

Commencement Talk  
Georgiana Bruce Kirby School (June 8, 2003)

David G. Sweet

I want to thank the graduating seniors of the Georgiana Bruce Kirby School, & your teachers & your parents, for having invited an outsider to come here & speak on this important & happy occasion. Let me congratulate all of you, working together as I know you have, for having navigated successfully the sometimes rough waters of adolescence to bring this group of twenty very promising young people safely to the shore of responsible adulthood.

I know that many of you graduates have seen some hard times already, thanks to serious illness or other kinds of problems in your families; I know that you have experienced real ups & downs in your own personal lives. That's what life is like. But all of you have been privileged to receive a good education in the company of good friends, & in a well-governed community that cares about you; & this gives you all a tremendous leg-up in a country & world that deny those opportunities to most people. Most of you, I'm told, are headed off already to good colleges; the rest will follow soon enough; & there is reason to hope & be confident that all of you will do pretty well at whatever you put your minds to. You'll learn to do good work in the world; you'll keep your bodies fit & your minds lively; you'll have a lot of fun from time to time; you'll be respectful & responsible in relation to the natural world that surrounds us; you'll find love & companionship & community; you'll make your own special contributions to your communities; & you'll pass on good values to your children.

Now, speaking as a gray-haired, sometimes tired & concerned but still active & optimistic senior citizen of our community & our country, I want you to know that I've come here today not simply to congratulate you, & wish you success in your future endeavors, but also to extend a warm welcome & an urgent exhortation. I want to welcome you into citizenship, into the privileges & also the responsibilities of full adult membership in this remarkable & potentially democratic republic of ours. I want to exhort you to take those responsibilities seriously, & get to them right away if you haven't already.

America, I believe, is still a beacon of hope in the world & it is still a land of unlimited promise. We have no king here, & no rigid class structure. There are public libraries everywhere; & if you look for them there are still some remnants of a free press & some independent radio working alongside the new & still-forming world of the Internet to keep us free. But America is also still very much a work in progress. Nothing is finished about our country; nothing works just right; we have lots to learn from other countries that do some important things better than we do; nothing here is living up to its full potential. So there is a whole lot for every American to do; & speaking for the more seasoned, & unfortunately sometimes jaded or discouraged or even cynical adults here in the room, I want you know that the rest of us Americans desperately need what you folks can contribute.

We need for you to keep yourselves well informed, & to take the political process seriously. Most Americans today, whatever our educational background, don't do either of those things. We focus more on our comforts & entertainment than on the society & world around us; we don't know much & we aren't even embarrassed to admit it; most of us can't see how an election is going to change things one way or another, so we don't even bother to vote. You can't have a working democracy of poorly informed people who don't bother to participate in the conduct of public affairs.

We need for you to think clearly & independently about what kind of a society you want. We need for you to talk with one another about that subject year in & year out, & come

up with your own good ideas about what to do & how to do it. Then we need for you to work hard alongside other people, including some of us older adults, to achieve those goals. Should our society offer a high-quality education, high-quality health care & high-quality recreation to everybody, or only to those who can afford it? Should we rely primarily on military might in the conduct of our foreign relations, or rely more on collaboration and diplomacy? Should we be an empire, or a free republic that is a good neighbor to everybody? Should we send people to prison for punishment, or for rehabilitation and a rapid return to society? Is drug abuse a police & military problem, or a public health problem? Should everything be run like a private business for profit, or should some things be run by civil servants for the public good? Should elections be publicly financed, or should high office go to the highest bidder? We all have our own answers to these questions & others like them. I'm not here to foist my answers off on you; but I am here to entreat you to take such questions seriously, & to commit yourselves to working hard with other people to find answers to them. That is what a real democracy is all about.

Our democracy & our economy, like a lot of American teenagers -- people less fortunate than yourselves, are in deep trouble right now. Anybody who has taken a high school civics or economics class can see it. The system of checks & balances is way out of whack; the civil liberties guaranteed by the Bill of Rights are under attack; the separation of Church & State is hard for us even to remember. We buy more than we sell, & we run a huge trade deficit every year. We run up our credit cards until there's no hope of paying them. As a nation we borrow to pay the bills instead of collecting taxes to pay them, which means that people like yourselves will be left holding the bag a few years hence. When folks in government flat out lie to us about critical matters of state, we aren't even surprised to & don't stand up & scream bloody murder. People have been convinced that government has nothing to do with their lives, and that they can't do anything about it anyway. I think that Americans can do much better than all that. As a citizen, I'm doing myself whatever I can think of to help fix the mess; & I'm sure that most of the other older adults here present are doing the same. That is what all of us need

from you. No more, and no less, than the best you have to offer as well educated & responsible, free citizens of the United States of America.

If you take me up on this challenge, & if you're looking around for examples of how to behave as citizens in your own time & places, you can hardly do better than to look into the details of the life & work of Georgiana Bruce Kirby. While getting ready to give this talk I took some time to do that myself; & I was amazed by what I found. She came to this country as a poor immigrant at the age of twenty, with very little formal education but a great commitment to learning. She worked as a domestic servant, governess, prison matron & schoolteacher; she lived in a utopian community for four years; she got deeply involved with the abolitionist & early feminist movements of her day; she sailed around the Horn to California & came to live on a ranch just up the hill from here in 1850, when the rough & ready Anglo American community in Santa Cruz was just getting started. She & her friend Eliza Farnham learned to farm that property, working & riding horses with pants on, which gave scandal to their neighbors, & they worked side by side to build their own houses up there when most so-called "respectable" American women were trussed up in corsets. Then they both got married, & Georgiana – who always viewed her husband as a good friend & partner rather than as her lord & master -- bore & raised five children while running her farm & garden & continuing her lifelong work as a political agitator & writer of articles for the newspapers on matters of public concern such as abolishing slavery & obtaining the right of women to vote. Reading about her today, it is hard to imagine a better American citizen than she was.

So go forth & plunge into the wonderful adult lives that await you, & along the way please honor your school & our community by being like Georgiana: work hard & carve your own way, but always hold tight to your ideals, challenge authority, work alongside others for the common good, & make it your business to do some great thing – something that leaves the world just a little bit better than it was when you came in.