

Earlham College
Baccalaureate Address
June 12, 1994
Stephen N. Butler
Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, and
African and African-American Studies

On this occasion, perhaps the most important day of celebration for the Earlham community, I welcome parents, guardians, relatives, friends, members of the fifty year class, and others associated with Earlham to the baccalaureate address from the Class of 1994. And, of course, thank you, members of the class of 1994, for affording me the honor and privilege to address you this morning (although while staring at a blank computer screen at 8:30 last night I began to question the whole idea of whether it was an honor to give the talk or the something other... I had a flashback to my student days, up late, writing a paper just to get it done, and what possessed me to take this class in the first place). But this is a day of community celebration that has you, the class of 1994, as its focal point. Let us not forget that. This is your day. And thank you for allowing me to participate as your speaker.

Déjà vu... “Encountering something for the first time but having the illusion it has been encountered or experienced before.”

Now, I certainly have given the baccalaureate before so this is not an illusion. It is, at the same time, a new experience, and an old one. But let me make the most of this Déjà vu thing. Last night, when time was getting short, I thought why write a new talk? Recycle one of your old baccalaureates. No one will know. I can use the 1980 talk, perhaps the one from 1989...the students will not know because it was before they came to Earlham. Certainly not the faculty, who find it hard to remember most anything, particularly those in the back two rows (where I ordinarily sit) who customarily sleep during the talk, carefully hidden in the shadows and behind their colleagues. Yeah, I’ll use the 1989 talk. Stephen, a little voice said, that would be wrong. Under pressure I was as becoming, as Beard and Cerf note in *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*, “ethically disoriented.” My mother, who is here today, would say “dishonest.”

At the Sociology and Anthropology senior dinner this past Wednesday, I indicated I only had three days to write this talk...” no problem the seniors mused, one day is when you start to panic.” One senior volunteered that on her last final exam, she only answered 3 of four essays...and realized it didn’t matter, graduation was assured. And they said, “You know you have to make a good impression on our parents.” I would certainly get no sympathy from this group...

I usually include a joke or two, to liven the audience. But in these politically correct times jokes become questionable, humor dangerous. I could not think of anything neutrally humorous to say, why did you want me to talk anyway? (WIPE FACE)

One senior volunteered it was because I was an African American male, another thought it was because I would say something radical, shake up the complacent people, a third thought people who did not take any of my classes wanted to check me out...

Anyway, I've been here before, and interestingly enough, as I reviewed my post baccalaureates with (larceny in my heart) I discovered that for fourteen years, the core of my message had remained intact." (SLOW) Act on the world before it acts on you, create your opportunities instead of waiting them to be created for you, synthesize, embrace diversity and change, pay attention to the usefulness of the message, not the status of the messenger, and THINK FOR YOURSELF. It was also interesting to note that with the same core message, I have alternatively been viewed as liberal, radical, conservative, reactionary, relevant, and irrelevant by various constituencies. Hummmmm.

Now some things DID change...a member of the class of 1980 paid \$6,800 a year, approximately \$27,200 for four years of tuition, room, and board. YOUR education, has a four year "book value" of \$70,974. Since there are 271 of you, the total worth of the class is \$19,233,954. We certainly want to thank the parents for putting up most of this amount to educate their children, and yes, they will leave home.

Anyway, the multiple ways I have been viewed over the years, at Earlham did get me to thinking about how I came upon such a position. Is there anything in my biography that would be of some use to the graduating class and possibly to others here today?

I could tell you about the time during WWII when I was a baby that my mom and sister, who was barely walking, got on a bus in North Carolina, headed for the fabled trip to grandmother's house from NYC. There were no seats and one of a group of white Marines, seated in the front of the bus gave my mother his seat. The bus driver and some passengers strenuously objected but the Marine and his peers were not to be denied. Mom got the seat. Or, three years later, on the same bus route, when I jumped into the seat behind the driver to see where we were going like I had done many times before in New York City. The passengers again objected but this time it was the bus driver who was not to be denied. I sat behind the driver. Or when I was five years old, my uncle and I were traveling by train from New Bern to where grandma lived. The coaches were segregated, the "Colored" coach crowded, the "white" coach virtually empty. I refused to go into the crowded coach when there were clearly seats available elsewhere. This time I was not to be denied, and neither was my uncle. We stood in the space between the coaches for the entire 20 miles journey from New Bern to Tuscarora Road. Or when my sister, who was valedictorian of her eighth grade class, was told by the school counselor, in the presence of my mother, that she should not plan on going to college. My mother was not to be denied and my sister went on to graduate from college with honors. You get the idea...life can sometimes be a struggle and it helps to have people of conscience who will take risks, who will not be denied.

In the same vein, this year there were rumors of me leaving EC...indeed, I was interviewed at one of the two colleges I would consider leaving Earlham for. Everything was going fine until I was asked to respond to something like the following: "Does the current generation of students lack discipline and responsibility? Are they only interested in their own individual and group goals? If so, doesn't this mean that administrators and faculty should reinstitute the rules and standards that have eroded over the years to help restore community? And, how can we best help the many student groups support and learn about their own cultures?"

Now, you should never go to a job interview without doing some reconnoitering of the situation. From previous knowledge about that particular community I knew there was a politically correct context and maybe "right answers." If I was to be seriously considered for the job, I would have to give right answers or something reasonably close to what was expected. Now this was serious because I figure my salary would have increased significantly. What to do? Lie Stephen, position yourself to take the money and run. At these wages you can fake it until retirement. "Ethical disorientation" again. I said I thought that students modeled their behavior off the adults in their communities and that people on the Search Committee and their colleagues would have to BE, what they want their students to value. I said it was important for students to know and understand their own cultures but that I also thought such understanding was only the first step towards a FUSION of racial, ethnic, cultural, identities, with new forms of social life replacing the status quo. The interview went downhill from then on.

The point I am making with these stories from my past and recent biography, is that you are not tested until you have to make a decision that really counts. Many of you will be faced with difficult choices. Some of you may choose not to speak up and to take the money. But I could not agree to be something I was not. I believe that the problem of the 21 century, your century, is that of cultural, ethnic, racial fusion- the creation of new forms of social behavior and thought...the continual breaking of precedents and the creation of forms of social life. This terrifies those invested in maintaining the status quo.

I encourage you to think of new ways to do things, set goals to achieve so that you are not simply responding from day to day or year to year...think about goals you want to achieve in five years, ten years, and set your course, modify it along the way as you get feedback on your actions, assess your performance, create new goals. It's an ongoing process.

Déjà vu. I've been here before except that this was an exceptionally hard talk to prepare. Perhaps we really are in a Post-modern world that has little room for humanists like myself. Perhaps that is why I had bouts of "ethical disorientation." The societal oracles are odd, repression strange, full of danger...bristling with intolerance, crime in the streets, 3 strikes and you're out, and an unwillingness to understand those who are different — from ethnic strife in Bosnia and Rwanda...to Olivett College where in a recent year there was an exodus of many African American students from an environment that could not easily synthesize and absorb new forms of cultural life. In

such a world, you must think for yourself while being open to meeting new peoples and working together for a better world.

In 1933, Carter G. Woodson, the noted African American Historian, author, and educator wrote:

“If you can control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself with what he will do. If you make a man feel he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you will not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one.” (84-85)

Now, I read Woodson to remind you to watch out for those who would seek to control your thought, and always respond to others as you would like to be responded to. Above all, thus, think for yourself. Reject seeing people through categories in which they might be placed. Deal with the person, embrace new things, don’t cave in to dealing with only those people you understand, and view different peoples and cultures as liberating troops rather than as a hostile army.

There are those who wish to cling to the past, enshrine old legends, myths, and ways of doing things. Twenty-five years ago it did not occur to me that in 1994 I might still be fighting for a view of the world that would get people to cease thinking about other groups like elements on the periodic chart, all part of the same family but with some groups being peacefully incompatible with others.

I think that if there is a truth, with a capital T, it is that we are constantly evolving as a species and that change is an inherent part of the human condition. To deny this is to run headlong into eventual obscurity. The direction and rate of change depends on those who are willing to take risks, embrace change, think of new ideas, and fight for those values that makes us one. This means we do not hang on to all of the cherished notions of our past that worked for individual, groups, or for any given community, but rather that we must continually engage upcoming moments in reality, and make the world what we, and others, want it to be.

I believe there is a profound danger for us to simply “go along to get along.” There is a profound danger for us when peace and quiet is valued over fairness and struggle. There is a profound danger when conformity valued over difference. And, there is a profound danger if we do not recognize that conformity is not the same thing as community.

In the words of George Herbert Mead:

“We can insist on making community standards better standards. We are engaged in a conversation in which what we say is listened to by the community and its response is affected by what we have to say...the process of conversation is one in which the individual has not only the right, but the duty of talking to the community of which he is

a part, and bringing about those changes which take place through the interaction of individuals...we are continually changing our social systems in some respects, and we are able to do that intelligently because we can think.”

It is in these times, when new paradigms are on the horizon, that our commitment to change is most tested. And often, we miss golden opportunities because we insist on rejecting new possibilities because they don't fit the way things have always been done. The Swiss, who invented the quartz watch, knew it wasn't a watch because it didn't fit their conception of what a watch should be (it didn't have gears or a winding stem.) They did not patent the invention, but Seiko and Texas Instruments, who did not make watches, immediately saw the possibilities. As a result, the Swiss lost their dominant market share as the world's foremost makers of watches.

Rules of old paradigms prevent us from seeing new possibilities. Collectively, we must reassess our old paradigms about how the world, our nation and social institutions work. The growing interdependence of the world depends on a new paradigm of diversity, the fusion of peoples while honoring the old conceptions. We must see challenges (some would say bad times) as opportunities.

In engaging diversity, we cannot simply announce we are good people. Rather, we must accept difference, and the struggle it may bring, as a liberating process that better prepares us for the future. By doing so we continually push the community to a higher plane, not by the rhetoric of transcendence, but rather through the liberating struggle of shared experiences. Above all, we must resist the temptation to become a purified community where we all are the same and/or think the same.

Think for yourself. If you are African American, white, Hispanic, male, female, gay, or X or Y or Z whatever they might be, don't let the category in which you can be placed, or what others think of this category, DETERMINE your thinking. Celebrate the ways different peoples have engaged social life, their histories and cultures but at the same time insist that this is a part of understanding an everchanging world of peoples and cultures. Challenge complacent authority, accept diversity and difference, speak truth, as you know it, to power. But remember Herodotus. People do kill messengers.

Now there are always some skeptics. Human beings, if motivated, can share and understand another culture if they are receptive to change and adaptive. Remember, where some see impossibilities, others see challenges. Where some head into oblivion, others head into the promise of future progress. Remember you must act on what we wish to be, not simply announce what you are. You must model diversity by BEING IT in all manifestations, from the new forms of knowledge to the people who carry such knowledge.

Yours are difficult and challenging times. Be more resolute and determined than previous generations to struggle for the dignity of all people, but respect the enemies, one dimensional thinking, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and all kinds of prejudice that have denied human potential.

And beware the conspiracy of every older generation to label the upcoming one in unflattering ways, (which, I think, is really an attempt to get you not to compete with them or a way to make them feel better). You have been labeled as spendthrifts, people who will buy anything, selfish, greedy, graceful losers, slackers, and whinners. I think I speak for my colleagues when I say, if these characteristics are supposed to represent your generation, we do not see this reflected in the 271 members of the class of nineteen hundred and ninety-four. Thank you.