

THE FIRST COMMENCEMENT... IN THE SPIRIT OF YOUNG

By

Charles E. Perry
President
Florida International University



Florida International University
Tamiami Campus
June 16, 1973

Let me begin tonight by telling you how very pleased I am to have the opportunity to deliver Florida International University's first commencement address. The Academic Council and the Commencement Committee have honored me with this invitation to speak to you, the graduates, on this very special occasion in the young life of this new institution of higher education.

The following two statements, "No man is regarded as a prophet in his own country" and "Familiarity breeds contempt" are commonplace in our everyday conversation. Yet, here in my own country--within the bounds of this young, but vibrant university community--you have invited me to be the first "commencement prophet." And surely you have seen and heard enough of me to make me "very familiar." Even so, you have translated that regard and familiarity into a friendship and trust that places me before you tonight.

And if this is a moment of unique distinction for me, it is no less for each of you. For tonight you not only become graduates, you become the first graduating class of this University. And that is a distinction which will grow as first the years and then the decades slip by.

It is my hope that you will remember well this commencement. And if at some time in the future you chance to look back on this June evening in 1973 when you were part of Florida International University's first graduating class, perhaps you will recall a phrase or a thought from this commencement address. No commencement speaker can ask for more.

My speech will be brief as commencement speeches go, because brevity is an inspiration to everyone. And in an academic atmosphere, brevity is the soul of eloquence, and it honors the scholar. At this commencement, I know that brevity on my part will please the graduates--and astonish the faculty.

Not only are you our first graduates, but compared with succeeding graduating classes, you will be looked upon as a very small and highly select group because, in the not too distant future, Florida International will hold commencements for thousands of graduates. Let us, then, for these few moments ponder not only the event we celebrate here tonight and its importance to all of us--let us also view this event as the moment at which the present becomes the first step into the future.

Imagine, if you can, that you have assembled for Florida International's 50th commencement. You might even imagine that I will be on hand--although I find it extremely difficult to suppose such a thing. Can you see yourselves now on that occasion? Holding the honored place in the procession, seated with all the attention due your distinguished status? For that moment, the eyes of the 50th graduating class will be upon you and they will not be able to conceive of growing old.

What kind of University will this have become? What kind of community will it be part of? What kind of country will you be living in? And what kind of world?

And, even more important, what will you have done to make your community and your world a better place? And, by extension, your University--for a university cannot exist alone and apart. It reflects its surroundings even as it attempts to influence them. Fifty years from now, this University, I believe, will have played an important and continuing role in shaping the future of this community--but it also will accurately reflect the values it has helped to create.

Looking into this kind of crystal ball for the future of South Florida is both fascinating and terrifying. Take population as just one example. There are about 1,300,000 people in Dade County today, but just 50 years ago, the population of Dade County--the same geographic area--was only 69,000. What will it be in 50 years? And what will it mean in terms of the life that will be lived here?

If you think we are in a land development and building boom today, the next 50 years will be even more incredible.

And if today we are struggling to provide the services needed by our present population, what will be going on 50 years from now?

No one can really answer these and other similar questions today. It may well be that none of us is really able to envision what will happen here in the next half-century. Certainly, no one living here 50 years ago even remotely envisioned the development of South Florida as it has occurred. The only thing we can be sure of is that things are going to change -- here and elsewhere -- for we are all caught up in the grip of a social and technological revolution that is moving much faster than we would like and much faster than we can keep pace with.

What we really must address ourselves to is how the various diverse and complex forces in our society can be reconciled in order to preserve the quality of life which we have been accustomed to think of as our basic asset in South Florida. We have to find ways of taking advantage of our advanced technology -- whether it be in housing, in mass transportation, in sewage disposal, or in power plants -- without upsetting what we have painfully learned are delicate and critical balances in all that makes up our environment.

We must find some way to move our society forward in a manner that will permit our ecological concerns and technological advancement to co-exist harmoniously. I firmly believe that we will win this battle. However, there will be many engagements, many actions and many clashes of opposing positions and ideas. All of you will take part in some of them. Some of you will take part in all of them. Is there anything we can say today about the part we will play in the ongoing struggle of tomorrow's forces? I think there are a number of things that need to be considered.

The first thing to consider is that whatever is going to happen here in the next ten, twenty-five or fifty years, will happen because it will be what the people who live here want to happen. Or perhaps, more accurately, what they will allow to happen.

In a free society, the ultimate decisions that affect our lives are not made solely by public officials. They are made possible, for better or worse, by the kinds of feelings that the people reflect to their public officials.

Twenty years ago, Adlai Stevenson said it this way: "Government in a democracy cannot be stronger or more tough-minded than its people. It cannot be more committed to the task than they. It cannot be wiser than the people."

If this is going to be a place where people will enjoy living 50 years from now, it will be because people -- who most certainly include you -- have made it so, not because government officials give warnings or hold public meetings or finance environmental studies. No, in the final analysis, we get the government we want -- and, therefore, the government we deserve -- and that government, whether we like it or not, directs the society in which we must all live.

That's pretty easy to say, isn't it? But what does it really mean?

What it means, quite simply, is that the community in which you and your children will live -- the community in which this University will function -- will be the community that you and others will create here. In addition, our State and our nation and, in some measure, our world will be shaped by your actions, or, in turn, by your inaction.

Your future will reflect not only your concern, but your commitment as well. Not merely your awareness of situations, but your ability to change them. Not merely the fact that this is the place in which you and your family will make a living, but, rather, that this is the place where you will also make a life.

The world in which we live today--which is a framework that was obviously created yesterday--is both a preview of something new and a reflection of something quite old.

This is an age of specialization. Living in it, we all tend to learn more and more about less and less. Not because of any grand design, but simply because each individual discipline has become more and more complex--and, in addition to learning basic skills, we all are faced with having to keep up with an avalanche of change.

In this kind of world, we train people to build nuclear power plants--but forget to train people to operate and maintain them. We become more educated than ever--but our horizons grow more narrow instead of becoming wider. We are terribly concerned about what concerns us--but since our time and energy are limited, what concerns us tends to focus more and more sharply on smaller and smaller images.

If you think seriously about what the next 50 years will bring, you cannot avoid asking whether or not we can continue to afford such a high degree of specialization. I do not think we can. This kind of tunnel-vision that isolates human potential must be changed, altered and, eventually stopped. We must develop a society that is more effective, and productive, by allowing our population to expand their minds by taking in much, much more of the horizon--not less and less.

To do this, we must start practicing ecology and conservation on a truly broad spectrum, conserving not only the rich natural resources of the earth, but the human resources who live upon it!

And if we are willing to broaden our horizons and take greater responsibilities upon ourselves; and if we are willing to be whole people and not merely reflections of what we have come to accept as the status quo, then I can see a community here 50 years hence that will be among the most livable in the world. A community that will have preserved and not squandered its natural and human assets, a community that will have met the problems of growth with growth in its problem-solving ability, a community in which citizens will be both concerned and committed, both aware and able, making both a good living and a fine life.

In that kind of community, this University and its mission will flourish. As the community contributes to the University, so the University will make its contribution to the community. And when you come back here in 2023 to Florida International's 50th anniversary commencement, I hope that each of you will have played some part -- even if it is known only to you -- in the making of that kind of place. For that alone your alma mater and your community will have good reason to be proud of you.

Now, before closing, I want to congratulate each of you as graduates and extend to you my warmest good wishes for your continued success.

Next, I want to thank each of you for coming to Florida International. For choosing to come to a new university, yet untried, yet untested, for your confidence in us, your faith that we would indeed provide a quality academic program. You have given to us every bit as much as we have tried to give to you. From you, we have learned to make the machinery of a university actually work.

We shall always remember you, for no matter how big we grow, how large we become, you will always be our first graduating class. I know you will carry our standard with distinction.

Finally, I want to share a special message with you tonight--one that comes from a plaque hanging in my office. In so doing, I am suggesting that being young is not so much a "when" as it is a "what"--and that the calendar itself provides no clue to the difference between what is called "youth" and what we prefer to regard as "young." So, I dedicate this special message entitled "What Is Young" to you, the first graduating class in the history of Florida International University:

What is "young"--and when is it?

Young is an attitude, a spirit. A way of looking at things. Of responding to them.

It is not an age. Not a hairstyle or a piece of clothing or a musical beat.

Young can be a child examining his first marigold with wonder and delight. . . . or Verdi at 81, composing his finest opera.

Young can be a teenager swinging on a surfboard . . . or Einstein, in his 70's still working on his unified field theory, sailing his boat and playing his beloved fiddle.

Young is not a monopoly of youth. It survives, and flourishes, everywhere the vision has been kept fresh, the muscles of the mind firmly toned, the juices freely flowing.

Let's not cater to youth for its own sake, for its slogans and styles of the moment. Nor scorn it for any of those reasons.

Instead, let's respect "young." Wherever it may be found. Whether the beard is soft and curly or stiff and gray. Spirit has no color. It is always translucent, with its own imaginative sheen.

YOUTH should be listened to. But YOUNG should be followed.

There is no generation gap between the young of any age.

Class of 1973, maintain the young spirit, keep it close to your heart and on your 50th reunion I will join you as we think back on this youthful moment in the young history of this University.

May the "Spirit of Young" be with you always!

