



Commencement Address
Percival Everett
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Fellow students, graduates, I'd like to thank President Stuart Kirk for inviting me here to speak with you today. I'd also like to thank Mark Behr, Matt Donovan and Greg Glasner in the Creative Writing Program for pulling the wool of President's Kirk's eyes so that he would invite me. And I'd like to thank all of you, whose day it is, you students. I'd like to thank you because you are students. I hope that whatever you do in life, wherever you go, that you will remain students. The world needs students. It seems we are lousy with teachers. I've been called a professor, a teacher often and I try to shake that label off. I prefer, I choose to think of myself as a student.

A couple of things happen by my merely acknowledging my station as student. The first is that I realize just how little I know. What follows that is the logical realization of how much there is for me to learn. These are two very different things. So, I ask you to study, study something, but do not seek to become experts. There is no position so loathsome as "expert" and there is never any real forgiveness for it, for the office is self-

elected.

I know very little about many things and even less about what's left. Some years ago I asked to be an expert. I was invited to attend a conference at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, a conference on black cowboys. A few days before I was to leave for the conference I was called by a producer from some ABC news program. She said they wanted to interview me and I told her I knew little about black cowboys. I told her I was no expert. I referred her to someone who knew a great deal more than I, a student of the subject. She called me back and told me they wanted me. I told her again that she wanted someone else. After a couple of laps around the conversation pit I realized that she did not want my friend because he was white. She did want me because I was black. This was after all television. I cannot tell you on just how many levels I was offended. I insisted that she reconsider my knowledgeable friend and, further, I suggested that she read a couple of specific books on the subject. Her rather quick and decided response was, and I report this verbatim, "I don't do paper." She was telling me not only that she did not have time to read, but if she did have time to read she still wouldn't. I looked at the phone in my hand, said not another word and hung up. I hung up before she could put me on television and make me an expert.

About forty years ago, over at Pine Springs, Arizona, an anthropologist, John Adair, and a filmmaker, Sol Worth, embarked on a project that culminated in a book titled *Through Navajo Eyes* in which Navajo people were given movie cameras and allowed to make short films. While seeking permission and support for the project, they talked to a man named Sam Yazzie. Mr. Yazzie listened and then asked some questions. His first question was “Will this harm my sheep?” The answer to this was ‘no.’ The second question was, “Will this do my sheep any good?” The answer was ‘no.’ Finally, nodding, Mr. Yazzie asked, “Then why make movies?” The beauty, subtlety and complexity of these questions was not lost on the researchers. A completely new level of abstraction and genius was added to Mr. Yazzie’s words when it was learned that Mr. Yazzie did not in fact own any sheep. Mr. Yazzie was dealing in symbols, asking what the project might mean for his people. But more, he was asking an even more profound question. He was asking, “Why make art?” Further, “Why make or do anything?” The researchers didn’t have a satisfactory answer for Mr. Yazzie, but I’m certain that Mr. Yazzie had one.

So, why do this? Why make art? I can and will speak only for myself and my answer is constantly being reformulated, constantly just beyond my understanding. Right now, today, it goes something like this. I make art, I

write because it allows me to study. In making art, in admitting how little I know, I am free from having to be an “expert.” In the artistic process, through my studies, I discover that I didn’t know what I thought I knew. And so, part of the pleasure and benefit for me in my work is that I know less with the completion of each book. Sadly, I have written many books and therefore know less than most people, less than I ever thought I could know. I have exceeded my expectations as far as ignorance goes. My ambition, aim and desire is to finally know nothing. My friends and family tell me that I am well on my way. But what do they know? More than me, it seems. Interestingly, knowing so very little requires a good education. A good education is crucial. I am thrilled to see so many candidates for know-nothing success right here in front of me.

This is your day. Your time. Your world. Your world to participate in, to shape, to remake. You can make up for the failures of my and former generations and build on the few things we got right. It would be obvious for me to point out that you are the future and not very profound, but I would like you to know that you will become the past before you know it, in no time at all. So, please do not waste your time with frivolous things, like the mere pursuit of wealth, the mere pursuit of fame, the mere pursuit of pleasure. I ask that not because it will make me happy, but because I truly

believe that it make you happy. Your guides through these last few years have schooled you and are now turning you loose. I believe they want you to do what I want you to do.

Make art. Do that. I understand that is what you all do, make art. And that is what you should do. Make art because you love it. Make it because you need to make it. Make it when everyone understands what you are doing and make it when no one seems to have a clue. And while you make your art, you might be served to remember some of things that will happen along the way. They will certainly happen. You will stop one day in the middle of a painting, a novel or a sculpture and ask yourself, “What kind of manure is this?” You will be right to ask this question. In fact, I encourage you to ask this question often. Make friends with this question. Many times you will have no satisfactory answer, perhaps you never will, and you will realize that, like most manure, what you have made stinks. Other times, you will forge ahead, like the true pioneer you want and ought to be, not comprehending why, but knowing that there is a destination, that there is art in front of you. Sometimes many people will appreciate your work. More often, a few will. And then there will be the times when no one gets it, or you. This is when you must have confidence and faith in your artistic vision, your artistic effort, your artistic spirit. That confidence has to

come from you and you alone. No amount of praise from others will give it to you. And if negative criticism stops you, then maybe this line of work isn't for you. It will help with your confidence that you have received this fine education, that you are tooled and trained well in your chosen art. Take your training from this college, remember these years fondly and never think again about getting anything "right." Simply, make art.

There are those in our culture who ask that question I've been repeating. "Why make art?" These are not only crass politicians and single-minded land developers and fluff-headed producers of reality television shows, but sometimes hard-working decent people who grow carrots and beets and fennel in their gardens, who recycle bottles and cans and rubber bands, who listen to public radio and own banjos. I do have an answer after all, it turns out, and, despite the fact that it comes from me, I think it is true or at least as close to true as a fiction writer can get. Art makes us smarter. All of us. Not just those of us who make it, but all of us. If for no other reason than it allows us to know that it is okay to let go and not "know" so much. Art allows us to do what is so difficult in this world, to merely and honestly experience the world and of course this includes ourselves.

Of course, I am asking you to make art in the face of a culture that not only often disparages the truly artistic, but tempts the artist with material and

crude rewards for making the ordinary. If the ordinary is what you love, if making gives you joy, then go for it. But if you savor a challenge, if you are a pioneer, an explorer, an adventurer, then make art according to your vision, without apology, without qualification. I ask you to find these words of Whitman in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore”:

Have you thought there could be but one supreme?

There can be any number of supremes—one does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another, or one life countervails another.

All is eligible to all,

All is for individuals, all is for you,

No condition is prohibited, not God’s or any.

All comes by the body, only health puts you in rapport with the universe.

Produce great Persons, the rest follows.

All visual evidence aside, I have not lived a terribly long time, but I’ve learned a few things that I relearn every day. These are things that I think we should do every day. Here they are. My suggestions:

Read something new.

Read something old.

Tell a story to someone.

Listen to someone's story.

Make kissing sounds at an animal.

Sing a song with funny lyrics.

Sing a song with sad lyrics.

Sing at least one of them while you bathe.

Do something that scares you.

Walk someplace.

Look at the sky and predict the weather.

---be happy whether you were right or wrong.

Ask a child to explain something to you.

---believe her.

Enjoy a piece of cake.

Dance to music.

Dance to no music.

Feel good about what you have.

Feel bad about what many do not have.

Give a small bit of money to a person on the street.

There are many things that we should do, but perhaps not every day.

Like buy a more fuel efficient automobile. Learn to play a musical

instrument, preferably a bassoon or French horn or something else with an odd-shaped case. Ask that our election process become more than a popularity contest. And overthrow tyrants.

In these sad times it would be easy for me to stand up here and fill you with fear and dread about an unjust war and a dishonest, manipulating and uncaring administration. It is difficult for me to not go on at length about how despicable our current so-called leaders are, but I will not go on at length. Consider all that said. Consider that done. Instead, I choose to look out at all of you and see possibilities. Good or bad, that is up to you.

Simple possibilities are enough for me. Like mornings. I used to wake to feed my horses and mules and watch the sun come up beyond Mount San Jacinto. I would then look at the animals I would work later and wonder, “What will you do today?” “What will you make me do?” “What will you allow me to see?” I look at you and I offer only one more suggestion to be added to my list. I ask that you always question authority and everyone else as well. Remember, please, I fall into the “everyone else” category.