GRADUATE EDUCATION AND THE REAL WORLD:

Doing Good by Doing Well

Commencement address

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

George Mason University

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The popular philosopher Yogi Berra once observed that "you need to be careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there." As usual, the great Yogi was not entirely original ("*déjà vu* all over again"), since he was unconsciously rephrasing what a real philosopher, Aristotle, had said twenty-five hundred years before: "everything that is necessary is necessary upon some hypothesis." My task in these brief remarks is to convince you that Yogi and Aristotle have something useful to say to you this evening!

We are here because most of you in the audience have completed graduate degree programs. Many of you have been enrolled in focused, vocational programs, and I hope that these candidates have already found good jobs in the specialized fields for which they have been trained. I assume that that finding suitable employment was one of the most, if not the most, important reason for you entering your degree program. And I also assume that the very competent faculty at George Mason has prepared you well for your post-graduate career. Graduate education is time-consuming and expensive,

and it needs to provide a satisfactory return to students. There is nothing wrong with taking a personal and utilitarian attitude toward your post-baccalaureate studies.

But I also know that many degree candidates at this convocation have been enrolled in more general degree programs and have much broader (and less definite) career plans. Some of you have worked at the Master's level in fields such as history or philosophy simply to enrich your intellectual lives. Others have earned a degree mainly because your chosen career requires you to complete a Master's degree. And still others are either trying to make up for what you failed to do well in college, or to prepare to go on to doctoral work. These are all worthy and understandable motivations for doing graduate work at GMU.

The quest to improve the quality of life for all Americans was the primary reason for the development of public higher education in the United States in the nineteenth century. We Americans, as Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out almost two hundred years ago, are a practical sort of people, with a special genius for getting things done and doing them well. We began to establish state universities, supported by the national government, during the Civil War and from the start these institutions were primarily intended to increase the productivity of agriculture and industry. We understood that the most important function of public education was social improvement, through both the development of human resources and the creation of knowledge. To that end, the nineteenth-century public institutions contained separate colleges for agriculture, home economics, journalism and other specialized subjects. A growing nation needed highly trained personnel and the knowledge with which they could advance social ends.

And that is also why our country developed the notion of public service as one of the three purposes of higher education – the others being teaching and research. "Public service" was a

distinctively American contribution to the development of higher education, a concept not to be found in the British and German universities upon which our own system of higher education was modeled. This was both because of the Tocquevillian pragmatism of our country and because of American republicanism, which entailed commitment to the role of education (at every level) in promoting democracy. We did not intend, in our public institutions of higher education, to promote elitism, which we thought was an old world, aristocratic notion. Rather we sought a more broadly meritocratic university, one whose product would be the public good. And that continues to be the larger goal of public higher education, as manifested in such superb state university systems as you have here in the Commonwealth of Virginia. In other words, while George Mason may be a relatively new university, it is playing an important role in a long and distinguished tradition.

And so are each of you. I suppose you are too young to have heard many of the songs of the great Tom Lehrer, but one of his best is in point here. At the risk of endangering my welcome by the state authorities, I want to quote from "The Old Dope Peddler," of whom Lehrer says:

> Every evening you will find him,
> Around our neighborhood.
> It's the old dope peddler
> Doing well by doing good.

Now I want to assure both the parents and the cops in the audience that I am not urging you to sell drugs, but I want you to think about doing a riff on the Lehrer refrain – please, think about doing good by doing well. Let me try to explain what I mean.

Higher education in the United States has long been premised on the notion that general (or liberal) education ought to precede specialized (or professional) education. Liberal education means exposure to the great ideas of civilization (Aristotle, Tocqueville and Yogi Berra, for instance) and training in critical thinking. This is what normally gets tucked into the first couple of years of collegiate education. And it is very American, by the way, for liberal education is something that Europeans think belongs in what we would call secondary education. But we Americans then force students to specialize by "majoring" in some disciplinary or practical subject. The result is the achievement of a *baccalaureate* or B.A. degree, which certifies that the graduate is generally competent both for the workplace and for citizenship. Throughout all of the nineteenth century and much of the last century, the B.A. or its equivalent was all that a young person needed to be launched on his or her career. And for many young Americans, an undergraduate degree is still sufficient. This is particularly true for that increasing percentage of college students who major in a professional field – the proportion who major in arts and sciences fields (everything from philosophy to biology) is steadily declining.

But increasingly young (and not-so-young) Americans are finding that the B.S. or B.S. is not sufficient. For some this is a psychological discovery – they just sense that somehow a higher degree is necessary, and hope that it will magically translate into better employment prospects. For some this is a commitment to the sort of career that requires post-baccalaureate training and certification. And this means pursuing a graduate degree. Once again, this puts American students in a different place than their peers in Europe, who ordinarily receive their professional training during their three years of university. In the United States, more and more of you are opting for graduate work, and for a very wide range of reasons.

The PhDs among you are mostly headed for teaching and research careers. Those who want both teaching and research are looking for college and university jobs, but others will move into

business and industry, government or the non-profit sector. To some extent you will be sorted by your fields – the humanists will almost all hope to enter the academy, while natural and social scientists will have a much wider range of choice. Some of the Master's degree candidates among you will be looking for employment either in your specific area of study, or perhaps thinking of going on for further training (even a PhD). For others, there is simply more to your intellectual development than could be accomplished in the four years of college – your thirst for formal knowledge cannot be quenched. And good for you!

Many of you are now looking for jobs, as you must and should. I still remember when my own son, then earning a living as a library systems specialist while conducting a small orchestra in Boston, decided that he was probably not going to be able to earn his living as a conductor. He called one evening to announce that he had decided to "enter the family business," by which he meant that he would get a PhD (like his sister and me) and go into teaching. I have been in "the business" for more than fifty years and have enjoyed myself outrageously. The trick for all of us who pursue higher degrees is to find a field in which we can excel intellectually, to increase our chances of satisfying employment – and, I hope, something else. That "something else" can take a great many forms, of which one is the pure joy of learning, but let's just call it (as I already have) "doing good by doing well."

In part this is simply a question of attitude, the need to feel that we are accomplishing something of value beyond earning our salary check – although I am not putting down earned income. I started out in life in commodities futures, my father's business, but I did not last long because I could not make myself feel as though I was making any tangible social contribution. I define "social contribution" very broadly – widget makers are contributing to society, just as physicians are contributing. I am not a psychologist, but I feel sure that a fulfilling life requires some sense of giving to

others. Some careers are of course entirely built around such motivation, but I cannot imagine a satisfying career entirely devoid of it. And this is not a question of professionalization or job descriptions. Some physicians and teachers have a deep service motivation, for instance, while others are simply "doing a job." We all need to "do jobs." But I urge you to consider whether we do not all also need to serve in some meaningful sense?

There is increasing discussion of something usually called "civic engagement" in our colleges. This is usually taken to mean that undergraduates should be encouraged to do volunteer work in the local community, to tie some of their academic work to the concerns of the community, and to engage in non-academic activities with their fellow students. The notion is that such activity in college will engender civic commitment in college-educated adults, and thereby enhance prospects for democratic citizenship. I am enthusiastic about such an approach, and indeed I think there is no reason why it should not be equally encouraged in graduate school.

But what interests me more is the prospect for civic engagement ("doing good") in and through work. From this point of view it is less important what you do than how you do it. Any job can be done well, but there are two senses in which we can talk about doing a "good work." One is simply the sense of craftsmanship, that is, meeting the highest formal standards of a profession or field of employment, whatever it may be. But the other is the sense of making something more of your work, using it somehow to go beyond the job description. This is a topic that one of my very best former students has been thinking about for a long time, and I want to ask you to bear with me for a minute while I quote him, Prof. Howard Gardner of the Harvard School of Education:

> Whether we are executives or front-line workers, artists or scientists, physicians or lawyers, all of us would like to feel that we are carrying out **good work**. In our daily occupations, we want to carry out our **work** in expert fashion; and we would like as well to contribute to the common **good**. But carrying out **good work** is never easy. For example, those who are expert are often tempted to be selfish, to accumulate wealth, and to neglect the broader **good**; even those who strive to be constructive sometimes inadvertently injure others. It proves especially difficult to do **good work** when conditions are changing rapidly and unpredictably, and when the powers of the market are unrestrained.
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> Clearly, the commitment to pursue **good work** is not in itself a guarantor of success. Yet, the examples of **good** workers in various professions continue to inspire others, particularly the young. Moreover, **good** workers are often surprisingly successful in the long run. Most encouragingly, those with a passionate commitment to carry out **good work** are energized by **doing** so. The challenge of carrying out **work** that is both excellent and ethical is far more bracing than the pursuit of only one of these goals. Knowledge that one could pass the "mirror test" is reinforcing. The **good** worker can be buoyed even by a setback, because it often suggests a more promising move the next time. Jean Monnet, the French economist who inspired the European Union, once declared "I regard every defeat as an opportunity." This could be the slogan of every engaged and energized **good** worker.
> (Howard Gardner, “Are You Doing Good Work?” WORLD LINK, January 2002)

I cannot put it better than Gardner and Monnet. What is necessary is that you think about the goodness of the work for which the graduate degree you are about to receive qualifies you. Or, to put it more broadly, what is necessary is that you consider the goodness of the life that you are about to live. And what is therefore necessary (back to Aristotle) is that you know where you are going, lest you fail to get there (back to Yogi). Go forth, work hard, do good and do well. I wish you good luck and godspeed.