

Good Morning, Exeter!

Thank you, Ciatta, for that generous citation.

I am reminded of an old saying: "If my father were here, he would be pleased. If my mother were here, she would believe it".

And thanks to Principal Rawson and to the committee that decided on me as the recipient of this year's John Phillips Award. When Wole Coaxum, the vice president of the board of trustees, called me in Florida, my first reaction was – they must want a really big contribution this time. And then he told me of the Award, and I was dumbfounded, and humbled. Me? Of all of Exeter's alumni now living, me? I was gratified beyond belief, and so honored. Thank you again -- to all.

It was 68 years ago that I sat, down here on my left, as an entering Upper. I was scared stiff; I was frozen. I was trying to move from the bush leagues of academia to the major leagues' all-stars. And they say you can cross a chasm only in a single leap. I proved them wrong, because I fell to the bottom first, and then crawled up, erratically, to solid ground. You see, my background was different. There were five of us in the 8th grade graduating class. There were about 50 of us in the local secondary school – all four grades. I was the best student of the 50-- and I then failed all three of Exeter's placement tests.

The Upper year was awful. I was nowhere in Latin, Geometry, and Chemistry. I didn't connect with the instructors or my fellow students. I was convinced that the Harkness method was an inefficient way of learning basics. (But I was not in charge of teaching.) I struggled through those courses, and Exeter was supportive; I was not expelled because of poor grades. On the other hand, American history with John Mayhew was a pleasure, both in subject matter and his teaching. And one experience was valuable and long-lived. I was assigned to English III under the fabled H. Darcy Curwen. He taught the section for the not-so-good students. We read Boswell on Dr. Johnson and a biography of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. And, in the spring, as we gathered each Saturday morning, he assigned us a topic on which we were to write a paper in the next 50 minutes. I was happy one time to receive his comment that said "Not Bad". I timidly asked Mr. Curwen what that meant. His answer: ..Not Good". To add perspective, we Seniors the next year answered a poll of our opinions of faculty members (and a few administrators). Excluding the administrators, Mr. Curwen was voted Most Respected, Most Inspiring, Most Interesting in Class, and (I especially agree with this one) Hardest Marker. In so many ways, Darcy Curwen typified all that was good about Exeter.

As time passed, I was less shy, and a bit more successful. The Senior year was different. Studies were still hard, but I got honors. And more friends. And a more relaxed and confident me.

Exeter was the best school I ever attended. Period. Of course we cannot compare a secondary school with a research university, but we can find, first, comparisons with other secondary schools, and you know where Exeter comes out. And, second, we can reflect on Exeter's deep pedagogy and broad scope - at the same time.

How Exeter has changed. I see - looking out over this room - that Exeter has discovered women - students, faculty, staff. I understand this has made the place more friendly, more accommodating, even more competitive with the girls' talents added. I see that Exeter has discovered inclusion -- beyond gender - with more people of color. Just the other day I read this quote from Governor Baker of Massachusetts, speaking at the inauguration of Harvard's new president. The Governor said, " ...We learn from our differences". How true. Inclusion is more than doing what's right for people; it also benefits all of us - because each of us, no matter our makeup, can find goodness and wisdom in those not precisely identical to you or me.

I am one of those affected by inclusion, because I am a gay man. Sexual orientation continues to be controversial, although clearly less so than earlier. But in some geographic areas, some religions, political parties, families, etc., it is still a difficult subject. I was closeted all the time I was at Ford, although another executive once tried to out me. I was closeted because of my concern that I'd be a controversial manager, and too much focus would then be on me, rather than on the business of Ford. But shortly after retiring, I outed myself. I, along with my partner and now husband, Eric Jirgens, gave an interview to the local gay newspaper. To our surprise, the mainstream media picked up the story, and there we were, on TV and the front pages of the local papers. So we took this as an opportunity to be out – to try to help the LGBTQ community. We joined boards and committees of gay organizations and straight allies. We hosted fundraisers. We supported building a new community center in the Detroit area... We've given money to local and national organizations. This is not to brag, for so many others have done all they could, whether time, talent, or treasure. And the need continues, especially for civil rights that both open opportunities and protect us.

There are quite a few in this room, I assume, who are gay, or lesbian, or bisexual, or transgender, or questioning. This may be a difficult time for you, right now, or it may be soon, or even later. Most of us come from a family of heterosexuals. We cannot learn from them what it is for us to be ourselves, in this one key aspect of life. So it is the responsibility of us in the LGBTQ community to help you. It is the responsibility of the Academy to help. Eric and I met yesterday with members of the Gender and Sexuality Alliance, and it was a pleasure to learn about the caring progress being made here.

But, surprising in a way, it is governments on all levels that have done the least. Many businesses and nonprofits are supportive because they care and because the LGBTQ community contains customers - which businesses want. It is easy, these days, to despair about our democratic system, but we can do three things. First, work to fix the system, and, if you are eligible, let's start by voting on November 6. Second, work with businesses and NGOs to make sure they don't discriminate and support the efforts they do make. Third, work right here at Exeter to understand each other, to value each other. Returning to the Harvard inauguration, incoming president Larry Bacow said, and I quote, "Be quick to understand, and slow to judge".

The students here have many years of education ahead before they join, finally, the real world, as we call it. (No, it's no more or less real -- just different.) You'll gradually narrow your interests, probably change your minds, worry, and finally decide what you want to do. Don't decide too soon, because you'll come across new and fascinating paths you never dreamed of. That was my Ford career. I just read a perfect summary by someone retired from the auto industry. He said, "I had a career I never dreamed of". That describes it for me - an interest in cars, talented colleagues, major scope, and economic importance. As in any big organization, Ford has a wide variety of things that must be done. Early on, I had no subordinates; later, I had 250,000. Early on, I prepared data for the board of directors; later, I proposed an acquisition, and the board rejected it. We had wonderful products - Mustangs, Thunderbirds, Lincoln Continentals, Explorers, Ford GTs, F-Series pickups - and some less wonderful I'd best not mention.

As you reflect on your future, please do not conclude that the honorable and important jobs are only in the professions - doctors, lawyers, accountants, professors, clergy -- or in government work or in the NGOs. The private sector - business - provides 70% of the jobs in the economy. It covers the whole world, the whole range of innovation and entrepreneurship, the whole range of industries and services. The great stories of this generation - Amazon, Tesla, Apple, Microsoft, Google and its relative Alphabet, Uber, Lyft, PayPal, Netflix, and so many others - seize our attention, and then our own imagination. Can't we do similar things? These are business enterprises driving economic growth, attracting the best of talent, and providing us customers with products and services we only dreamed about.

Some will point out the failings of business. They are there, but business does not have a monopoly on bad behavior, or economic cycles, or misreading of apparent trends. There's plenty of blame to go around. I was proud of my Ford work. But I made mistakes. I oversaw a car product program that did not succeed in one of its two markets - America. I sponsored a program rejected by the board of directors, as I mentioned earlier. To describe it a bit: Ford was a major defense contractor, and we thought a larger acquisition in that field would add considerably to our portfolio. The pitch to the board -the final decision maker- wasn't going smoothly, but I thought we'd still get approved. Then, out of the blue, a quiet director who ran a high-tech company said, and I quote, "I'd rather deal with the Mafia than the Defense Department". Silence in the room. No more comments, and we left the room, rejected and dejected.

A smart speechwriter gave me this sentence for a conference where I spoke, "They say you can learn by your mistakes, but that does not mean the more mistakes you make, the smarter you are."

And we read or watch, with high interest, the success of the new companies, particularly those started by young entrepreneurs in high-tech fields. You can aspire to such work. The underlying basic research will probably be done in research universities or select government labs. Some of you will work there and make major contributions to knowledge. More of you will likely work to apply the outcomes of new research to new products and services, offered by new or older companies. The opportunities you'll face!

I was told not to preach this morning, but I do want to end with a few sermonettes:

1. Pay attention to STEM, or, to add an "A" for the arts, STEAM. I didn't – a big mistake. Science knowledge is so important these days.
2. Your initial work will undoubtedly be deep and narrow- expect that. For some, that will be ideal; you'll be master of a discipline. Others may want a broader experience, but you'll start narrow and deep. Don't lose hope as you seek breadth, and learn all along the way.

Next, the journalist H. L. Mencken wrote: "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple -- and wrong." Life is not simple. There are no shortcuts that work.

And George Bernard Shaw wrote, "...Some...see things as they are and ask, why? Others see things that never were and ask, why not?"

Exeter, why not? We older types will watch your progress and success, and we'll proudly say "that person went to Phillips Exeter Academy".

Thank you again for this tremendous honor. I will humbly and excitedly treasure it.

GO EXETER!