

2009 Spring Commencement Keynote Address by Paul Hawken

June 13, 2009 - President Wiewel, fellow speakers Shelly Brady and Ni'cole Sims, distinguished faculty and graduates, family and friends, alumni, ladies and gentlemen.

And parents. Is there a father or mother here who is not astonished at their offspring? You remember their first tattoo and nose ring in high school, and how they were texting, messaging, downloading, and networking with Green Day and Beck pouring through their ear buds while they were doing their homework; throw in the missed breakfasts and Guantanamo like sleep deprivation. Were you afraid they would end up dropping out and asking for money to join a Los Angeles-based multi-level marketing company that would fill your garage with cases of blue-green algae supplements? But look, here they are! This is a great day to tell your son and daughters that you never once doubted them.

To the graduates, I offer my congratulations but I want to also offer apologies. You are graduating when our country is fighting two wars and during the worst economic crisis in 85 years. Remember not so long ago when you were little and thought that adults were in charge? What a surprise.

Class of 2009: you are going to have to figure out what it means to be a human being on earth at a time when every living system is declining, and the rate of decline is accelerating. Kind of a mind-boggling situation... but not one peer-reviewed paper published in the last thirty years can refute that statement. Basically, civilization needs a new operating system, you are the programmers, and we need it within a few decades.

This planet came with a set of instructions, but we seem to have misplaced them. Important rules like don't poison the water, soil, or air, don't let the earth get overcrowded, and don't touch the thermostat, have been broken. Buckminster Fuller said that spaceship earth was so ingeniously designed that no one has a clue that we are on one, flying through the universe at a million miles per hour, with no need for seatbelts, lots of room in coach, and really good food—but all that is changing.

The stats tell us that what the world needs is basically impossible. Restore spaceship earth in a generation. Stop all further destruction of the environment. Feed 9 billion people while restoring forests, reefs, wetlands, and topsoil. Lower the thermostat. Alleviate poverty, raise the standard of living for five billion people and reduce our impact on resources and living systems.

There is invisible writing on the back of the diploma you will receive, and in case you didn't bring lemon juice to decode it, I can tell you what it says: You are Brilliant, and the Earth is Hiring. The earth couldn't afford to send recruiters or limos to your school. It sent you night blooming jasmine, sunsets, ripe cherries, hermit thrush, and that unbelievably cute person you are dating. Take the hint. And here's the deal: Forget that this task of planet-saving is not possible in the time required. Don't be put off by people who know what is not possible. Do what needs to be done, and check to see if it was impossible only after you are done.

When asked if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data. But, if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse. What I see everywhere in the world are extraordinary people willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in order to restore

some semblance of grace, justice, and beauty to this world. Humanity is reimagining what it means to be a human being, and the action is taking place in schoolrooms, farms, jungles, villages, campuses, companies, refugee camps, deserts, fisheries, and slums.

This shared activity of hundreds of thousands of organizations is humanity's immune response to political corruption, economic disease, and ecological degradation. Individuals are associating, hooking up, and assembling into a mosaic of activity as if we were solving a jigsaw puzzle without ever having seen the box. It is made up of teachers, children, peasants, businesspeople, rappers, organic farmers, nuns, artists, government workers, fisherfolk, students, incorrigible writers, weeping Muslims, concerned mothers, poets, doctors and engineers without borders, grieving Christians, street musicians, the President of the United States of America, and as the writer David James Duncan would say, the Creator, the One who loves us all in such a huge way.

These are narratives of imagination and conviction, not gossip and smallness. There is a rabbinical teaching that if the world is ending and the Messiah arrives, you first plant a tree and then see if the story is true. Inspiration is not garnered from the litanies of what is flawed; it resides in humanity's willingness to restore, redress, reform, rebuild, recover, reimagine, and reconsider.

“One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you kept shouting their bad advice,” is Mary Oliver's description of moving away from the profane toward a deep sense of connectedness to the living world.

We are here today because we cherish life. Life is inside the arena, not just out there in the parks and hills. In the words of biologist Janine Benyus, life creates the conditions that are conducive to life. There is no better motto for a future civilization and economy. We have tens of thousands of abandoned homes without people and tens of thousands of abandoned people without homes. We have failed bankers advising failed regulators on how to save failed assets. We are the only species on the planet without full employment. Brilliant. We have an economy that tells us that it is cheaper to destroy earth in real time rather than renew, restore, and sustain it. You can print money to bail out a bank but you can't print life to bail out a planet. At present we are stealing the future, selling it in the present, and calling it gross domestic product. We can just as easily have an economy that is based on healing the future instead of stealing it. We can either create assets for the future or take the assets of the future. One is called restoration and the other exploitation. And whenever we exploit the earth we exploit people and cause untold suffering. Working for the earth is not a way to get rich, it is a way to be rich.

The first living cell came into being nearly 40 million centuries ago, and its direct descendants are in all of our bloodstreams. Literally you are breathing molecules this very second that were inhaled by Jesus, Einstein, and Bono. We are vastly interconnected. Our fates are inseparable. We are here because the dream of every cell is to become two cells. And dreams come true. In each of you are one quadrillion cells, 90 percent of which are not human cells. Your body is a community, and without those other microorganisms you would perish in hours. Each human cell has 400 billion molecules conducting millions of processes between trillions of atoms. The total cellular activity in one human body is staggering: one septillion actions at any one moment, a one with twenty-four zeros after it. In a millisecond, our body has undergone ten times more processes than there are stars in the universe, which is exactly what Charles Darwin foretold when he said science would discover that each living creature was a “little universe, formed of a host of self-propagating organisms, inconceivably minute and as numerous as the stars of heaven.”

So I have two questions for you all: First, can you feel your body? Stop for a moment. One septillion activities going on simultaneously, and your body does this so well you are free to ignore it, and wonder instead when this speech will end. You can feel it. It is called life. This is who you are. Second question: who is in charge of your body? Who is managing those molecules? Hopefully not a political party. Life is creating the conditions that are conducive to life inside you, just as in all of nature. Our innate nature is to create the conditions that are conducive to life. What I want you to imagine is that collectively humanity is evincing a deep innate wisdom in coming together to heal the wounds and insults of the past.

Today you are bathed in grace; the decency of the community of Portland; the generosity of the extraordinary faculty who have served you, the kindness of the people here who love you unconditionally. The rigor of your education gives you great compassion for the lack of understanding others may have. None of us know what will happen tomorrow. There are phenomenal odds saying you will be unable to address climate change and ecological collapse. But in devoting ourselves to service on behalf of others, we save our hearts from an even greater failure.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once asked what we would do if the stars only came out once every thousand years. No one would sleep that night, of course. The world would create new religions overnight. We would be ecstatic, delirious, made rapturous by the glory of God. Instead, the stars come out every night and we watch television.

Nessun Dorma, that haunting aria sung by Pavarotti from *Turandot*, says “no one sleeps, no one sleeps...look at the stars that tremble with hope...my kiss will break the silence, night will disperse,” and the song's famous last line “All'alba vincero” -- “At dawn I will be victorious.” Like so many great arias, this is a love song. But that is exactly what we need, a love song. We need to fall in love with the place we call home in a way we have never loved before.

Derek Wallcott wrote that for a poet “it is always morning in the world; history a forgotten, insomniac night. The fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world in spite of history.” Yes, you can kick back, play it safe, be comfortable for a while, but you will miss the action. “One can live at a low flame,” writes Diane Ackerman. “Most people do... but given something like death what does it matter if one looks foolish now and then, or tries too hard, or cares too deeply?”

This extraordinary time when we are globally aware of each other and the multiple dangers that threaten civilization has never happened, not in a thousand years, not in ten thousand years. You are graduating to the most amazing, stupefying challenge ever bequeathed to any generation. The generations before you didn't stay up all night. They got distracted and lost sight of the fact that life is the miraculous ally every moment of your existence. Nature beckons you to be on her side. You couldn't ask for a better boss. November's election taught us that the most realistic person in the world is the dreamer, not the cynic. To be sure, hope has to pass a sobriety test and walk a straight line to reality. But hope only makes sense when it doesn't make sense to be hopeful. This is your century. Cherish it, transform it, make it your own. Your job is not to please the generation that preceded you. Your job is to become the greatest of ancestors to those that follow. William Stafford wrote that “the things you know before you hear them; these are you and the reason you are in the world.” These are you and the reason you are in the world. It is an honor and privilege to speak to you, and I offer my deepest respect and congratulations.