

CORNELL UNIVERSITY 139<sup>TH</sup> COMMENCEMENT  
School of Hotel Administration  
Diploma Ceremony  
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Keynote Address:

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Presidential Councillor, Trustee Emeritus

Thank you, Dean Johnson for your generous introduction which I greatly appreciate.

Good afternoon to you all, graduates, parents, grand-parents, relatives and friends of the class of 2007. To-day is **indeed** an extraordinary and happy occasion for **all** of you! The great philosopher Yogi Berra opined that baseball is 90% mental, and the other half is physical!! Well, after many years of mental preparation, physical hard work and personal sacrifices, your **dream** has come to fruition, and it **is** an achievement of which you are justified to be proud. In the presence of your peers and loved ones, you bear witness for each other in the official rite of passage in receiving the appropriate degrees from the world's pre-eminent institution in hospitality management. YOU deserve a **generous** round of applause!!

From my personal experience some forty-four years ago, I recall vividly the enormous elation and personal satisfaction that I had felt with the letter of acceptance from The Hotel School in my hands. I said to myself: "Oh my god! What a stroke of good fortune! My future will be assured!" It was a big deal for me as a foreign student, the third ever from Hong Kong to attend the Hotel

School, and the first of my family to venture into North America in 1962. It never occurred to me that I would one day be in front of such an audience, and I am overwhelmed and **distinctly** honoured to be addressing you today.

As the commencement and graduation activities are about to draw to a close for this weekend, I surmise that most of you will begin to look back the past few years and experience nostalgia for Cornell and **what** an impact it has made on your lives; and perhaps most of you are fortunate enough to weigh your options from job offers, and speculate with anxiety what the future ahead holds for you. May I however remind you that while you have certainly earned the right of recognition for your academic achievements, you have **not** been granted the right of entitlement in the world of hard knocks and reality checks.

The foundation of basic knowledge and theoretical concepts that you have acquired for yourselves with a Cornell degree is simply an entrée into the hospitality world, including a general preview of the rigours and challenges in a global arena where tourism and the hospitality industry as a whole are often the primary engines for growth for many nations. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the hospitality industry in 2006 generated US\$6,477 billion

of economic activity, with 10.3% of the world's gross domestic product, and 234.3 million jobs, or 8.7% of the employment base.

It is also axiomatic that as you embark on a selected path to a destination of your choice, the course you chart for yourselves will often require adjustments, corrections, and even changing of careers along the way necessitated by economic, political, and personal circumstances. Your journey will make neither promise of reward nor assurance of success.....Theodore Roosevelt, the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States once said, "It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed." And to echo this strong statement, noted news broadcaster Walter Cronkite also said, "I can't imagine a person becoming a success who doesn't give this game of life everything he's got!"

Given my year of graduation and with a little benefit from hindsight, I can't help but talk about aspects of the foundation for my early formal education and life's experiences on several continents, at least up to this point. I would like to share them with you in the **hope** that you will put your own priorities into proper perspective and proportion, without setting the bar of expectations too high and too prematurely for yourselves, nor allowing your impatience to shortchange or

compromise your objectives. After all, honing one's skills and putting learning  
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into practice are done through sheer determination, unbridled passion, hard work, trials and errors, and adherence to discipline through life's gradual process of maturing that will **totally** and **ultimately** consume a lifetime.

The foundation of values that I had learned as a teenager came from the Analects of Confucius, and which have positively influenced my personal and working life. Before I recite for you a saying by Confucius that I believe is so **relevant** to life's cycles and experiences, a little background on Confucius is warranted for those of you who may only know him from fortune cookies. Confucius was born in China into poverty in the year 551 before Christ and was orphaned at an early age. He became a scholar, and like other scholars before and after him, would often aspire to government service for a more secure livelihood which he eventually achieved by becoming a police commissioner of the state of Lu, which is known today as the Province of Shangdong in Northeast China. He however abandoned his appointment after failing for years to prevail on the rulers of the states on his ideas and precepts about **ethical rectitude** and **moral correctness, which he firmly believed to be the critical underpinnings for personal behaviour in politics, business, philosophy, education, and literature.** He became a traveling advisor seeking employment and offering advices to rulers and

statesmen for 13 years. During the last five years of his life before he died at the  
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age of 72 in 479 B.C., he was a teacher and had a large following of students that have multiplied in numbers throughout the centuries, and who subsequently were most instrumental in implementing the core principles of his teachings throughout China's history. It should be noted that countries such as Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, and Japan also came under the strong influence of Confucius' teachings in different eras. Altogether, Confucius had 72 students or disciples during his lifetime, and only one became a successful merchant, and I should explain that merchants in those days did not rank higher than the peasantry as they were looked upon as being exploitive and dishonest.

According to J.A.G. Roberts, a noted scholar and historian, "Confucius by today's definition was not an arch-conservative. Confucius simply stated that the past was a source of examples to be applied creatively to the problems and challenges of his own day". To study and understand Confucius teachings would take a lifetime of focus and devotion, and there is no suggestion that you should hit the books right after picking up your diplomas. To get to my point, Confucius reasoned that to be a learned person and to have acquired professional skills are **not** simply enough. A person of moral conduct did not get that way from birth rights, but by attaining **moral qualities** which have come down in

history as the **five** constant virtues. They are: **benevolence; uprightness of mind;**

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**propriety in demeanour; knowledge or enlightenment; and good faith.** In addition, a vital component in Confucius teachings was associated with the term “**Li**”, a Chinese word which in essence means **a paradigm of etiquette that provided an objective, coherent and appropriate standard of conduct based on relational context.** Of these virtues, the **most** important was **benevolence or humanity** which is the **supreme** excellence in a human-being of perfect virtue. These virtues were **not** inherent – they **were** acquired through self-cultivation and self-study through a life of learning and self-improvement.

I in fact began learning various aspects of Confucius teachings and Chinese calligraphy beginning at age 12, and the saying by Confucius that I referred to earlier now makes a lot more sense to me now with the passage of time and the onset of maturity, and it goes like this. I quote, “**At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I know the decree of heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing what was right.**” Essentially this saying summarizes **fully** life’s chronology into six stages: First, at age 15, priming oneself for a formal education. Second, at age 30, establish a set of objectives with a focus, and a course of independent actions. Third, at age 40, staying on course with

affirmation and confidence on one's chosen avocation without any doubts. Fourth, at age 50, acquire a sense of rhythm through constant learning and honing one's skills through maturity and refinement. Fifth, at age 60, learning to align the mind through reasoning and balance it with the heart through compassion and not be distracted or annoyed by critics. And sixth, at age 70, attain a state of harmony, in the embodiment of truth, pragmatism, honesty, logic, compassion, and prudence.

At this juncture you will have perhaps noticed that this saying consisting of 38 Chinese words, does not mention financial success and monetary rewards. This I submit to you is neither an oversight nor an aversion to wealth on the part of Confucius to attaining financial security for he knew too well about poverty. By contrast, you are here mostly to learn about entrepreneurship, capitalism and return on investments. For his part, Confucius was being consistent to a fault in urging the need to follow a moral and ethical compass that can neither be compromised nor corrupted by: greed, avarice and ruthlessness. He had always maintained that personal success and uprightness are **not** mutually exclusive.

Several years ago, I chanced upon a collection of down-to-earth maxims on

durians in a fruit stand. For those of you who have never heard of or sampled durians, it is known as the king of fruits. It has a number of large seeds coated with a soft, yellowish meat inside a prickly shell, and they possess a consistency like Brie cheese, but are far superior in aroma, lingering taste and texture. I can assure you that durians and Brie are equally fattening and heavy in cholesterol. The collection of ten simple phrases written on the wall with unknown authorship was so simple and yet so powerfully effective that I thought I might offer that up for your reference and retention. The title of the collection is “A Little”, and it goes like this:

**“Work A Little harder;**

**Lower your temper A little;**

**Be A Little more flexible and creative;**

**Show A Little more compassion;**

**Give excuses A Little less;**

**Be A Little more forgiving;**

**Laugh A Little louder;**

**Move A Little quicker;**

**Speak A Little gentler; and**

**Increase your effectiveness A Little.”**

Like you and many other Cornellians before me, I **am** fortunate to be a member of the Cornell community, and **am** most grateful to the dedicated educators and teachers, past and present, who have tirelessly maintained their lifelong commitment to molding and educating generations of Cornellians. Their success is your success as alumni, and Cornell's success as an institution is empowered by active participation, support and engagement by alumni, parents and friends in the preservation of Cornell as a great resource and a national treasure for future generations. And to be a beneficiary of an education from a university such as Cornell is to be **empowered with boundless social and economic possibilities**. On behalf of the Class of 2007 and their parents, let us extend our heartfelt thanks and salute Dean Johnson, his faculty and staff for all that they do for education with a round of applause.

Peter Beinart is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and when he was a second-year Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University, he once wrote an essay about "What Is Wrong with Idealism?" He said, and I quote: "Idealism is not a political ideology. It refers not to a set of ideas that guide action, but rather to the passion, faith, and commitment that such ideas inspire." The challenge for you is

enthusiasm and commitment. Ladies and gentlemen, enthusiasm and passion are the very essential and critical ingredients that will propel you in your chosen fields of endeavours.

The world community in which Confucius and his counterparts on the European Continent lived some 2,500 years ago was arguably a lot simpler and less complex. It certainly did not have the knowledge and advantages associated with science, medicine, and technology as we know them today. And for you to be a responsible and informed citizen, your chosen field in the hospitality industry must not desensitize your appreciation for, or lessen your awareness of the world community in its quest for answers on our place in the age of the **genome**, and our relationship to other species, as we engage in the search for wisdom in an age of digital information through the transformative power of computing and information science. We must maintain an on-going attempt at sustainability around the world, in an effort toward a balanced eco-system through our economic, political and environmental actions. These are, of course, the very thrusts of academic enquiries under way here at Cornell now. Having said all this, we must also be aware of groups of fanatics and of powerful acts of nature that are both constant threats to our ways of life and to human life.

As you begin your journey today, it is not likely that you will have the answers to, and solutions for, the issues and challenges that will come before you in your lifetime. However, you **can** go forward with **confidence** and **conviction** with a **firm** foundation of core values that you can learn from Confucius. Referring to an Afghan proverb which says, “There is a path to the top of the mountain”, and whether the top of the mountain is euphemistically known as success, or achieving a state of harmony and balance in the embodiment of compassion and pragmatism, you **will** appreciate the definition of SUCCESS attributed to well-known poet and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson which I believe could serve as your guiding light for the rest of your life regardless of which path you will select.....

**“To laugh often and much;**

**To win the respect of intelligent people and affection of children;**

**To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;**

**To appreciate beauty;**

**To find the best in others;**

**To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch,  
or a redeemed social condition;**

**To know even one life has breathed easier because you lived.**

**This is to have succeeded”.**

Ladies and gentlemen, alumni and alumnae of the Class of 2007, until we meet again: au revoir, arrividerci, auf wiedersehen, jai jien, shalom, salaam, good luck and god speed.

Thank you.