

2004

**Winter Commencement Address, Maura Corrigan, December 15,  
2002**

Eastern Michigan University

EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT  
SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2004  
2 p.m.  
Convocation Center

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President Willis, members of the Board of Regents, members of the class of 2004, members of the Alumni Board, faculty, family and friends of the graduates.

Congratulations, class of 2004. I'm pleased to share this special day with you and to become an honorary member of the class of 2004. And I thank you, President Willis, and Eastern Michigan University board of trustees for the honor you have conferred upon me.

I commend each of you graduates for completing the requirements to earn your degree. And as the widowed mother of two children, I especially congratulate the single mothers and fathers among the graduates. Working your way through school is difficult enough. Having to support and raise children at the same time is another level of challenge altogether. That is a lot of balls to keep in the air.

All of you worked hard and often alone. But none of us arrives at our goal without help, so I also commend all the people who supported you along the way to this day: parents, siblings, spouses, children, other family; your friends and your professors. I especially identify with your parents, having witnessed first my daughter, in 1999, and then my son last spring, graduate from college in ceremonies quite like this. My heart was full of mingled emotions: great pride in my children's accomplishments, and relief that I wouldn't be worrying about any more tuition bills. As it turned out, my son started law school this fall, so I am still on the hook, but happy to be so.

Seeking inspiration for my remarks today, I thought about past commencement speeches I've heard, and tried to discover a central message running through them. Because commencements are not only about congratulating the graduates and celebrating their achievements, although that is certainly a large part of the reason we're here. It's also about addressing the question, "Where do we go from here?" That is the hardest question any of us has to answer, whether at commencement or at any point of transition in our lives: "Where do we go from here?"

About a week ago, I watched once again one of everyone's favorite movies, *The Wizard of Oz*. If you're a fan of the movie, as I am, you'll recall that the Wizard holds his own commencement awards ceremony near the end of the movie for Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion. The Scarecrow, of course, asks the Wizard for a brain. And the Wizard responds:

Why, anybody can have a brain. That's a very mediocre commodity. Every pusillanimous creature that crawls on the earth—or slinks through slimy seas has a brain! ...

Back where I come from we have universities, seats of great learning—where men go to become great thinkers. And when they come out, they think deep thoughts—and with no more brains than you have...But! They have one thing you haven't got! A diploma!

Therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Universitatus Committeatum e plurbis unum, I hereby confer upon you the honorary degree of Th.D.

And the Scarecrow asks: Th.D.?

And the Wizard says: Yeah—that, that’s Dr. of Thinkology!

The Scarecrow then proceeds to recite the Pythagorean Theorem and is overjoyed. But, as the movie points out, the true test of his abilities is not that he can reel off mathematical formulae, but that he uses his wits to get Dorothy and the others out of danger.

As I watched this scene, it occurred to me: brains are a cheap commodity indeed. All of us know people with talent and intelligence who act as though they’ve put those abilities in mothballs. Intelligence without purpose is sterile. What matters is how we employ our brains – whether we become proficient at “thinkology” in the service of our family, friends, and community. That means looking past our own everyday needs. It is so easy, especially when the Internet makes it possible to shop, get informed, and be entertained without ever leaving our living rooms, to shut out our communities and even our families. In my opinion, the worst disease of our time, and the problem for your generation, is disengagement. Technology makes it so easy to cocoon. Our challenge is to look beyond our small personal concerns to tackle the larger problems that surround us. There are no shortages of those.

It’s true that, no matter what you’ve done with your life or how many experiences you’ve had, there is always more to learn, a lot more. When I became Chief Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court four years ago, I’d already served as a probation officer, a prosecutor, a partner in a big law firm, and a judge and Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals, in addition to having been on the Supreme Court for two years. I didn’t think I’d seen it all, but I thought I was pretty close.

That didn’t last long. My learning curve has been pretty much a vertical line. Every day, I had to confront issues in our justice system that in turn opened windows onto larger social problems. And one of those problems, which has become a passion for me, is the fate of children who “age out” of foster care. And in that vein, let me single out the efforts of the staff of EMU in developing a scholarship and housing program for former foster children. Innovative programs like that, giving these young people a future, really get my attention.

Let me explain just how serious this problem is. At any given time, 500,000 American children are in foster care. Over 19,000 children are in foster care in our great State of Michigan. Statistics tell us that, after age 11, a child’s chances of ever being adopted are very slim. So we have thousands of young people every year who are leaving foster care at age 18 or 19. Most of these young people were removed from their biological families because of abuse or neglect. As a result, they usually don’t have a biological family to return to. As you might expect, these aging-out foster youth are ill-equipped to find jobs, manage their finances, locate housing, or perform the hundreds of other mundane tasks of adult life.

Not surprisingly, aging-out foster youth are at high risk for homelessness, unemployment, and involvement with the criminal justice system when compared with others in the same age group. Statistics indicate that young adults who age out of foster care are 51 percent more likely to be unemployed, 27 percent more likely to be incarcerated, 42 percent more likely to be teenage parents, and 25 percent more likely to be homeless. Within four years, 60 percent of them will have had a child. Statistics also suggest that over half of these former foster youth will find themselves back in the legal system within two years of “aging out.”

Those are disheartening statistics. What gives me great hope, however, is hearing about programs like the scholarship foundation for former foster children attending EMU; like the Guardian Scholars program at California State University, which provides tuition, books, housing and faculty mentors for former foster children; like the scholarship program at Texas A&M that pairs each foster youth student with a mentor and a sponsor family. John Maxwell, a supporter of Mary Queen of Scots, once said, "Where there is no hope in the future, there is no power in the present." By offering these young people that hope, these programs are putting power into their hands, power to direct their own lives and not become like rudderless boats.

Some people mistakenly think that education is about learning how to make a living. I say that education is learning how to make a life. We all like to pride ourselves on our professional achievements; that's only natural. We also want to support ourselves financially, to provide for the needs of those who are dependent on us. And that too is only natural. But we need to separate what is essential and authentic in our lives from what is merely needless distraction. Time management experts describe two types of activity: the urgent and the important. Too often, our days are spent on what is urgent while we neglect what is important. As the poet William Wordsworth said, "The world is too much with us/Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." Recently there was a front-page article in the Detroit Free Press about holiday spending, entitled "HOLIDAY SHOPPING TREND: Nothing but the very, very best; If it screams luxury, customers will splurge." A young woman interviewed for the article said that all she wanted for Christmas was peace and a \$995 Ralph Lauren choker.

If you and I are remembered and loved after our deaths, it will not be for our Ralph Lauren chokers, beautiful though they may be, nor for the expensive cars we drove, nor for our high-priced shoes or clothing. Nor will we be remembered for saying that we were all in favor of peace, or social justice, or better education. And nobody will recall us with affection because we multitasked while our children were trying to talk to us.

The poet John Berryman said that "Man is a huddle of need"; hurting and broken people are all around us. We can begin by being truly present to each other, not just waiting for our turn to talk or thinking about the next item on our to-do lists. Listen. Engage. Turn off the TV set and come out of the computer room. Put aside the video games. Look each other in the eyes. Get outside. Volunteer. Take your children for walks. Provide a shoulder to cry on. Read a book. Have dinner with your family. Talk about current events. Give of yourself and of your best, every single day.

Let me conclude with a poem written by a personal hero of mine, a young man who truly made a life. Many people would say, in sympathy, "He didn't get a chance to live," because he died of cystic fibrosis when he was only 18, just after he graduated from high school. But this young man, Eric Rentenbach, lived more in his 18 years than most people do in 80. He was not known outside my small community. He was the president of the student council at my daughter's high school the year she was a freshman. Eric was remarkable: a funny, brilliant, straight-A student involved in numerous extracurricular activities. He was physically confined to a motorized wheelchair, but he was one of the strongest and finest people I've ever encountered. Most significantly, he was loving and wise: wise because he understood how to transform

suffering into something good. In his short span on this earth, he touched many lives, often in ways he did or could not know. His poem is entitled "A Lesson from Mr. Johnson":

"With the blaze of a million fires, the sun comes across the horizon. Like this burst of energy, you and I were granted life.

Treasure each shade of orange and pink in utter astonishment – you will never witness them again; nor have you ever seen them before.

Each moment that passes only brings you closer to the end, you must shine in each one, bright like the noon day sun, because you have so few, because so many others did not have any, because so many only seem to get the overcast day.

Do not despair when the sun sets, it has served its purpose, it did what it could. Light has shined upon you and me – and our hearts will be filled with warmth.

Do not be frightened when the darkness comes, we remember you for your glory.

And we know the sun will rise again."

My wish for each of you is that you bring your own blaze of light to the world, and that you will fill the hearts around you with warmth.

Good luck, class of 2004. Godspeed.

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