

Address given to the Graduating Class
The School of Library and Information Studies
The University of Oklahoma
Spring, 2005

Professor Wallace, distinguished members of the faculty, students, guests, parents, family and especially Members of the Class of 2005, it is with pride and humility that I join you in celebrating the achievement of today's graduates.

It is certainly fitting and proper that we join together today in celebrating what these graduates have achieved. The Class of 2005 has navigated troubled times to today's ceremony. When today's graduating seniors were Freshmen, our nation enjoyed the sustained benefits of prosperity, the twin towers still stood in lower Manhattan, and our nation was at peace. What a difference these four short years have made! We have learned that prosperity can be as fleeting as the morning fog. Our alabaster cities still gleam, but they are no longer undimmed by human tears. Our nation has fought two wars and the battle against terror yet endures. We mourn our losses.

The achievements of today's graduates are the more remarkable because they occurred in the face of these travails. Today's graduates held fast to their belief in learning and to their commitment to knowledge. Yes, it is with pride and with humility that I join you in celebrating what these graduates have achieved.

Martin Luther King wrote that "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." The achievement we celebrate today, in these times of challenge and controversy, is indeed a measure of today's graduates.

While the achievement is great and deserves our honor and respect, where one stands is measured not merely by achievement but also by the choices one makes. The choices of today's graduates tell us much about what they believe and where they stand.

I have already said today's graduates chose learning and knowledge. Even more, today's graduates have chosen to be information professionals: experts in the organization, dissemination and analysis of information. What an enlightened and powerful choice this is! This is a choice for reason over fear, in faith that the light of organized information will triumph over the darkness of hate. This is a choice for knowledge over ignorance, for without information our lives must be ruled by superstition. Finally this is a choice for liberty over tyranny, for the access to information is the very foundation of a free society.

We live today in what is called the information age. This age began over a thousand years ago. Then life was hard and no one had the freedom to make choices that so many enjoy today. The information of the ages was fragile and preserved in a few scattered monasteries. The few who were able to choose a scholarly life gathered at these monastic outposts to study the sparse information available. The modern University evolved out of these informal gatherings of

scholars and their students, centered on the information in the library. The library was, then and now, the beating heart of the University.

The choices of these early scholars are among the most enduring in Western Civilization. Edsger Dijkstra, a professor of computer science at the University of Texas, has compiled a list of sixty-six European institutions that have had a continuously visible existence since 1530. These include the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church and the parliaments of Iceland and the Isle of Man. The remarkable thing about the remaining sixty-two institutions is that they are all Universities. Our graduates today have chosen a commitment to scholarship and to information and so have joined in the long march of liberation made possible by preserving and sharing our heritage of information.

Books are incredibly precious commodities. At the dawn of the information age, books were even more precious than today. By 1454 in all of Europe there were fewer than 30,000 books. Then a wonder occurred and by 1500 there were over nine million books in Europe. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press was easily the most important, the most liberating, invention of the last thousand years. Information exploded across the continent and the modern age was born. Newton, Voltaire, Shakespeare, Luther, Mozart, Austin: our modern world simply could not exist without Gutenberg's invention. The printing press launched an information revolution that shapes the modern world.

That revolution is accelerating today, propelled yet again by information technology. In December of 1969 the first computer network was created connecting four computers. Today nearly 900 million people worldwide are connected using this technology. In the US alone there are over one billion devices connected to the internet. This information explosion already far outpaces the Gutenberg revolution. Information is, at its core, liberating: it frees us to make new choices, based on new knowledge and shared ideas. Our choices today about how we share this information will shape future generations in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

This massive explosion of information presents a problem both new and old. In 1454, with only 30,000 books in Europe, finding a book was the challenge. Fifty years later, with over nine million books in Europe, finding the right book became the challenge. Today, with over a billion devices connected to the internet, finding exactly the information you need is daunting. The choice that today's graduates have made for information places them at the core of the new world that will emerge from this most recent information revolution.

Thus the choices that today's graduates have made in their studies deserves even greater honor and respect than the outstanding achievement we celebrate in today's ceremony.

Class of 2005: today we honor you; today we honor your achievements; today we honor your choices. Today I charge each of you to live the rest of your life so that today is not the last day you deserve honor.

When you leave our University, every day of your life you will make choices. Your choices shape who are and who you become. You may choose to make a better world for yourself and for your family, or you may choose to make a better world for all people and for all families.

You may choose live a life that holds fast to your faith, or you may choose to live a life that reveres all faiths. You may choose to enrich your life, or you may choose to enrich all lives. The difference in these choices is so small and yet so large. Choose wisely for you will become your choices and your choices will become you.

Many of you today will serve our communities as librarians. All of you share a commitment to knowledge. The American Library Association has long been a stalwart supporter of America's national choice for freedom. The foundation of this freedom is our ability to freely express and to share what is in our hearts and our minds. The Association's Universal Right to Free Expression includes an eloquent expression of this choice for freedom and I can think of no better words to conclude today's remarks.

“Courageous men and women, in difficult and dangerous circumstances throughout human history, have demonstrated that freedom lives in the human heart and cries out for justice even in the face of threats, enslavement, imprisonment, torture, exile, and death. We draw inspiration from their example. They challenge us to remain steadfast in our most basic ...responsibility to promote and defend the right of free expression.”

Graduates, today we honor you. Continue to make the choices that brought you to today's ceremony and we will honor you for all the days of your lives.