

Commencement Address - May 15, 2010
College of Agricultural Sciences
Robert L. Zimdahl, Professor Emeritus

I was surprised to be asked and it is a pleasure to offer a few thoughts to you. No one told me what to say to you - BUT I was told - be brief.

Since I was where you are, I have heard many commencement addresses. My experience has been as yours will be today. I cannot remember what was said or who said it.

These are troubling times in our country and in the world. Each of you could give examples of trouble here and abroad. A brief look at history reveals that many of the troubles are not new. Acrimonious political debate did not begin a few years ago, national and international economic problems have been common, war is not a new human phenomenon.

In full recognition of the state of our world - I have a few recommendations:

Have **gratitude** for the past where wisdom and perspective are found

Participate in the present, and

Anticipate the future which you will help create. The future is where hope resides.

A Story. Niagara Falls, one of the world's spectacular sights, lies on the border between Ontario, Canada and New York State. Goat island divides the river to create two falls. The American falls is 180 feet tall, about 5 feet taller than the Horseshoe or Canadian falls, which is about twice as wide as the American falls.

Jean Francois Gravelot, known as The Great Blondin, was born Feb. 28, 1824 in St. Omer, Pas de Calais in Northern France (d-1897). Since the age of five, his goal was to become a tight rope walker (a funambulist). His life ambition was to walk the wire across the roaring waters of Niagara Falls. In 1859, he was the first to do it - It took 20 minutes to walk about 1100 feet on a 3 inch rope. Part way across, he back flipped in the air and continued the walk

He repeated the crossing several times in 1859. Each performance was spectacular. Blondin is regarded as the creator of the high-wire act.

Huge crowds (5,000) came to watch him walk the rope across the falls. In 1859, he crossed: blindfolded, on a bicycle, on stilts, and once carrying his manager on his back.

As he began another crossing he turned to the audience and said - "Who believes I can cross pushing this wheelbarrow?"

Nearly every hand in the crowd went up.

He pointed at a man and said - "Do you believe I can do it?"

Without hesitation the man said, Yes.

Blondin then said - "Are you absolutely certain?"

"Yes, absolutely certain."

"Thank you" said Blondin. "Then Sir, get in the wheelbarrow."

Your life will never be precisely what you want it to be or, perhaps even like mine, what you plan today. Your life will have its share of surprises. When I was where you are, I knew I was going to be a dairy farmer in central New York State, even though I had been taught by a Cornell Professor during my senior year that there are only three ways to get a farm: patrimony, matrimony and parsimony. None worked for me. It took a few years **to learn** what I had been **taught** and find a new route.

Similar to my life and the man in Blondin's crowd there will be surprises. Life can be scary. In spite of all you know and what you have learned during your time at Colorado State University you will have to decide, often on your own, whether or not to get in the wheelbarrow. You may have time to consult with friends, parents, or even grandparents, but finally you have to trust yourself, make a leap of faith, swallow your fear and get in the wheelbarrow. Once you decide, you will often wonder - Why did I do this?

The future you begin today in the words of Robert Kennedy "does not belong to those who are content with today, apathetic toward common problems and their fellow man, timid and fearful in the face of new ideas and bold projects. Rather it will belong to those who can blend vision, reason, courage and personal commitment to the ideals of our society." Your future will surely have scary times, with several wheelbarrow decisions. "It lies beyond your vision but it is not completely beyond your control."

Part of your responsibility is to watch for stones. Stones! Khalil Gibran, the Lebanese/American poet/philosopher wrote *The Prophet* in 1923. In one essay he said:

Like a procession you walk together towards your god-self.
You are the way and the wayfarers.
And when one of you falls down he falls for those behind him,
a caution against the stumbling stone.
Ay, and he falls for those ahead of him, who though faster and surer of
foot,
yet removed not the stumbling stone.

Watch for the stones.

For me, an important part of the lesson of Gibran's words is that the greatest happiness is found by those who serve others.

As you move toward the future, I think you will discover that the value of your education at this fine university will be found in the residues: not the facts, not the stuff on the tests but in the residues. They include:

- Knowledge and perspectives that enable participation in your culture.

The ability and desire to -

- Read significant literature,
- Understand and appreciate the arts,
- Converse with educated people about matters of importance,
- Comprehend the news in historical, geographic, and social perspective,
- Have some understanding of science and technology, and
- Be at home with religious and philosophical issues.

The charge I leave with you is from Jean Paul Sartre, the French author and philosopher. Sartre told us that

"We cannot in all probability bequeath a better world to our children but we should always live as if we could."

Finally - Go in love, Keep your faith, Give your faith away, Work hard, Play enough, Laugh often, Make peace, and Hang loose.