

Commencement, Worcester College, May 16, 1992

Dear Graduating students!

Here we are, live, on camera, in real time. And you thought this day would never come! You are rightly proud of your accomplishment. But now the bad news. The world you are entering is a mess.

The environment is degraded.

Population is outrunning food supply.

There is an undeclared civil war in our crumbling inner cities, usually invisible to us except as the war on crime and war on drugs which is really the war on people. It is usually invisible to most of us except as war on crime and war on drugs that really conceals a war on people. And many of these people have no other way to get attention but to strike out as we have seen in Los Angeles and other cities only two weeks ago.

Then there are the not-so undeclared civil wars, ethnic and almost tribal conflicts, collapsing governments, collapsing ideals for a better and more just social order, a discrediting of the political process even as we are giving lip service to democracy.

~~Let us make no mistake:~~ The balance sheet seems *with our backs to the wall,* dismal, the future gloomy, the task hopeless. So we have no choice but to face up to an impossible challenge. But remember the saying: the possible we do immediately, the impossible will take a little longer. Many things that seemed impossible yesterday - good as well as bad -- the end of the Cold War, the receding of the nuclear menace -- have become reality. So let us start turning things around. Here, now, today.

And let us start with the education you have received. It may or may not help get your first job, and I know how scarce they are getting to be for new graduates, but something even more important. It should help not so much your first job as your last job: how far you can go until you reach that lasting job, and what kind of a life you will lead in the meantime. A university is also a place to learn about things you can never learn on a job. Those are things that can equip us to meet the formidable, forbidding challenge of our time, to turn things around so that civilized lives and democratic cultures can make a comeback.

Let me be more specific. You have heard about the problems of the physical environment -- the air we breathe, the water we drink, the earth we live on. Making it more livable for more people will determine our survival as a

species. But there is another environment which will affect how we survive, the quality of our survival as civilized human beings. That is also an environment into which you are graduating, which will affect you and your children profoundly, and which poses a large part of our challenge. It is what I call the cultural environment.

Let me sketch the predicament of our cultural environment and urge you, new graduates, families, and friends, to join in making it fit for us to live and for our children to grow up in peace and freedom and justice.

Cleaning up the mess begins with the stories we tell. What distinguishes human life from that of other creatures is that we live in a world erected largely by the stories we tell about it. And this humanizing process of story telling has changed profoundly in just a few decades.

For the first time in human history, a child is born into an environment of images and messages independent of the home, the school, the church, the local culture, and often even of the native country. Until recently, the everyday cultural environment was mostly hand-crafted, home-made, community-inspired. It is now largely mass-produced and mass-marketed all over the world. It is driven by increasingly restrictive and centrally managed industrial policy. Most of the stories are brought home to most children not by parents, teachers, clergy or communities with their own stories to tell but by a handful of distant conglomerates with something to sell.

The average ten-year-old can name more brands of beer than presidents. As many recognize Joe Camel, the smooth character, as recognize Mickey Mouse.

The world of tv. Census -- 3/1 1/3 1/5 Life chances; casting. White males in the prime of life. Power, violence.

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras but none as filled with images of violence as the present. We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen. There is no escape from the massive infusion of colorful mayhem into the homes and cultural life of ever larger areas of the world.

Of course, there was blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. It is a violent world. But no tragic cost, pain, suffering. Happy violence.

DEMO OF POWER. WHO CAN GET AWAY...

6-8 prime time, 20-25 children's weekend daytime

2 entertaining murders a night

1/2 commit, 6 percent killers, 55 percent victims

Demonstration of power. Underrep, overvictimized.
Insecurity, dependence, demand for protection and even
repression of it comes in the name of security.

For every 10 violent, 12 victims. But:

women - 16

Girls and older women 19

Nonwhite and foreign women 23

Not popular but cheap ---

Occupations, education, science, religion, women and
minorities, etc.

Health related portrayal.

Cult environment movement

Here is to the success....