

Thomas J. Schwarz, President

Purchase College 42nd Commencement Speech

Westchester County Center, White Plains NY

Today is Graduation – Commencement. And those terms are appropriate, since to “graduate” from its Latin root means to take a step and Commencement of course is to begin, in the context of a new stage in your life.

But for me, in this era, the term should be Victory, which is not just to conquer an enemy – but also and most relevant to overcome obstacles.

And what obstacles you have overcome:

- More than half of you will have graduated in four years at a time when the national average for public four year institutions is approximately 43%.
- About a quarter of you are first generation college students- the first generation in your families to go to college.
- More than a third of you were entitled to receive Pell Grants.
- A majority of you have worked during college.
- Many of you are in debt, perhaps more than you would have been if Congress, in its wisdom, had not eliminated financial aid for summer study.
- And all of you came to college with trepidation – one overriding fear- can I succeed?

So I would argue that the words “*Graduation*” and “*Commencement*” don’t go far enough. Because long before today, you took a step, and began your journey to get to this day. But today you celebrate your Victory. And whether you are a saxophonist or a sociologist, a dancer or a drummer, a political scientist or a painter, or any other permutation, you have won the Victory. And some of you won multiple victories as double majors in all sorts of combinations – studio/art history, cinema studies/art management, biology/dance, liberal studies/music, performing arts/ history, just to name a few.

And I believe that our nation will be victorious in overcoming its obstacles if we have more graduates like you.

You are not the cookie cutter college graduate and Purchase is not the cookie cutter college- you are not in the famous words of Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca – the “usual suspects”. Most of you came to Purchase to pursue special dreams. You wanted to:

- Cross the borders of the disciplines
- Passionately express ideas in writing, in art or in performance
- Expand knowledge – not just absorb it.

In doing so, you created a culture which

- embraces individuality,
- defies classification and stratification
- invites personal narratives to shape but not define or confine achievement.

With the help of our faculty and staff, you have helped to create an environment that teaches and embraces diversity and ambiguity. While you have an understanding of the traditional constraints of class and income and identity, you do not allow those constraints to limit you - you *Think Wide Open*.

My challenge to you is to continue to do so. Kris Kristofferson wrote the song *Bobby McGee* which Janice Joplin made famous. (Perhaps you are more familiar with Pink's rendition). There is a line in that song which has always intrigued me for its ambiguity – "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose".

Does it mean that you are not free unless you have nothing else or does it mean you have nothing else if you are not free? I thought of that line recently when reading the New York Times and saw a photo of Afghanistani citizens lined up to vote in the face of the threat of the Taliban to kill them if they did. And, there was another insight in the Times the other day from a young Ukrainian citizen who, talking of leadership in that country, said: "Bad power is elected by good people who do not vote"*. A symbol of freedom is the right to vote. The preservation of freedom ultimately comes from exercising that right to vote.

Thankfully you don't live in a country where your life is threatened if you vote. But with your freedom comes a responsibility and

as Purchase graduates who "think wide open" you have a special responsibility. Because of your creativity and – cross disciplinary education, you can look at opportunities and fill in the dots that others cannot even see. You can be both creative and disciplined, both technological and emotional, both expressive and convincing. You can help the world's creative thinkers not just think but achieve and get it done.

(*Young Ukrainians Brush Aside the Crisis...NYT 5/7/2014)

The Nation needs you to do so. We don't need more cookie cutter thinking – more fights between the right and the left. We need solutions for a world that is not only “Flat” as Tom Friedman called it but also spinning out of control. Our leaders need new ideas, new compromises, new creativity – a creativity which you have.

Today is your Victory day. But with Victory, you must embrace and accept your responsibility. Given what is going on in the world, you may have “nothing left to lose” if you don't exercise that responsibility.

Perhaps it is odd to quote the New York Giants football coach, but what he said about the recently drafted players could be said of you:

“It's about ...[working] hard, being consistent, having virtues and values that you believe in and are not willing to sacrifice ... for popularity”.**

I am confident that if you fulfill your responsibilities that come with today's Victory, given your “Think Wide Open” creativity and interdisciplinary thinking, the world will be a much better place. Thank you and God bless you.

(Tom Coughlin, New York Times, 5/11/2014.)**