food and tonight's shelter, in order that these few might attend to tasks in no fashion of immediate utility to the society. It must be in the nature of an advancing civilization that provision is made for man to move forward and upward by permitting those who will later affect its course to have an opportunity to come to a knowledge of man and self. The community, consciously, subconsciously, or even with complete unawareness, provides this island of contemplation and a time for the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

This I say to you from the small wisdom which has become mine in too many years spent questing within this mortal coil and in these last months of refuge in this special place:

Live life as you find it, improve it as you can. Live it as nearly as possible in fidelity with truth as you conceive truth to be. And do not expect to live it perfectly but only with honesty and courage. Perfection is impossible of attainment, and we break ourselves in the fruitless attempt.

The good life is the one fashioned out of a constant striving to do right. It is also made up of falling short and yet having the inner strength to pick up what remains and to try again. Some of the resources you will need to face up to this noble task you have received here.
Be aware, too, that there is a rhythm to life, just as there is to a year or a single day. Each portion has its own cadences and longings and attitudes. The time will come when you see in yourself a tendency toward all those attributes you found most annoying in your father. This will horrify you at first, and then, in season, it will give you comfort and a feeling for the continuity of life.

The name of the game is commencement. And that word means just what it says. It is a launching out upon the next phase of life, into which one carries the armaments and capacities acquired in the one just concluded. The player has passed "go" and collected his two hundred dollars. Immediately ahead is only Baltic and Oriental avenues. But three corners away lie Park Place and Boardwalk.

And now to close. There was always, for me, in the trial of a lawsuit, a certain heightened consciousness of the uniqueness of the undertaking when the time came to sum up. A dozen men and women had come out of the workaday world to participate with the parties and the witnesses and the judge and the attorneys in a determination of the just disposition of the cause. The trial was an entity: it had an integrity all its own. The summation consisted of the last statements of the attorneys for the opposing parties before the questions of fact were placed in the hands of those twelve good men and true. Always there were the regrets that there was no time to say all that wanted saying, no way to convey with a equacy and precision all of the relevant facts. And there would never be another chance to rectify errors or supply omissions.
Once the jury left the box and once it returned its verdict, its members would go back to their places in the community.

Similarly, and also uniquely, we assemble here this week to mark the completion of years of mutual effort by the one hundred twenty-nine of you and your professors. You will not, ever again, come together to make common cause in pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. The tempo of your individual lives is about to accelerate and your paths will diverge.

There is a virtue to being able to look beyond the here and now. For John Kennedy, those days behind the iron fences and the guards at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue were perhaps more bearable because there was, in legend and song, a place where dwelt King Arthur and Guinevere and Lancelot, and because there was a wood to stop beside on a snowy evening. And the historian knows the renewal to be found in the saga of a greying Genoese captain of three tiny Spanish ships venturing so far out into the unknown seas that the tides and the winds might render a return home impossible and the abundance of vegetation erupting from the ocean's floor might seize and hold a vessel fast, as that "painted ship on a painted ocean," until she decayed and died.

In the same fashion, when the tides run heavy and the waves are tall, when the pedestrian business of earning a living and making a place in the community threatens to constitute all of life, to obscure those matters of ultimate concern, you have always the remembrance of that special time and that special place of which you will forever be a part.

Good luck to you.