



**OXFAM**  
America

**Commencement Speech**  
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**Warren Wilson College**  
**Asheville, NC**  
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Good morning. Thank you President Solnick for the kind introduction... and warm Carolina welcome on this glorious Saturday

Let me begin by thanking you and the board of Trustees for this special opportunity. I am truly honored to join your college community on this joyous occasion.

And good morning graduates. How are y'all doing? This is your big day! You made it!

Also, I want to give a big shout out and congratulations to all those parents out there. Graduates, you have no idea how proud your parents are today.

Let's give them a hand. Job well done, Moms and Dads. You can now relax.

Having watched my son and daughter accept their diplomas, I can relate to your both your joy and relief. Mission accomplished!

Today I am going to simply tell a few stories and offer some reflections that hopefully inspire.... That's it.... I won't keep you long.

As the comedian, Groucho Marks once said:

"For the next little while, my job is to talk and yours is to listen. And if by any chance, you finish before I do, please let me know."

I am particularly pleased to join you today because for me this feels like completing a circle. I grew up in NC outside Charlotte and spent my summers in these hills.

So I feel very at home here. But not just because of my fond personal memories of Asheville, but also because of my affinity for the mission of Warren Wilson College to create a more just and sustainable world.

In choosing to come to Warren Wilson College you made one of many important choices in your life.

You chose a college

- that seeks to shape character as well as intellect;
- that seeks to model how values, shape ideas and how ideas informed by values shape a better world; and
- that seeks to embody the poet Yeats' idea that: "Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire."

And in my humble opinion, the values that are core to the culture and DNA of Warren Wilson--- justice and sustainability---are the pillars of any truly good society. Personally, I cannot think of values more critical for negotiating the complexities of today's world.....

Let me take just a moment to introduce myself.

I am an activist.

That's of course not my job title..... but in truth that's what I am.... and that's what I do.

I have made a life out of being an activist---and doing it on a global level. It's been a unique privilege and an experience that I do not take for granted. I have traveled the world---met peasants, popes, and presidents. And I have been blessed to work for and with amazing people who have committed their lives to building a more just world.

But it took me awhile to give a name to what I was looking for and to find a sure path.

When I left college, I tried all kinds of jobs. I was a steelworker and camp counselor. I bussed tables, parked cars, lived as a monk in a monastery, worked as a social worker with inner city gangs in Philadelphia, hitchhiked across the US and then Europe, and milked cows on a farm in Vermont, a kibbutz in Israel, and a ranch in Panama.

I took some risks and learned a lot. No regrets.

One thing I can assure you of: No one who gives a commencement speech had their life figured out at 22. If they tell you otherwise, they are lying. So relax.

Those years in my 20s shaped my character and view of the world. It was a challenging and yet exciting time

- the US put a man on the moon,
- the Vietnam War was raging,
- inner cities were burning,
- protesters were marching on Washington,
- Woodstock was defining a new cultural era,
- And Watergate was putting our political institutions on trial.

Our world was changing very rapidly all around us. Frankly, I found it all pretty darn confusing.

It was hard to imagine following a “traditional” career path.

You are leaving college at a similarly confusing time. Your world is changing at an even faster pace. And in a way it is even *more* confusing than the ‘60s and ‘70s.

The big innovation breakthroughs are not in outer space – but on our smart phones.

According to Eric Schmidt of Google: “Every two days now....we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003. Think about that -- we create as much information every two days as we did from the dawn of civilization.

That's something like five exabytes of data, he goes on to say. I don't even know what an exabyte of data means. What I do know is that I am never going to read it all.

Our nation's wars do not involve a draft or a singular enemy; they are ideological, global and terrorizing the streets of NYC, Aleppo, Brussels and Paris. The enemy is sometimes invisible, yet among us and on-line.

Our inner cities still burn with race-based discrimination and violence— but in smaller outburst like Ferguson and Baltimore. Discrimination remains somehow acceptable – here in North Carolina, you are seeing that firsthand. As one who lived here and witnessed, South Mecklenberg High School in Charlotte become one of the first schools in the state to accept integration, while race riots rocked South Boston, I was proud to be a Tarheel..... but today I am sad to see us sliding backward.

Our planet now burns as well, causing extreme weather patterns across the globe which disproportionately harm the poor.

And sadly, our politics in the US is more polarized and dysfunctional than ever.

Given this pace of change and scale of the challenges of today's world, your lives and career paths will probably not be "traditional" either.

As you leave Warren Wilson with notions of service, justice and sustainability emblazoned on your character, I want to encourage you to not only live those values in whatever career or life path you choose, I would like to challenge each of you to go a bit further.

I would like to challenge each of you to become "practical radicals" in pursuit of a more just and sustainable world.

What is a practical radical?

I can't summarize it in a buzzfeed listicle – but here it is:

For me, being a practical radical is not about a lifestyle choice, but rather it is a way of thinking.

It is about looking beyond the conventional answers to questions and asking why?

It is about using the analytical skills you have acquired at WWC and looking at the root causes of social injustice, hunger, poverty and climate change.

It is about seeing the interconnections between seemingly disconnected ideas, events, policies and practices that get at the real truth behind social phenomena.

It is about setting aside the ideologies that defend an unjust status quo and challenging that status quo with a morally and intellectually sound alternative.

It is for example about realizing that the reason some politicians deny climate change may not be because they have examined the evidence and made a rational choice, but because there is coal being mined in their states, jobs are at stake and the coal industry is funding their campaigns and keeping them in office.

Or that the reason that there is mass hunger in the world is not because we do not produce enough food to feed the world but because the food produced is processed to go to the most profitable markets to those who can pay for it. It's a problem of distribution and market failure, not production

Why do I think it's important to imagine yourselves as practical radicals?.....

We live in a complex globalizing world. When a school is closed in rural Mali, the reason may not have anything to do with a decision taken in the local school district but rather one taken in conference rooms of the World Bank in Washington DC.

In a globalizing world, understanding how money flows and how political power is used to manipulate markets and institutions is key to achieving a practical understanding of how the world works and what may be needed to change it.

Making those connections between the local and the global is precisely what gives power to 21<sup>st</sup> century global advocacy.

This axiom applies equally well to injustice at the local as well as at the global level. You don't need to be a global advocate to see injustice in your own community, whether it's in the form of discriminatory arrest patterns embedded in the policies and practices of a local police department, as we saw in Ferguson, MO.

Or in a deteriorating water treatment system of Flint, MI, that is the result of a regressive tax system and entrenched political interests at the state level.

Being a practical radical however is about more than just thinking----it requires action----persistent, savvy, and sustained action----that not only speaks truth to power, but also pushes for change and gets results.

It is about righting the wrongs in our society – and our world.

Let me give you an example.

Both in the US and in the 17 chapters and 90 countries where Oxfam works, we are a community of practical radicals.

One of our efforts involves what all of you surely came to rely on during final exams – coffee.

As you may be aware, Ethiopia grows some of the finest coffee beans in the world. It is where coffee was invented.

Several years back, Starbucks started selling gourmet Ethiopian beans for as much as \$26 a pound. Meanwhile, the farmers were paid less than \$1.25 a pound. Moreover, Starbucks sought to copyright the names of Ethiopian coffee varieties.

So Oxfam, after reaching out to corporate leadership to broker negotiations between Starbucks and the Ethiopian government to discuss both these copyright and price questions, launched an advocacy campaign on behalf of Ethiopian farmers.

We didn't have a venti-sized budget..... It felt like David vs. Goliath..... But it challenged us to get creative with social media and civic activism.

At a grassroots level, Oxfam worked with a coalition to organize members of the Ethiopian Diaspora... students... Starbucks employees...and our own supporter base.

We organized sit-ins in Starbucks shops across the globe, video-taped them and ran them on YouTube.

By the campaign's end, more than 100,000 people had gotten involved...the Wall Street Journal ran a front page article on the conflict,....and Starbucks had learned a lot about the power of You Tube to shape their brand value.

Ultimately, Starbucks founder Howard Schultz invited the Ambassador of Ethiopia to Seattle. They resolved the issues, and in fact, they signed a significant marketing, distribution, and licensing agreement between the government of Ethiopia and the company. It became a model for other cases like this, in other countries and other industries.

Many thought we were crazy to take on Starbucks. They thought we would be crushed by their sheer power and resources. But we believed that if we understood the core logic of their business, their profit margins and their markets, we could get their attention and force them to engage in dialogue. As a result, tens of thousands of Ethiopian farmers have now been able to expand their production, increase their exports and are getting a fair price for their product.

One lesson we have learned at Oxfam is that there is no institutional Goliath that can resist a compelling moral challenge to their integrity and core purpose.

Another takeaway from this example is that in the work of a practical radical, politics and power matter. Ultimately, to make the profound change that is required ... we must go far beyond the fundamental tools of citizen activism----marching and voting. We have to dive deeper. Think harder. And reach higher.

At Oxfam, we have a simple slogan that reminds us what's important and what we are seeking. It's change, not charity.

To make this shift we had to move from thinking about poverty and injustice as a problem to be addressed with funding and handouts to one in which we recognize that in most cases, poverty and injustice are the results of various forms of institutionalized social exclusion---that range from apartheid in the most extreme to patriarchal cultural norms to LGBT legislation.

These issues require remedies that are framed in human rights terms and demand that governments uphold their obligations to protect the basic rights of their citizens.

In addressing poverty and injustice through a human rights approach, we must insist on a politics of transparency. Politics cannot be just about making deals behind closed doors. It relies upon an active, informed and engaged citizenry and electorate. Now more than ever, our world needs voices like yours being active, speaking out and staying engaged.

When you leave her today, you will leave all the structures that have defined your life at home and in school for the last two decades. You are now free to make all your own decisions. It's exciting but also daunting.

Through your 20's you are going to find your way to a career..... It will likely not be a straightforward path. It will be bumpy and a bit chaotic..... You will take some detours,.... have some terrible bosses,.... make some mistakes..... but have faith....you will get there.

So don't get discouraged and more importantly don't get cynical.

Seek good mentors who model what you want to become.

There are lots of fantastic jobs out there that you cannot even imagine until you jump in and experiment.

You may need to take some risks. So go a little crazy. Jump in...try some things....., make friends....., fail a few times....., and network like crazy.....but remember job one in your 20s is not just about finding a job but also about finding your calling, your vocation. And whatever it is – make it count.

Seek out organizations, institutions or companies that embody your values and can help you to grow. Find the work that stirs your head and your heart and you have probably found your vocation.

While you are on this journey, don't lose sight of the values that brought you to Warren Wilson. Let them inform your choices along the way.

But aspire to be a practical radical in the way you approach problems and solutions in your work and in your daily life. In our complex world, we need creative, action-oriented leaders who aren't afraid to try new things; whose focus is solving problems and driving positive change.

Most importantly, we need the voice and energy of your generation in every domain. The public sector. The private sector. The nonprofit sector. And the good news is that many outstanding alumnae of Warren Wilson have already paved the way for you.

Finally, I would offer you one last challenge. That is to think about your life's journey beyond Warren Wilson College as not about acquisition but about giving.

How much of yourself can you give away in love in a lifetime??..... And what path will enable you to do this in a way that gives you peace, self-confidence and capabilities to give even more??

Ask yourself frequently.....what do I love and how much time and energy am I giving to the people and causes that I love??

If you answer this question honestly and frequently, you will stay centered on the things that matter most.

And such a life will yield much in return.

In the end, true happiness in this life is not about what we acquire but rather what we give away..... Not about the money we make or the small victories we secure in work or in politics, it's about who we have become, who we love and who loves us.

I am partial to poets of Irish extraction so I will close with a quote from George Bernard Shaw from his preface from the play Man and Superman that embodies the spirit of this challenge.

He writes:

“Life is no brief candle to me. It is a splendid torch which I have got hold of for a moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it off to future generations.”

Today this torch is passed to you.

May you make it burn brightly for yourselves and all whose lives you touch!!

On behalf of the community of practical radicals, we congratulate the Warren Wilson class of 2016. We have high expectations of you and we welcome you with open arms!

Thank you very much.

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