

2004

Spring Commencement Address, Lana Pollack, April 25, 2004

Eastern Michigan University

President Kirk-patrick, Chairman Incarnati, Regents, honored guests, faculty, families and friends -- Good morning.

(afternoon). But - most important – good morning (afternoon) graduates! I'm honored to join with you on this landmark day in your lives and let me begin by saying "congratulations"-- this is a day to remember, a day to celebrate.

I'm honored to be here for personal reasons, too. About 75 years ago, my mother arrived on this campus, back when EMU was still called Michigan State Normal College, to pursue a teaching degree. She paid her own way through school, cleaning house, cooking and babysitting for a family who lived on Pearl street, at a time when many women didn't even go to college. In fact, apart from her older brother (whose tuition she also paid), my mother was the only person in her family, up to that point, who'd ever gone to college.

And in the years that followed, she passed a fierce belief in higher education on to her students, and to her children including me. So today I honor her memory, as well as the memory of all those professors and students at EMU who – for more than 150 years – have passed the torch of learning from one generation to the next.

For all of you graduates, today's ceremony marks the end of years of study. Some of you have pushed hard, straight through four or five years of classwork. Others among you have taken longer, working while pursuing your degree, fighting traffic and exhaustion as you juggled the demands of a job, family and the classroom. Some of you came here for graduate work, seeking special expertise and new career opportunities. But for all of you – no matter how you arrived at this day – this commencement marks the end of a major chapter in your life.

But it doesn't just mark an ending. As a *commencement* ceremony it marks a beginning, of new responsibilities and opportunities. And in these times of uncertainty for our nation and our world, these responsibilities and opportunities have never been greater. So today I want to talk about the power everyone has to make good decisions in the face of this uncertainty, and about the implications your decisions have for your nation, your democracy and your world.

Let me start by making a couple of observations. A lot of *life* has been happening while you've been attending classes, working toward your degrees. You've had job changes, births and deaths in your families, marriages and divorces. You've gotten sick, recovered, and moved (probably several times). You've made important new friendships, and likely incurred new debts. Through all these changes and challenges, you've figured out how to rebalance your lives and go on with your education.

At the same time, a lot's been happening in your *world*. When most of you began your education, the national budget was balanced, the stock market was booming, and many new graduates could demand starting salaries that their parents had worked decades to achieve. Then the economy stalled, terrorists attacked the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, government spending soared out of control again, companies shipped white-collar jobs abroad, SARS and mad cow disease hit here and abroad, and the nation went to war twice, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. And in the wake of this unprecedented turn of fortune – from good times to tough times, from optimism to concern – a lot of people started to reconsider some of the things that just a few years ago they thought they knew for sure.

Being in school can often distract you from the larger world, but even as you were going to lectures, writing papers and taking exams you've certainly not been immune to these changes. Change, after all, is guaranteed. So too is uncertainty.

But we should never let uncertainty paralyze us. Small uncertainties are so much a part of ordinary life that we hardly think about them and every day we make decisions in the face of uncertainties... Do I need to take an umbrella today? Do I have enough minutes left on my cell phone? How early should I leave for the airport when I don't know how heavy traffic is, or whether an accident will tie up I-94?

Sometimes we're hit with mega-decisions that also come with uncertainties. And as much as we'd like to, we can't duck them. Some of you have already confronted family illness - perhaps cancer - and rather than telling you what to do, your doctor has asked you or your family to help decide the course of treatment. Your doctor has offered you choices, even guidance, but he or she hasn't given you explicit directions and certainly no guarantees. Why not? Because doctors - while educated and experienced, know they face uncertainties about the way a disease may respond to treatment.

Of course we're all going to be somewhat uncertain about the future. It's only hindsight that's perfect. Or is it?

You've all heard "hindsight is 20/20" but that's not really true. If you've been paying any attention to the 9/11 Commission hearings, you have to recognize that even looking backwards, it's hard to be certain what went wrong, who was at fault, or if anybody could have made decisions that would have avoided the catastrophe that took place. Apparently, uncertainty is also a part of the past.

When you think about it, in matters big and small, as you've gone through life, as you study and learn and get professional experience, you've had a lot of practice making decisions in the face of uncertainty. And even with all the uncertainties of life, your experience and your education have made you a pretty smart decision maker. It's a good thing too, because to stay strong our democracy depends on having a lot of good, informed and active decision-makers. Not just in Lansing or Washington, but here in this audience today, and in the communities you call home.

There are more than 117,000 living EMU graduates. There are about 2200 more graduating this year. Four years ago in Florida, a national election – some would argue the direction of the nation – was determined by only 500 votes. I mention these numbers to illustrate the fact that our individual voices do count, and that our democracy is all about the decisions we make as individuals, and the decisions we make with each other.

While our democracy doesn't ask you to weigh all the information and make the tough calls directly, it does need you to weigh the wisdom of your leaders, and cast judgment, at the very least at election time. Unfortunately, many people don't do even that.

Even in heated Presidential elections, only about half of all eligible voters cast their ballots. In fact, only one third of eligible voters aged 18-24 generally vote in Presidential elections. Two out of three don't even show up. Again, 500 voters – only a small fraction of the people in this convocation center– decided the last presidential election. 100 million eligible Americans didn't show up.

You and I are *not* asked to decide whether or when to go to war; or how many troops it will take, or to anticipate how many lives will be lost.

Nor do you or I have to choose between the conflicting advice of the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, or top military brass – or between the head of the CIA and FBI. You don't need to make the call on whether the war in Iraq should be financed by raising taxes today, or raising them in the future, or by cutting health care, transportation, social security, college scholarships or some other programs that may be deemed less important to the survival of your democracy.

No, it's your President, it's your United State Senators and your member of Congress, who have to make these judgment calls, even as they can never be absolutely certain of the consequences of their decisions. But if you are an American citizen, you do have some responsibility for this great democracy. As long as you have a democracy, you will have the obligation to guide – and to judge – the decisions of your leaders at election time.

One common reason that people – especially young people – give for not voting, is that they think they don't know enough to make an informed decision about whom to vote for. But, just because ~~you~~ don't know *everything*, doesn't mean ~~you~~ don't know *anything*. Even with incomplete information ~~you~~ can make some pretty good decisions.

As we've already seen, uncertainty is a part of your challenging and changing world. If the only people who got to cast votes were the ones who were certain about everything, no one would get to vote – except the people who are arrogant enough to think they know everything and never make mistakes.

Whether or not you are a citizen, there are many ~~many~~ opportunities for you to make a difference. I know that here among the student body at EMU are people from about 90 different countries around the world *and all of them are making a difference.*

You can volunteer to serve in the armed forces. You can pick up a sign and picket, or raise an American flag. In the best tradition of this country you can rally for a woman's right to choose, or you can march with Right-to-Life; you can demonstrate for laws to limit the sale of guns or you can join forces with the National Rifle Association; you can picket for - or against - our war in Iraq. You can write letters, demonstrate and organize for or against better environmental protections, gay marriage, privacy, the Patriot Act, lower tuition, rent control or a living wage. For those of you who say there is no difference between politicians, think about the sharp differences over all of these issues. No matter what side you come down on, there are real issues up for grabs, and real lives are at stake.

You can and should choose to take up sides in at least *one* issue that's close to your heart. And beyond the thing that matters most to you, you should try to have an informed opinion – which means at least a little careful reading or respectful listening to diverse opinions – on lots of issues that matter to your life, this country and the world. And while we're on the subject of getting informed, forget the 5 o'clock TV news where the programming is little more than the daily police and fire report. Instead, listen to public radio, like WEMU – one of the finest radio stations in the country – and it's right here on this campus.

The truth is that if you want to make a difference in the things that matter in your own lives and in the life of the world, you have to be willing to reach out and at least touch the edges of politics. You can ignore politics and you can skip Election

Day, but you can't escape the consequences:

— SHOW OF HANDS QUESTION

In a free society, political outcomes *will* make a big difference in your lives, no matter what you're doing.

Before I close my remarks, I want to say a few words on a difficult topic: the very real threat of terrorism, and the war that has changed so much in America since 9/11. Like any sensible person, I take the threat of terrorism very seriously. To be sure, the United States needs to invest heavily in more sophisticated and efficient intelligence systems, and take precautions at our airports, seaports, chemical factories, nuclear plants and, indeed, where ever people gather in large numbers.

But there is another level of threat posed by the 9/11 attacks. It is a threat from within, a threat that arises because some would have us surrender a number of our traditional American freedoms and privacy rights in the name of national security.

The challenges we face in adapting our democracy to this radical new element are among the most serious our country has ever faced.

It's my belief that we are less in danger of losing our democracy to acts of terrorism than we are to losing it through public indifference, by letting elected officials escape from our careful scrutiny, by letting them erode the most basic freedoms enshrined in our Constitution's Bill of Rights. The root of this indifference is the belief that individuals can't make a difference, that you as an individual can't control the changes that are part of our post 9/11 world. Remember, each of you *does* have a voice. Each of you has many ways to make a difference.

If you really want to get involved – and if you have a high tolerance for uncertainty – try plunging headfirst into politics and choose, as I did, to run for public office. Win or lose (and I've done both) you'll be celebrating and honoring America's best democratic traditions.

I left elected office more than a decade ago and found a new way to make a difference, at the Michigan Environmental Council. I now work in the non-governmental and non-profit world, and with community groups, protecting Michigan's magnificent lakes, landscape ~~and air~~. This work is both vitally important and enormously rewarding, and I know that our success is dependent on people like you who care about the environment.

and

we also work w/ others to

contain global threats like climate change caused

mainly by increased burning of fossil fuels

But, I'll always be thrilled that I had the honor and opportunity to serve in elected office, first on the Ann Arbor School Board, and then in the state Senate in Lansing. I hope and trust that some of you will take the risk, run for office and serve your democracy in this bold way.

This country and this world need you to participate, now more than ever, and I hope you will make that commitment. It is not necessarily a big commitment in terms of time, but it does require more than just giving lip service to patriotism.

Service to this country, protection of its way of life, is a commitment of mind and of focus. It requires that you accept responsibility to make informed decisions, not just about your job and your family, but also about your community, your country, and your world.

And -- no matter how much you may sometimes doubt your own knowledge – remember that as you leave Eastern Michigan University, you have the critical thinking skills that are necessary to make good decisions, even in the face of uncertainty.

If we all make those decisions wisely, day-by-day and year-by-year, we can fulfill our obligations to our democratic traditions. We can find the will and the capacity to protect our freedoms. We can repair and restore the nation's confidence in our government's capacity to protect us from foreign terrorists, while not sacrificing the fundamental freedoms that have brought us to where we are today.

In closing, I'm sure your teachers, families and friends join me in congratulating each proud new graduate of Eastern Michigan University.

Thank you.