

Bren School Commencement Address 2009
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Chancellor Yang, Dean Melack, distinguished guests, faculty, graduates, family, and friends of the Bren School:

There aren't many events in life more joyful than commencement, and I'm deeply grateful for the invitation to share it with you today. In fact, any time I can wangle an invitation to come up here, for any reason, I'm deeply grateful. I get why you'd want to go to school here -- I really do. I'm having a harder time just at the moment understanding why you'd want to leave -- especially these days.

The Bren School is, in so many ways, "the right place to be at the right time": Environmental mission, rigorous curriculum, outstanding faculty and students, spectacular location -- even the building is LEED Platinum, one of the greenest, most sustainable buildings of its size anywhere in the country.

But most important: This institution brings together the disciplines we need to answer the greatest challenges of our time -- and to take advantage of the opportunities they present: Science, business, law, and public policy. As the great French philosopher Voltaire said so famously long ago, "If the Donald Bren School of Environmental Science and Management didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent it," and I think his words ring even truer today than they did in 1778, especially in the original French. ["Si L'Ecole Bren n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer."]

So, it's a privilege to be here -- and particularly to speak to this class of graduates, at this extraordinary moment in history.

You are a special group. Incessant texting, emailing, twittering, skypeing, surfing, facebooking, bbm'ing, pinging, and IM'ing -- even, I expect, at this very moment -- and still you've managed to accomplish great things:

- * No generation did more than yours to elect our first African American President, voting for Barack Obama by an astounding 66% to 32%.
- * No generation in half a century has shown a stronger commitment to public service -- in nearly every government-funded service program.
- * No generation has a greater capacity to build consensus for global progress, using new methods of communication that, at the click of a mouse, can educate, motivate, and organize people everywhere.
- * And, of course, as you know better than anyone, no generation has ever faced stiffer competition to get the education you've now completed.

For all this, congratulations -- to you and to your parents, so many of whom are here this morning, smiling from ear to ear -- proud of your success and giddy with relief that the years of writing big fat tuition checks may finally be over.

And, while I'm at it -- because commencement marks a new beginning, a time of anticipation and anxiety, a commencing of student loan repayments -- let me thank you in advance for everything you'll have to do to fix the mess you soon inherit. Because let's face it -- and you may be just a little concerned about this

yourselves – you're heading into a perfect storm of economic and environmental crisis.

In times like these "[t]he world demands the qualities of youth," said Senator Robert Kennedy, one of my great personal heroes assassinated in 1968, "not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease."

Today, more than ever, we need these qualities (and maybe a little anger) – at a time when, despite monumental problems, the audacity of hope has transformed our political landscape, and necessity has opened the door to a renaissance of opportunity to "do well by doing good."

Nowhere are these cross-currents of adversity and possibility more obvious than in the world of environmental policy. Nowhere are the stakes higher than in the race to heal our planet. "This is the great work of our age," said geologist Thomas Berry, "to move the human situation from a destructive relationship with the Earth to a creative one."

To Jesse Jackson, it's a moral imperative, like the civil rights movement was to his generation: "Unless I have the right to breathe, to drink good drinking water," he said, "no other right can be realized. Environmental justice is a fundamental right."

We know that, with time, the turmoil in our financial markets will recede. We know that, eventually, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will come to an end. We know that next season Jack Bauer will once again miraculously save the world in 24 Hours.

But not even Jack Bauer can head off the most destructive effects of our society's prosperity, from sea level rise and ocean acidification to crashing fish stocks and polluted cities.

There's nothing Jack Bauer can do to save life as we know it from the accelerating effects of atmospheric carbon and global warming. Only we can do that – by slashing our demand for fossil fuels and starving the petroleum addiction that threatens our security.

Let us not be blind to the difficulties, but let us not be blinded by those difficulties to our proven ability to meet the challenges of history when our survival requires it. Nobody has expressed this more forcefully than marine scientist Roger Payne: "The environmental crises we face," he said, "provide us with the most singular opportunity for greatness ever offered to any generation, in any civilization."

So here's to you, Class of 2009, because that's where you come in. Environmental justice, I believe, is the great work of your age. And saving the planet is the most singular opportunity for greatness of your generation. And I'll tell you why.

I'm an environmental lawyer. I get paid to find polluters and sue them. And if I can't sue them, I find some other way to make their lives difficult – not for the fun of it – well, sometimes it *is* fun -- but to make them stop, to call them to account, to force them to think about what they're doing to the rest of us and to the world we live in.

I've done this now for 30 years, and I've had some success in fighting powerful special interests, from the country's largest developers to multinational corporations to all types of government agencies, including the U.S. military.

But let's be clear: In my business, you can't win all the time; if you do, you're not trying hard enough, and I've lost some battles that really hurt. Jack Greenberg, cofounder of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, once said you're not a man until you've stood up to argue a case in the U.S. Supreme Court with all nine Justices against you. Well, I've had that experience, and, believe me, they were not about to let me phone a friend.

So how did I get there?

When I graduated from Columbia Law School, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. But I was quite sure whose side I wanted to be on.

My first job as a lawyer was a one-year fellowship in 1980 at a public interest law firm in Los Angeles – a time-limited job with no possibility of renewal. I got paid the princely sum of \$12,000 a year, and I worked day and night. Almost immediately, I inherited a case that no one else wanted – a hopeless challenge to a nuclear power plant, already 98% built, at Diablo Canyon, near San Luis Obispo. As it turned out, not only had PG&E built the plant virtually on top of a 7.2 magnitude earthquake fault, but when they were forced to retrofit the plant, they flipped the design blueprints by mistake and installed the seismic supports backwards! I am not kidding! Four years of litigation later, including a successful run to the Supreme Court, and that one-year fellowship had become a permanent job.

My first case after joining the NRDC in 1990 was for the Mothers of East Los Angeles, a church-based organization of low income, politically powerless women determined to protect their community from one of those projects that “has to go somewhere” California's first large-scale commercial toxic waste incinerator was about to be built within a quarter mile of their homes, schools, and churches – approved by government regulators without even the courtesy of an environmental impact report. I remember vividly how, at court hearings, the mothers would show up, some with their young children, and file quietly into the court room, slowly filling every seat, listening to every word, speaking volumes by their silence. There was no denying their personal stake, no denying the environmental injustice that was being done to them. And when we won -- when the incinerator was defeated in court – the joy and empowerment they experienced (and I got to share with them) were indescribable.

I have lots of stories and too little time today to tell them. But my own outrage at environmental injustice like this, to people or places that I love, is what got me started and has kept me going, year after year. I'm certain that, in your own lives, it touches you too, and I hope it makes you mad.

And speaking of places that I love, did you know that just a few hours from here in Sequoia National Park, during most of the year, you can walk in groves of 2000-year old giant redwoods, in almost complete solitude and silence?

Did you know that, just off our southern California coast right now, among pods of dolphin, you can watch blue whales feeding, the largest animal in the history of the world – larger even than any dinosaur?

Or you can visit San Miguel Island, just 20 miles west in the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, and see 30,000 elephant seals on the beach at one time – and be the only person there!

These sights – just a stone's throw from here -- are some of the most extraordinary anywhere in the world. I've gotten to share them with my three young children. The question is: Will you get to share them with yours? Will your children get to share them with theirs?

The answer is up to you.

Or you can leave it to the crazy agency in Orange County on a crusade right now to build a massive toll road from top to bottom through California's fifth most popular state park, at San Onofre State Beach. You may have heard of it -- you may even have been there -- because the park serves about 2.5 million visitors each year, and Trestles Beach is world-renowned as California's "cathedral of surfing." This isn't a toll road through a state park; it's a toll road instead of a state park, and it makes me angry. What about you?

This is the kind of trade-off we can no longer afford – a false choice between our quality of life today and the environmental resources our children need tomorrow. And *this* is the critical problem you'll have to solve:

Coal and oil companies, and the utilities that burn these fossil fuels, generate the power we need to keep the lights on.

But not without leveling mountains in Appalachia, polluting our coastal waters, and generating greenhouse gasses that overheat the planet.

Developers build homes that all of us want.

But not without grinding up scarce open space, depleting our water supplies, and contributing to the greatest extinction crisis the world has seen since dinosaurs walked the Earth.

Auto manufacturers make cars that we like to drive – with great stereo systems and voice-activated door locks.

But not without perpetuating a petroleum dependence that fouls our air and threatens our national security.

We barely survived eight years of an Administration in Washington more friendly to these kind of trade-offs than any in my lifetime, if not in the history of this country.

And it makes no sense.

I grew up in Riverside, a city at that time with the most polluted air in the country.

I remember summer afternoons not being able to take a deep breath.

I remember the terrible oil spill here in Santa Barbara in 1969.

I remember Randy Newman's song about the Cuyahoga River catching fire and burning for three days – "Burn on, big river, burn on."

The fact is we've made great progress during the last 40 years *only because* of laws like the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and others.

Rather than a target for trade-offs, those laws should be a priority for prosecution, because the environment is a nonpartisan issue. It's not a question of Republicans or Democrats, of right or left; it's a question of right or wrong.

We don't protect the forests and streams and birds and fish just for their own sake. We protect them for ourselves, for our children, and for our communities. They embody our hope and our optimism for the future -- as Emily Dickinson so beautifully expressed it, "hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul."

Think about this 500 year test, proposed by one of the world's great scientists:

Imagine people living 500 years from now. And ask yourself what it is they'll care about most in terms of what we do today.

I doubt they'll care about red states or blue states.

They won't remember OctoMom, Gossip Girl, or the number of games Manny Ramirez was suspended and why.

I expect they'll care about the best of our music and art and literature -- or at least I hope they will.

But my guess is that, above all else, they'll care about what we did today to give them a healthy planet --

- A world with fresh water and clean air.
- Cities where children can grow up free from lead poisoning.
- Oceans that sustain thriving fish populations and seafood we can eat without fear of mercury contamination.

And, to be clear, I'm not suggesting that each of you needs to make the environment your life's work. In fact, if there's one piece of advice I have for you today, it is to find your passion, find your outrage, follow it, and the rest will take care of itself.

But here at the Bren School, where I know I'm preaching to the choir, you're already environmental experts [-- in fisheries management, energy and water policy, eco-entrepreneurship, nanotechnology, adaptive management -- to cite just a few examples from your recent group projects].

You've been trained to develop multi-disciplinary solutions to multi-dimensional problems -- to avoid the false choices that have been our downfall.

You *will* be our future environmental leaders -- as regulators, lawyers, scientists, engineers, teachers, corporate executives, or elected officials.

You *will* find opportunities to ride the rising tide of economic investment in environmental technology, renewable energy, alternative fuels, and green building.

But no matter what you decide to do -- and that may still be an open question for most of you -- consider this African proverb:

"If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." In our race to save the planet, we need both speed *and* solidarity of purpose. We will all fail unless we all succeed -- because protecting the environment is a community endeavor, a collective determination to preserve the natural resources that sustain us all. That's one of the things I learned from the Mothers of East Los Angeles.

From the mundane to the grandiose -- from choosing a job to raising children to joining an environmental group to buying a fuel efficient car to voting for candidates who take the environment seriously – *everyone* must understand and act like the environment matters, and expect the same from others.

Demand that our leaders prioritize in the right way, ensuring that policies across the board are environmentally sustainable and grounded in the precautionary principle. And if they don't, then vote for someone else.

If you have children, teach them that environmental justice is a fundamental right, no matter where you live, what color your skin or how much money you've got.

Don't just show them the beauty of a California beach at sunset – but teach them how fragile it is.

Scientists may disagree about how much time remains to prevent an irreversible shift in our global climate, but whether it's ten years, 15 years, or a generation, you have no time to lose.

And you already know where to begin: Renewable energy, mass transit, more efficient cars, water reuse, conservation, smart growth, recycling – the strategies aren't rocket science if only you have the political will to use them.

And this is just the tip of the iceberg of emerging technological innovation.

Let it not be said of this generation, in the words of T.S. Eliot, that “[t]hese were a decent people. Their only monument: the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls.”

And let us not be swayed by the advice of that great 20th Century sage Homer Simpson, when his son Bart was having a hard time learning something new: “If something's hard, son, then it's not worth doing!”

With your degree today, you've already embraced the challenge, but your most important work lies ahead. Whether for love of our natural resources or anger at their desecration, I have no doubt you'll defend the health of our planet more vigorously, more relentlessly than any generation before you.

Graduates of the Class of 2009, congratulations on your success thus far.

And remember this: “The environmental crises we face provide *you* with the most singular opportunity for greatness ever offered to any generation, in any civilization.”

Seize that opportunity, save the planet – and never forget to enjoy the ride.

Thank you, and good luck.