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University of the Pacific Commencement Address

University of the Pacific

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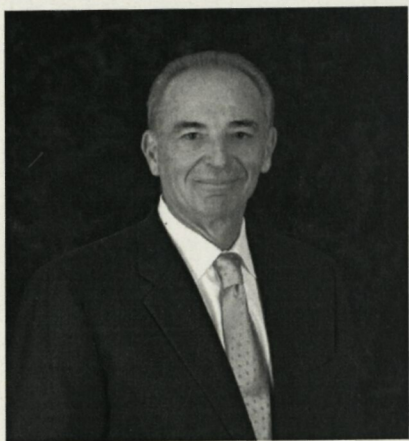
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UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC

152ND
COMMENCEMENT
EXERCISES



DONALD V. DEROSA
PRESIDENT
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
STOCKTON, MAY 16, 2009



A Transformative Presidency

Dr. Donald V. DeRosa has been President of the University of the Pacific since 1995. During his tenure at Pacific, DeRosa has led the creation of distinctive, nationally ranked programs, centers, and institutes, elevated national visibility, raised student selectivity, increased freshman applications 650%, expanded student leadership development programs based on whole-student learning and social and emotional intelligence, dramatically improved university financial strength, led a comprehensive campaign that raised over \$330 million, expanded partnerships between the University, business, and community, and launched an initiative to enhance institutional sustainability practices.

DeRosa's presidency has been called transformative and historic by Pacific's Board of Regents, who named the DeRosa University Center (opened 2008) in honor of his achievements. Beginning in July 2009, Dr. DeRosa will serve in a consulting role for the University as President Emeritus.

Donald V. DeRosa
President
Commencement Address
Stockton, May 16, 2009

I want to extend my personal welcome to all Pacific graduates, their parents, friends, and all members of the university community. And offer my congratulations to the class of 2009. You have reached a unique milestone in your life — having achieved educational goals that will open the door to new opportunities that await you.

I have also reached a unique landmark in my own life: The conclusion of a 14-year Presidency here at Pacific. In a sense, that makes me a part of the class of 2009, as well. Together, we will soon set out from Pacific with new goals and new horizons. But we will always be bonded by the experiences here that have shaped our lives.

Your being here today signifies that you have earned your degree. You have mastered a body of knowledge, skills, and a specialization in an academic discipline. But your Pacific experience has been much more than that.

During your years here, much has been invested in helping you develop personal qualities that will enable you to be successful in career endeavors and to develop positive working relationships with others. Your whole person education at Pacific has led to a deeper understanding of yourself, your life purpose, and your calling. Your college years have also been critically important in the development of values that will guide the way you make decisions and choices

throughout your life, your attitudes toward others, and your approach to life-long learning.

Many of us would say that our values were predominantly shaped by our parents and other role models — people who had a significant influence on us at home, at school, in church, and at this university. Today I'd like to talk about how my own values were influenced by those close to me, my upbringing, and by reading about inspirational role models. My hope is that you will think about how your own values have been shaped, and how they will continue to develop in the future.

My mother and father were key influences on me and from an early age instilled in me an appreciation of American values. They were born in the United States but raised in their early years in Italy. My 101-year-old mother returned to this country when she was 10 years old, my father at 16. They both came back to the United States unable to speak English. My father had been given the choice of remaining in Italy or coming to the United States, because his father could no longer afford to send him to school. In Italy, education past the eighth grade was at personal expense. He made a brave choice — for a 16-year old — he left, and came to this country. But he also believed there would be greater opportunities here for him, for his children, and his children's children.

I remember him telling me about the emotional feeling he had when his ship arrived in New York harbor and he first saw the Statue of Liberty. When I was a young boy, my family would take the nickel ferry from Battery Park in New York City out to

Staten Island to see relatives. Every time we took this trip, my dad would get misty-eyed when he looked at "the Lady," as he called her. He would often say, "Don, this is a great country, where you can be anything you want to be." I don't think I had much understanding of what he was talking about back then. My father was, indeed, extremely patriotic. He believed in this country and in our national values.

I grew up in Eastchester, New York, 20 miles north of New York City, a place with many working-class families. My parents, when they came to this country, experienced some discrimination which was common against Italian Americans at the time. My mother tells stories about it, but my sister and I never heard our parents speak negatively about any race or any religion or any group. As an adult I came to realize how important that was in shaping my own feelings about cultural, ethnic, and American identity. To be discriminated against, but not discriminate against others, became a powerful message for me. But I also learned that my parents valued their American identity more than anything else.

I used to think my father was so corny sometimes. Let me give you an example. We would listen to the New York Yankee baseball games on the radio, because we couldn't afford a TV, and the games probably weren't even on TV. There weren't all the commercials back then so you'd hear them play the national anthem. And he would actually have me stand. At home. In our living room. For the national anthem. Just the two of us.

Yes, I thought it was corny. Hokie. Your generation would call it cheesy. But really, that was a great pride in this country. And a pride that he was an American citizen. He voted in every election. He was involved in politics, participating in voter drives. I think this is how he understood his civic responsibility. But more than anything, he believed in American values.

I don't think we talk enough about American values today. Or if we do, we approach the subject historically. Our country's earliest settlers came to establish a society that was free from the class structures that existed in Europe. In writing our Constitution, the founders worked to ensure that an aristocracy would never come to power, that one could not be forced to practice a particular religion, and that there would be a climate of freedom with emphasis on the individual and on equality of opportunity.

What drew earlier generations of Americans to this country then, still draws them today. Immigrants have been attracted to the United States because they believe they have a better chance here for success — in particular, economic success. They come here believing that opportunity will not be limited by the social class they were born into. And through their personal effort they can achieve their dreams. I know that's what my parents believed. They always emphasized that through education and the opportunities available in this country, I could be anything I wanted to be.

I thank my mother for instilling in me the value of education. Today, I try to share this message with young people — high school

students, or even younger children — that tour this campus. That if I, as a first-generation college student, coming from a family with limited resources, could become a university president, they too, through education, can achieve any goal or aspiration they set for themselves. This country makes that possible.

American values include freedom, equality, democracy, the rule of law, and individual opportunity, particularly for education. These are concepts that have held us together as a nation for over 230 years and have led to the idea of the American Dream. And yet our society's discourse can often be more about valuing our differences than our commonality.

I have always believed that what makes our society great is the richness of our diversity, the many people from all parts of the world that make up our population. It is both important and appropriate that we preserve the multiple colors and characteristics that make our country so special. At Pacific we do this through our curriculum, through the study of culture, through our multi-faith traditions, through our clubs, our international center, and the like. It's why we encourage our students to study abroad, to learn about other countries, and to look at the United States through the eyes of others. And why we encourage international students to come to Pacific, so that we can learn from them, and they from us. And why we seek to double our international student enrollment, and to increase the number of students studying abroad.

The simple fact is, however, American do share values in common. This year, in a

survey of the American electorate conducted by the Center for American Progress, respondents were asked to choose two American political values that are important to them. 42% of the respondents chose liberty, closely followed by opportunity, justice, and equality. The survey also clearly showed that these values are not the exclusive domain of the right-wing or the left, but that they characterize the common views of a diverse society that still agrees on many things. These are also the values that the world admires most about America, and that many other countries seek to emulate because they represent aspirational, universal values, as stated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

For many years I have been an avid reader of books on American history, particularly biographies of America's great leaders. I find Abraham Lincoln to be one of the most inspirational leaders this country and the world has ever had, someone whose leadership model has influenced my own. He had challenges in his life at every turn. But he led our nation through what is considered the most difficult period in its history – a period in which unity and American identity were at stake.

Why was Lincoln such an effective leader? Of course we know he was an exceptionally talented thinker and communicator. But he used his intellectual gifts in an emotionally intelligent way...and he had strong values that provided his moral compass.

In February we celebrated the 200th anniversary of his birth. He was born into such humble beginnings, and we all know

aspects of his story. Born in a log cabin. A mother who died when Lincoln was 9 years old. His father frowned upon his son's love of reading and discouraged him from schooling beyond the second grade. But Lincoln was self-motivated. He didn't have strong role models as a child. He found his role models through books – through the strong characters in literature, whose personalities he sought to understand, and whose strengths he sought to emulate.

Lincoln had self-awareness. He knew what his strengths and weaknesses were. He was insightful about the abilities of others. He knew he was not an expert in every area of government and he knew he would be a better leader by surrounding himself with talented people, even those that had been his political rivals. Because of his emotional intelligence, as labeled by Doris Kearns Goodwin, in her acclaimed, "Team of Rivals," Lincoln did not feel threatened by them.

Lincoln also led with empathy. This was especially apparent in his handling of the Civil War and the issue of slavery. He was keenly reflective about the impact of war on families and individuals, and while he always sought to do what would unify the country, he had great compassion for the enemy, the prisoner of war, and the families of those killed or injured.

Lincoln formed early judgments about slavery not just on an intellectual level, but an emotional level. He understood the humiliation of slaves, and committed himself to eliminating the contradiction between the institution of slavery and the American ideal of equality. Finally, Lincoln

was unshakable in his belief that our country's democratic form of government, of the people, by the people, and for the people, was a model for the world. And he could not let it crumble despite extraordinary differences among people, their opinions, and their beliefs.

Liberty, opportunity, justice, equality — these were Lincoln's values. These were my parents' values. These are still our common values today.

No matter what your political views may be, it is hard to disagree that the last presidential election in this country demonstrated a uniquely American spirit of hope and empowerment. Many of you voted for the first time in November. It is through democratic elections that we participate in how we are governed, and how we demonstrate that the views of individuals and minority groups are important. Yes, we have many issues to overcome to ensure equality of opportunity for all individuals and groups. But what makes us great as a nation is our ability to celebrate and take advantage of our differences, while retaining and cherishing our core American values.

We know that the term "melting pot" may have been discredited by many in our society, and other terms have been proposed for the American immigrant experience. Yet the term retains an important and valuable aspiration, and that is, that the best of American values continue to be sought, learned, held in common, and affirmed by peoples of all backgrounds from the earliest years of our nation's founding.

This same kind of shared experience,

whether you call it a melting pot or not, is also what we value on our Pacific campuses. Undoubtedly, much of what you learned here, you learned from the people in the diverse community around you. And I assure you, others, including your professors, and me, have learned much from you.

It has been my special privilege to serve the University and work in this community in advancing Pacific toward our common goals. I'm proud of what we have accomplished together. At the same time, I have been shaped and forever changed by my time here. Just as you have been shaped and forever changed.

As you and I both leave our home campus, I encourage you to remain connected to Pacific, as I always will be. Continue to learn throughout your life, remembering that history, literature, and the people around us can be our most dynamic and influential teachers.

Don't be afraid to talk about the values that hold us together as a community, and as a country. These values have lasted the test of 230 years and must continue to be guiding principles for us as we do good in our nation and the world.

Pacific encourages you to continue to develop your awareness of self, your purpose, and your calling. Pacific prepared you for the next step you'll take. You will have the opportunity to bring others together, holding common values, and seeking positive change. You will make Pacific proud as you soar in your lives, and in turn, as alumni, you will always be proud of Pacific.
Thank you.



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