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I'm tickled and a bit nervous, to find myself standing here today. As Mark Twain once said, facing a large, intimidating audience, "Homer's dead, Shakespeare's dead, and I myself am not feeling at all well."

I'm especially glad to find myself here today since it gives me the opportunity to make a long-overdue apology.

On this day, over 30 years ago, I stood right here on this very spot in the capacity of Class Historian.

My speech concluded by quoting a bit of graffiti that I had found in the men's room of the Cross Campus – now, Bass -- Library. A bathroom stall is, yes, an odd place to find inspiration, but it seemed perfectly to sum up the very essence of the Class of 1975. So I felt I had no choice but to quote it verbatim.

The problem was that its punch line contained a certain four-letter word beginning with the letter that designates a failing grade.

Here it is, in a cleaned up version. *God didn't create the world in seven days. He [effed] off for six days and pulled an all-nighter.*

Well. There was this *gasp* – the sound of all the oxygen in Old Campus being rapidly sucked into 8,000 lungs. One owner of those lungs was my dear old dad, Class of 1950. The next day, he presented me with my graduation present – a typewriter, four of whose keys had been removed.

So I'd like to start off today, 34 years later, by formally apologizing to God, Country, and Yale for my appalling lapse of *lux* and *veritas* on that otherwise lovely May day. Or as we say in Washington, "My prior statement is inoperative."

This afternoon, you will hear only the refined and lofty sentiments typical of a Yale English major.

Whether I have anything like wisdom to impart is another matter. As a witty movie critic wrote about a non-masterpiece he had just watched, “It is like ‘A River Runs Through It,’ only there is no river. And nothing is running through it.”

Apart from the profane graffiti, the story that to me best sums up my time here took place on the eve of the Harvard game, in 1975.

The day before, Generalissimo Francisco Franco, the long-time dictator of Spain, had finally died after an interminable illness. Some people have terminal illnesses—Franco had an interminable illness.

Seizing the moment, three plucky Yalies got a ladder and bucket of paint and roller brush and climbed up on top of the building that’s now the Barnes and Noble bookstore on Broadway. They painted over a huge billboard in giant letters:

November 20 – Franco

November 21 – Harvard

On reaching the sidewalk, they were accosted by the New Haven police. They were duly frisked and thrown up against the wall. At which point the arresting officer said, “Okay, which one of you guys is Franco?”

To me, that story contains the whole old relationship of Yale to New Haven in eight words.

Today, chief of Yale Police James Perotti would send out an email starting, “Consistent with federal reporting requirements, I write to inform you of an incident yesterday involving a billboard....”

Looking back on it, I think the Seventies were a bit like the present era. As with today, there was a recession going on. And that one, somewhat like this one, had been caused by the previous generation’s best and brightest getting the country involved in a civil war overseas.

That one was in Southeast Asia. Today’s best and brightest, thankfully, did not repeat that mistake. They were smarter than that. They got us into civil wars in the Middle East.

It seems odd that the phrase “best and brightest” should be a such a pejorative term. Almost damning, really.

So today I will not insult you by calling you “the best and the brightest” of your generation. Instead, I will call you “darned smart and really good-looking.”

Strange, too, to consider that the three people most responsible for the Iraq war – that is, the president, the secretary of defense and head of the occupation authority – went, respectively, to Yale, Princeton and Yale. You’d expect a foul-up of that magnitude from Princeton ... but ... Yale?

But then it occurred to me that the president and occupation authority head had gone on to graduate study at -- Harvard. Which sort of explains everything.

Oddly, they all three of them had one thing in common. They all went to -- Andover.

What lesson do we draw from this? It’s pretty obvious: no one who went to Andover must be allowed anywhere *near* U.S. foreign policy.

A graduation speaker is supposed to urge you to save the world. As Twain said – I quote Twain a lot; he’s funnier dead than I am alive –as he put it, “To be good is noble, but to show others how to be good is nobler, and no trouble.”

I could stand here and urge you all to “Party on!” But I take my role as Class Day speaker seriously, so I too will urge you to save the world. It could use some saving, poor old world.

This hasn’t been the most excellent of milleniums.

You entered your teens just around the time of 9/11, and now you’re entering the job market – to use an ironic term for it – during the Great Recession.

I can hear you thinking, *Thank you, prior generations, thank you soo much.*

As a French philosopher put it, “The trouble with our times is that the future isn’t what it used to be.”

Being French, he probably went on strike after coming up with that.

What *is* it with the future, anyway? Why is it so uncooperative? Why can’t it just get with the program?

When I was a student here, we were preoccupied with the threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union; China was still a commie dictatorship; computers were something

only those total loser Computer Science majors cared about; and the idea of an African-American U.S. president was about as plausible as ... Ronald Reagan as president.

Today, we no longer worry about nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Which frees up our time to worry about one of Pakistan's 100 nuclear weapons arriving in New York harbor aboard a container ship.

Funny, I never thought I'd be looking back on the Cold War with nostalgia.

Life used to imitate John Le Carré novels. Now it imitates Tom Clancy novels. As an English major, I'm not sure this represents progress.

As for China, it's no longer a commie dictatorship. Its rulers just don't think that the people should be able to access Google. Today, Americans love China. In fact, we're *indebted* to China.

But perhaps most amazing – most cool of all -- America finally elected its first African-American president.

A Harvard man.

Okay. But remember – it might not have happened if it hadn't been for a *Yale* man. George W. Bush.

So the future is hard to call. If you're lucky, and you all *look* lucky to me, in addition to being darned smart and really good-looking ... if you're lucky, your futures will be hard to predict.

I say "lucky" because I think one of the most exciting things about life is its unpredictability.

As Dorothy Parker put it, "What fresh hell is this?"

Whatever you think lies in store for you, there's a pretty good chance it's going to turn out differently.

As the Yiddish proverb goes, "Want to make God laugh? Tell him your plans."

Today I'd revise that to: "Want to make God laugh? Show him your 401(k)."

Now, I don't know exactly how to advise you, here. To be honest, I'm still trying to figure it all out myself.

They used to screen late-night movies in Linsley Chit. Maybe they still do. Almost every night, in those happy, bygone days, you could catch an Ingmar Bergman

movie, for a buck. What better way to unwind after a long night at the library than sitting in hard upright, wooden seats, watching incomprehensible black-and-white Swedish art movies?

And every night, it always happened: right at the climactic moment when Death was playing chess with Max Von Sydow and the eerie music was swelling and you didn't have the foggiest idea *what* the heck these brooding Swedish persons were talking about, someone at the back of the room would shout out, "What does it *mean*?"

Your generation, being more sophisticated than ours, came up with an all-purpose answer to that pressing existential question -- *Whatever*.

We didn't have that word in our day. It was your generation that came up with the whole concept of "whatever." And on behalf of my generation, I want to say, *Thank you*. It's just brilliant and philosophically air-tight.

There is no proposition, no argument, dogma, asseveration, boast or claim that can't be stopped dead in its tracks by an American teenager with an iPod in his or her ears saying, *Whatever*.

Try it.

To be or not to be. *Whatever*.

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. *Whatever*.

Mission Accomplished. *Whatever*.

But *whatever* life holds in store for you, remember the words of that most quotable of American philosophers, Yogi Berra: "When I come to a fork in the road, I take it."

Your first fork is right there on the other side of Phelps Gate. And my advice to you is – *take it*.

Fortunately, College Street runs both ways.

But at some point on your life journeys, having taken some fork or other, you'll probably look up and see a large red sign that says WRONG WAY.

Don't worry about it. Just make sure your brakes work. Sometimes it's exciting, going the wrong way.

And it's fun, watching the faces of the oncoming drivers.

As the saying goes, experience is the name we give to our mistakes. Kierkegaard, a sort of Swedish person, said, “Life is best understood backwards, but must be lived forward.”

To that I say, whatever.

May 2009, may not seem like a terrific time to be starting out on life’s journey, but – take heart -- it might be a better time than you think.

Some of you, I’m guessing, will *not* be going into the training program at Lehman Brothers or A.I.G. or one of those “best and brightest” Wall Street firms that came up with such great ideas as “credit default swaps” or “collateralized debt obligations.”

But did you really want to model your lives on characters in a Tom Wolfe novel? I always wanted to be Tom Wolfe, but I never wanted to be Sherman McCoy.

It was in English 25 that I first came across the line *Radix malorum est cupiditas*. I’ll translate for the benefit of the parents: “Money is the root of all evil.”

Being Republican, I of course do not believe that. But I do think Marilyn Monroe was on to something when she said, “I don’t care about money. I just want to be wonderful.”

Remember that whatever happens, there are always two ways of looking at it.

We just had another of those anthrax scares at the post office in Washington lately. Call me old fashioned, but I remember a time when you were *thrilled* to find some white powder in an envelope.

John Major, former prime minister of Great Britain, found himself one day in a Green Room with Boris Yeltsin, then president of Russia. They were about to give a joint press conference.

Major said, “Boris, if you had to describe the state of Russia in one word, what would you say?”

Yeltsin thought for a moment and said, “Good.”

Major said, “What if you had two words to describe it?”

Yeltsin said, “Not good.”

So this crummy economy that we’ve kindly provided you with may have an upside. You may end up in a better place for it. Your lives may be deeper and more enriched for it.

But whatever else happens, think of the wonderful bonding you'll experience when you move back in with your parents.

And now a word to the parents.

This is your day almost as much as it is their day.

I just thought you'd like me to say that.

But well done, Mom, well done Dad. Did you ever think, back in 1988 or so, when you were dandling them on your knees and being spit up on, that one day you'd be sitting on uncomfortable chairs on Old Campus, tears welling in your eyes, knowing that you had written your last tuition check to Yale University?

Boola boola. Or as they say over at the development office, moolah, moolah.

And so, my about-to-be-fellow alumni, I wish you every success as you enter that never-ending graduate school called life. Have adventures! Make journeys! Make memories! Make future Yalies!

Say the cool lines.

What do I mean by 'cool lines'?

Well, I was called for jury duty not long ago. During the preliminary part called *voir dire* – which you French majors know translates as “Interminable process that makes you regret registering to vote” – the judge was asking us questions about our suitability to serve.

Being red-blooded Americans grateful for the sacrifices of Valley Forge and the Founders who left us the Constitution and Bill of Rights, we were, naturally, all doing our best to weasel our way out of jury duty.

I saw my opportunity when the judge asked us if any of us knew any one in law enforcement. I was married to a CIA officer. I saw my chance. But not wanting to end up like poor Scooter Libby, Yale class of '72, I raised my hand and said, “Your honor, may I ... approach?”

I'd seen this on *Law and Order*.

He looked at me and said, “Approach.”

And I thought, *Cool*. So I approached. And spent the next three weeks on the jury.

But it got me to thinking that we too rarely get to utter the really cool lines, the ones you hear in the movies.

How many of us get to say, “Sponge, clamp, sutures”? Or “Three, two, one, ignition”? Or “I’d like to thank the Academy”?

Or “I, Barack Hussein Obama, do solemnly ... faithfully ... execute...”

Count on a Harvard-educated Supreme Court justice to screw up a 35-word oath of office. Dude!

Or “Up periscope!” How cool would that be to say that? In my case, it probably would be “Down periscope” – after accidentally ramming some Greenpeace research vessel. “And get us the hell out of here!”

“But Captain Buckley, what about the survivors?”

“Screw the survivors—this is my career we’re talking about!”

When I fly home, I call the house from the airport and declare, “The Eagle has landed!” To which the reply is usually, “Great. Tell the Eagle to pick up a quart of milk on the way home.”

So, ladies and gentlemen, go forth and speak the cool lines. Yes, you *can*!

But whatever else life holds in store for you, and may it hold every blessing and every happiness, there’s one very cool line that you can already say: “Yale, two-thousand-nine.”

It’s *whatever*-proof.

So as they say at the Development Office, whose best friend forever you now officially are – boola, boola.

God bless. Have amazing lives. Knock ‘em dead.