

# **COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES**

**Cornell University Class of 2005**

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Members of the Class of 2005, candidates for advanced degrees, families and friends of the graduates, Chairman Meinig and other members of the Board of Trustees, honored guests.

On behalf of my colleagues on the faculty, it is my privilege to welcome you to Schoellkopf Field for this morning's celebration of those students who are completing their degree requirements here at Cornell University. Twenty-eight years ago, I was sitting where today's graduates are seated for my own Commencement ceremony. You cannot imagine how thrilling it is for me to be here today, as Cornell's President, addressing today's graduating students.

At the outset, I think it is important for us all to recognize that none of these graduates made it to this day alone. Others provided the emotional, intellectual, and financial support that was necessary to make their education possible.

So let us take a moment to ask those who are not wearing caps and gowns — the parents, grandparents, spouses, partners, siblings, sponsors and friends, all of whom have sustained these graduates — to stand now so that we may acknowledge you and your contribution to their success.

Graduating students, I want you to appreciate just how carefully your beloved Cornell has prepared you to enjoy this moment. It is the moment of your commencement. And we have placed you on Schoellkopf Field, facing west.

West. The direction of the sun as it traverses the sky. By day it is the destination of the celestial body that energizes our planet. By night it is the destination of the other stars that illuminate our sky.

When we look out towards the western horizon, it is natural to ponder our own destinies as well. For the horizon marks the limit of our capacity to see, the boundary between what we know with confidence and what we can only imagine.

Your time at Cornell was always oriented towards the horizon of this graduation day. Today marks the boundary that separates your student life, a life which – at least by your final year – you more or less understood, from life after graduation, a life which lives in the domain of imagination, of aspiration, of hopes, and of dreams.

When we, your teachers, contemplate the boundary that you are now crossing, we know some important things. We know that during your time here at Cornell you have learned much. You have developed expertise in at least one field of study and gained comfortable familiarity with others. You have proven your ability to swim – at least a little. And you have nurtured qualities of mind and heart that transcend any particular body of knowledge or academic discipline. Members of the Class of 2005, the Force is strong with you.

It is clear that “special powers you have.” You have the power to do good in the world. You have the power to create the magic that will make our lives better, to make constructive contributions to all humanity. We celebrate you and all that you can accomplish.

But we also know that at this moment you might be feeling a wee bit anxious. You might be wondering, “What if I fail? What if I don’t live up to the expectations that others have for me, or that I hold for myself?”

Think of the Star Wars movies. We know that, just as the Force is strong with you, it was also strong with Anakin Skywalker. He too had special powers. But he ended up as Darth Vader. How could that have happened?

So let me begin by reassuring you. None of you will become Darth Vader. Really.

But perhaps your anxiety might present itself in a slightly milder form: how can you be sure that you do not go over to the Dark Side?

And here I think that I can be of some service to you. This morning I will take a little bit of poetic license and extend the metaphor of the Dark Side to explore some of life's moral complexities – the traps, if you will – that await you on the other side of graduation. These traps might not be so serious as to put you on the road to becoming Sith Lords, but they might nonetheless make it harder for you to realize your full potential.

Let me begin by discussing what I mean, and what I do not mean, by “the Dark Side.”

First, when I speak of the Dark Side I am not talking about anything like “unwavering devotion to the cause of evil.” That narrow a view doesn't work even in the world of George Lucas. Lucas takes great care to indicate that, as Anakin Skywalker turns into Darth Vader, he does not believe that he is embracing evil. He believes that the Jedi are the ones who have been corrupted; he is committed only to knowing the truth and to saving the life of someone he loves.

Nor can we say that the difference between the Sith and the Jedi is that one pursues its ends through intolerable means and the other restricts itself to benign means. Each side is equally willing to be violent to promote its cause.

The Dark Side I am interested in is more subtle. Think of it not as evil, but as good people run amok. Yielding to a certain kind of wholly understandable temptation, in a way that ends up being counterproductive for the individual or damaging to the larger community.

In your lives after graduation, what forms might that Dark Side take? How might they tempt you? How can you successfully resist them, so that your lives are maximally successful, fulfilling, and beneficial?

Rather than approaching those questions head-on, I would like to examine them indirectly, as they are refracted through the lens of fiction. To do so, I will make use of two different works by one of the great writers of our time, Thomas Pynchon.

Pynchon came to Cornell to study engineering physics in 1953. He was a talented science student, but he was also good in other subjects, and in his sophomore year he decided to major in English.

Pynchon had some wonderful teachers in the English department – people like M.H. Abrams, Baxter Hathaway, James McConkey, Arthur Mizener, and Walter Slatoff. They recognized his prodigious talent early on. One of them saw the potential in a paper that Pynchon wrote for class, entitled, “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna.” The literary journal *Epoch* was edited by Baxter Hathaway at the time, and he decided to publish “Mortality and Mercy in Vienna” in the Spring 1959 issue, just before Pynchon graduated. According to a letter from Pynchon 25 years later, having that story published in *Epoch* was a major factor in his decision to try to make a living as a writer.

The story concerns a man named Cleanth Siegel who attends a party in Washington, D.C. Siegel finds himself cornered, one at a time, by two different members of an extended, interdependent social group, both of whom regale him with details of their lives, from the petty to the bizarre. As they drone on and on, Siegel feels himself getting fed up with them, and with the entire lot of partygoers. He comes to see himself as a kind of father-confessor to this self-styled “Group.” And then, oddly, he comes to see himself as their savior.

Late in the story, Siegel meets one of the newer, more marginal entrants into the Group, a man named Irving Loon. And Siegel develops a hunch that Loon suffers from a mental illness called Windigo psychosis. A person suffering from Windigo psychosis has a deep identification with the Windigo, a mythical Canadian ice monster that craves human flesh. This identification can often lead the psychotic to become homicidal as well. Pynchon writes, “[I]f this hunch were true, Siegel had the power to work for these parishioners a kind of miracle, to bring them a very tangible salvation.”

Now the salvation that Siegel has in mind for them is horrifying. He goes up to Loon and says the word “Windigo,” hoping that it might trigger a psychotic break and prompt him to violence. And it works. Loon flips out. While Siegel watches, Loon takes a Browning Automatic Rifle

down from the wall, and loads it with ammunition. Siegel casually leaves the party and walks downstairs, whistling as he goes. He hears screams. He shrugs. And as the story ends he hears the first burst of gunfire.

All of us would say that Cleanth Siegel went over to the Dark Side. He would presumably argue that the damage he caused was in some sense necessary to promote a larger good, the overall good of his flock. But this is nothing more than the familiar claim of a fanatic.

Unfortunately, the daily news reminds us that fanatics remain all too present in our world today. In pursuit of what they consider a greater good, they do horrible things. Even murder feels warranted to them, they are so obsessed with achieving their objective.

But in speaking of what I will call the Windigo Dark Side I do not want to limit our attention to this kind of fanaticism. That feels too remote, too distant from our lives. I want to make the challenge more relevant, more difficult, by having the Windigo Dark Side also encompass fanaticism's much milder cousin: tunnel vision.

People afflicted with moral tunnel vision recognize a good, something that carries a positive benefit for the world. They see a path to that good. And they become so committed to pursuing that path that they lose sight of the costs to other values that might be associated with going down that path. These are the kinds of blind spots that can undermine communal life and collective progress.

The temptations of moral tunnel vision are everywhere we look. Think, for example, of the soldiers who, in their efforts to defeat a dangerous enemy, are tempted to slip into torture. Think of the campaign workers who want to help their candidate, and are tempted to caricature the opponent unfairly. Think of the advocates for a cause who are tempted to use tactics that are disproportionate to the goal they champion. Think of the business leaders who are tempted to be stingy about workplace safety in order to improve their price position in a competitive marketplace. Think of the university leaders who are tempted to deform their institutions in hopes of rising in the magazine rankings.

In the world of action you will find that it is surprisingly easy to become convinced of the paramount importance of your cause. It is a short step to see those who oppose you as evil or immoral, or maybe just stupid or naive. And another short step to tell yourself that the harm you inflict on them is necessary to promote a greater good, or might even be, in some way, for their own good.

When you leave Cornell, I know that you will use your Jedi powers to promote noble ends. And I know that most of the time, you will not find it difficult to remain clear-eyed about the relationship between the goals you are pursuing and the means that are appropriate to them. But you should also be prepared to face the temptations of the Windigo Dark Side.

The second Pynchon work that I would like to discuss is his second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, published in 1965. It tells the story of Oedipa Maas and her struggle to make sense of a world in which nothing can be known with certainty.

The book begins when Maas receives a letter informing her that she has been named co-executor of the estate of her ex-boyfriend, Pierce Inverarity. Her efforts to sort out the estate lead her to meet a series of alienated young people, one of whom directs her to attend a play entitled, *The Courier's Tragedy*. The play feels like a bad imitation of Shakespeare, a senseless mixture of sex, betrayal, torture, and killing. In Pynchon's words, it is "like a Road Runner cartoon in blank verse." Late in the performance, Maas is struck by an obscure reference to "Trystero."

Maas sets off to understand this reference. She traces the evolution of the play's text through different publications, finding many changes associated with the Trystero line, but none that offer any realistic account of why the changes were made. Her odyssey leads her into an increasingly bizarre world. To take just one example, she encounters a man who claims to have built a machine incorporating Maxwell's Demon. Those of you who, like Pynchon, studied physics, know that Maxwell's Demon is an imaginary creature who was invented to get around the second law of thermodynamics. And part of Maas's growing frustration in

The Crying of Lot 49 derives from her inability to get the machine to work.

She comes to believe that a conspiracy has created an underground postal system in California, going by the acronym W.A.S.T.E., “We Await Silent Tristero’s Empire.” As her obsession with the putative conspiracy deepens, Maas finds herself more and more isolated, cut off from her husband, from her psychiatrist, and even from the lawyer she thought was helping her.

Towards the end of the book, Maas is led to an obscure historical source which suggests that Tristero [sic] really existed – as a man who, in 1577, set up an underground postal system to challenge the existing postal monopoly in sixteenth century Europe.

And then, just when the reader is tempted to believe that the puzzle has been neatly sorted out, Pynchon shows how W.A.S.T.E. and the entire Tristero postal conspiracy might have been an elaborate hoax, constructed by Inverarity himself in order to torment his ex-girlfriend. But we really cannot be sure. Because this is, after all, a world in which nothing can be known with certainty.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon has again given us characters who do not feel quite like us. Cleanth Siegel was a fanatic. And Oedipa Maas seems to be a bit too easily drawn into the world of conspiracies.

But in speaking now of what I will call the Tristero Dark Side I again want to broaden our view. Rather than restricting our focus to conspiracy theorists, I would like to define the Tristero Dark Side by reference to a related but more familiar idea, the rush to judgment. This is the temptation to see too quickly a pattern emerging, to infer too soon an organizing principle, and then to become unable to assimilate contrary evidence into your worldview.

After you leave Cornell, you will have the opportunity to take positions of authority and responsibility. In those roles you will be required to act under conditions of uncertainty, to use your best judgment about what is going on when you have little information. These will be won-

derful opportunities for you to do good in the world. They will invite you to draw on your very best qualities – your compassion, your intelligence, your intuition.

And at these moments you will also have the opportunity to negotiate the temptations of the Tristero Dark Side. It will be surprisingly easy to believe that you know more than you do, to see more order in the universe than is really there, to see less entropy, to see conspiracies where there is only coincidence. It will take hard work to remind yourself of the limits of your own knowledge, to stay receptive to new evidence, to keep an open mind, especially when you feel very real time pressures weighing on your decision.

Think, for example, of the national leaders who must assess the danger posed by other countries. The journalists who must decide how much credence to give an anonymous tip. The labor negotiators who must decide whether to trust the latest representations that management has made to them. In these contexts, people are naturally tempted to connect the dots. It is more satisfying to know the answer than to live with ambiguity. And often it is easiest to have that answer take the form of malevolence, or conspiracy. It is so tempting to rush to judgment.

And yet, you can defeat the temptations of the the Windigo Dark Side and the Tristero Dark Side. You do not have to develop moral tunnel vision. You do not have to rush to judgment. I am happy to provide you with five strategies for staying true to your best selves. Think of them, if you will, as the five virtues of a Jedi Master: a love for complexity, a patient spirit, a will to communicate, a sense of humor, and an optimistic heart.

First, a love for complexity. Fanaticism is anchored in the belief that one has discovered The Truth, a master key that explains the world. That same kind of belief can generate both tunnel vision and a rush to judgment.

When you feel yourself developing that kind of certainty that you have access to a master key, push back. Use all of your intellectual and sympathetic powers to seek out multiple perspectives. See the world through your critics' eyes. Feel your adversaries' pain. When it seems

as though you've got it all figured out, ask yourself whether Pierce Inverarity might have led you astray, and whether you might be missing something important.

Second, a patient spirit. When the stakes seem highest, it is natural to believe that only swift and decisive action will do. When you feel that impulse, wait. Take a walk around the block. Review in your mind the foreseeable consequences of your decision – the outcome you hope for and the collateral damage that might be avoidable. Remember how much you do not know. Then you will be able to act, and to do so in ways that enable you to keep on learning.

Third, a will to communicate. Pynchon's writings are filled with the communicative failures of his protagonists. Characters have insights, but they fail to share them with others in a way that is intelligible, in a way that can be helpful. And those failures make it easy for the Dark Side to move in. In these circumstances your rule of thumb should be that responsibility lies with the speaker. It is up to the person with the insight to find a way to convey it so that the audience understands.

As you assume greater leadership roles, having acquired special learning, knowledge, or expertise, that rule of thumb will become more and more important. It is not enough to have such learning. And it is not enough to bombard your listeners with data. You must come to understand what the linguist George Lakoff has called "frames" – the ways in which your listeners structure their perceptions of the world. And you must help them to develop frames that will allow them to appreciate the importance of the learning you have to share.

Fourth, a sense of humor. Humor is the great enemy of the Dark Side, and the most powerful form of humor is self-deprecation. And here Thomas Pynchon has offered us a priceless example.

After graduating from Cornell, Pynchon emerged as one of the great writers of the twentieth century. His five novels have each won wide acclaim. But he decided early on that he would not accept the celebrity that success can bring. He chose instead to do what he could to preserve normalcy in his life by preserving his privacy. In particular, he avoided

cameras. He would not allow his photo to be taken. He declined to give interviews.

But then, to the shock and amusement of a literary world that had become somewhat obsessed with finding Thomas Pynchon, along came the January 25, 2004, episode of the television show, *The Simpsons*.

In that show, Marge Simpson writes her first novel, *The Harpooned Heart*. Eager to promote sales of the book, the publisher seeks blurbs from Thomas Pynchon and Tom Clancy.

So picture, in your mind, the following scene. Imagine a *Simpsons* character. A man wearing a paper bag over his head, with a question mark painted on the bag, above the eyes. He's standing in front of a house, near a big neon sign that reads, "Thomas Pynchon's House. Come On In." The Pynchon character makes a call on his cell phone to Marge's publisher.

And here is what the Pynchon character says. (By the way, this really is the voice of Thomas Pynchon):

[“Here's your quote. Thomas Pynchon loved this book. Almost as much as he loves cameras.”]

The Pynchon character ends the call and hangs a big sign around his neck that says “Thomas Pynchon,” with an arrow pointing at his head, still covered by a paper bag. He starts shouting at passing cars:

[“Hey, over here. Have your picture taken with a reclusive author. Today only, we'll throw in a free autograph. But wait! There's more!”]

A self-deprecating sense of humor will take you far indeed, perhaps all the way to the *Simpsons*.

And finally, an optimistic heart. When we reflect on Anakin's fall, we recognize that the Dark Side's greatest allies are fear and despair. Those are the emotions that fuel tunnel vision and a rush to judgment. To fight them you must arm yourself with realistic optimism. Not Panglossian denial of the problems in our world. But a kind of working faith that, on balance, over the long haul, things will work out, justice will be served, progress will occur, success will be achieved. That kind of atti-

tude seems to be a predicate for most forms of collective achievement. Think of it, if you will, as the spirit that underlies Episode IV: A New Hope.

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New graduates of Cornell University, as you face the western horizon of your lives, I ask you to think about this moment in the way that Pynchon had Oedipa Maas think of a critical moment in her own life. “She thought ... of a sunrise over the library slope at Cornell University that nobody out on it had seen because the slope faces west.”

This is your sunrise. You are about to embark on lives of service to a society that desperately needs you. And as you go, let me conclude by sharing a few hopes that we, your teachers, hold for you:

May you enjoy the special pleasures of craft — the private satisfaction of doing a task as well as it can be done.

May you enjoy the special pleasures of profession — the added satisfaction of knowing that your efforts promote a larger public good.

May you be blessed with good luck, and also with the wisdom to appreciate when you have been lucky rather than skillful.

May you find ways to help others under circumstances where they cannot possibly know that you have done so.

May you be patient, and gentle, and tolerant, without becoming smug, self-satisfied, and arrogant.

May you know enough bad weather that you never take today’s sunshine for granted, and enough good weather that your faith in the coming of spring is never shaken.

May you always be able to confess ignorance, doubt, vulnerability, and uncertainty.

May the Force be with you.

May you frequently travel beyond the places that are comfortable and familiar, the better to appreciate the miraculous diversity of life.

And may your steps lead you often back to Ithaca. Back to East Hill.  
For you will always be Cornellians. And we will always be happy to  
welcome you home.

Congratulations, one and all.