“LIVING WITH THE FUTURE”

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The KAV

To all of you Emergent Scholars, let me add my congratulations on your academic accomplishments. You have talent. You have added to that the essential element of a dedicated work ethic. But you have also added to both talent and hard work that precious quality, adaptability. As you know well by now, college is very different than high school. You have much more independence. You also have to take on much more responsibility. The pace of new experiences, new information, and new demands in college is much greater than what you faced only two years ago. Welcome to the future. Things will not get easier. Looking ahead in your lives, the future will be even more challenging. But the good
news is that you have begun to learn how to adapt and change as the future has borne down upon you.

You should draw a larger lesson for yourselves from the transition that you have made so successfully as college students thus far. You made the transition from high school to college by not clinging to old ways and by constantly adapting to new challenges. At the same time, I trust, you kept the best that your parents, family, teachers, and friends gave you and added to it in order to help you meet new challenges. You undoubtedly met many new things that you did not accept, agree with, or adopt. You all have your own temptations that you avoided, or you would not be sitting here today with your proud family members and mentors. In other words, you learned to adapt--wisely. Not to accept the new blindly, not to be afraid of it, but to discern what you need to learn and what to avoid. In a small way, you have begun to learn how to live with the future.

That lesson speaks to the challenges that you face as a generation. What your generation will face is a more rapidly changing, more inter-
connected world than has ever been known before. Can you live with that future?

I’m an historian, by training. Besides teaching thousands of students over the years at colleges and universities coast to coast, and writing books and articles, I’ve had the privilege of serving as the historical consultant to the National World War Museum in Kansas City, Missouri. People will often ask historians about what they think will happen in the future. Historians are reluctant to make predictions. We’ve seen too many predictions go wrong. We love to tell you everything we know about things that have already happened. We sometimes have the reputation for boring people with the past. Perhaps you’ve heard the old saying: “Ask an historian the time of day, and you get the history of the watch.”

But, as an historian, even if I’m loath to make predictions, I can draw two lessons from the past about how to cope with the future. And, they are lessons that closely parallel what you have already been doing in adapting to the future that you’ve encountered as college students.
There are two major mistakes in dealing with the future that I as an historian can see. The first is what I call the “nothing new under the sun” attitude. Historians love to say that almost any new thing is not really so new. But lots of otherwise hard-headed types can equally make this mistake. Indeed, one of the values of studying history should be to help us to realize that some things really are revolutionary. In the 1950s, a number of prominent companies declined to acquire photocopying technology. As one executive asked at the time, “After all, how many copies can anyone want of something?” Eventually, the firm that came to be known as Xerox made photocopying a staple of every office in the world. Even the smartest people can vastly under-estimate how much impact technological change can have. Paul Krugman, whose columns are widely syndicated in newspapers and on-line, and who won the Nobel Prize for Economics, had this to say in 1998 about the worldwide web, which had been invented a few years before:

The growth of the internet will slow drastically as it becomes apparent that most people have nothing to say to each other. By
2005 or so, it will become clear that the internet’s impact has been no greater than the fax machine’s… Ten years from now the phrase ‘information economy’ will sound silly.

As we all know, Krugman was wrong. Just for a few examples, from places where computers are rare. In 2008, Egypt had 800,000 Facebook users. By 2012, it had 12 million. Pakistan had 250,000 users in 2008; by 2012, seven million. Large scale change is occurring elsewhere, too.

In terms of economics, the center of the world economy is now Asia, where it has not been for over 500 years. Medical advances in genetic testing and the ability to prolong life are sometimes breathtaking. Any of us who have loved ones spared by modern medicine from illness or conditions which only 40 years ago would have killed them know what amazing power science can give.

If not recognizing that some new things are truly revolutionary is one common mistake in dealing with the future, the second mistake is believing that revolutionary changes in society, the economy, or technology will change human beings, or what I call “the revolutionary
changes change everything” attitude. Digital communication, in particular, appears to be transforming our daily lives in ways that are radically new. Perhaps by communicating more easily we will understand each other more deeply and human relationships themselves will change.

But, speaking as an historian, we have been there before. We have seen revolutionary changes that have not changed us as human beings. Remember that for almost all of human history, the fastest that any communication could travel was about fifty miles a day, and that was only possible by ships at sea. Until 150 years ago, it took at least six weeks and sometimes several months, for news to cross the Atlantic Ocean, for example. The invention of the telegraph led to extravagant claims about how it would change human life. When Europe and North America were connected for the first time by undersea cable in 1867, two observers wrote: “It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for the exchange of thought between all nations of the earth.” In 1912, the
Italian inventor of the radio, Guglielmo Marconi proclaimed, “The coming of the wireless era will make war impossible, because it will make war ridiculous.” Less than two years later, the greatest war in human history up to that time broke out, between, I must add, nations that were more inter-connected and inter-dependent than any nations had been before.

In other words, we are in the midst of great change, much of it real and profound. Change in our world can bring many good things. We also know that humans have often exaggerated how earlier revolutionary changes would change human beings. No matter what change the future brings, our nature will not change. Victor Hugo, the great French novelist of the nineteenth century, said “Revolution changes everything, except the human heart.” The same could be said about the great changes in our world. Everything around us might be changing. Yet the human heart remains the same in its capacity for good and evil, for love and hate, for community and self-centeredness.
Your task, then, is to embrace the change around you that is good, that
does help human life, but not to exaggerate it, or believe, foolishly, as so
many otherwise brilliant people in the past have done, that it will change
human nature. War, poverty, and hate do not come from a lack of
communication. Communication certainly can help change them, but
only if what is communicated makes an impact upon the real problems
we face, and, especially, if it changes the heart.

In your remaining years at the College, continue to learn all that you can.
But remember that your larger goal is to learn how to adapt to the
changes around you with discernment, to see what is truly making a
positive impact on the world and helping those around you and what is
not helping or is even destructive. Your task is to continue to be a part of
that which will truly change the world for the better and, ideally, to learn
how to change the heart.

You have achieved a great deal. You have much before you. In your
remaining years here at the College, take advantage of every reasonable
opportunity to stretch your talents and experience. Study Abroad,
research with a faculty member, internships, service learning, leadership in organizations like clubs, teams, student senate, participation in Called to Lead—all of these will develop you as a person still more, and as an intellectual. The College has a particular interest in encouraging you to apply for prestigious external fellowships—Rotary, Fulbright, Boren, Truman, Gates, Marshall, Rhodes, etc. These awards can make an enormous difference in furthering your careers. Please talk to your faculty advisors or see Joel Janisewski, Director of the Prestigious Scholarships Program, for more information about applying for these awards.

Congratulations again. Continue to learn and grow, but also keep your eyes on the larger world that you will enter very soon. You have our best wishes as you learn, even more ably, to live with the future.