

## **Merrill College Commencement Speech**

**June 9, 2001**

Prof. David G. Sweet

You people have accomplished something very remarkable: you've completed (or almost completed!) the requirements for graduation from a great university. You have your parents to thank for this, and your teachers, and the taxpayers of California. But mostly this is your accomplishment, and it's one that should make you proud.

I can imagine how you're feeling, because I'm "graduating" myself today after 30 years of teaching at UC Santa Cruz. Like you I'm proud to have learned a lot during my stay here, and sad to see it end; like you I'm looking forward to meeting the challenges and grasping the opportunities of a new life. We've earned this happy moment! Let's enjoy it to the fullest with our families and our friends.

But before the party starts, I want to ask you on behalf of your parents, your teachers, the taxpayers and the rest of the human race not to let this accomplishment go to your heads.

College graduates are luckier and better educated than most people; but we are neither smarter nor better-looking, nor more valuable to society, nor more entitled to big money, nor more deserving of the respect of other people than anybody else. What you've earned here is not privilege, though some of that may come your way, but responsibility.

Most of you will be going on to full-time work or to graduate school in the months to come; & life will soon teach you, if it hasn't already, to do your work responsibly, to behave responsibly towards family and friends, and to live responsibly as citizens within limits prescribed by the law. But the responsibility I'm urging you to take up is of a higher kind. It's one that our economy and our society will not demand of you, and may even try to discourage. It's one that will require the strength of your whole moral being to sustain.

That higher responsibility is the responsibility to do your work and live your lives, whatever other people may say, in a spirit of active and uncompromising, day by day solidarity with other human beings – with all other human beings on every continent, with people who have struggled in the past, people who are alive and struggling today, and especially with people who are still to come. We are here to serve, not to be served. We are here to practice love and respect, stewardship and solidarity, not power and greed.

Most of you were born somewhere around 1980, along with tens of millions of other human beings. All of you, and they, were beautiful and loveable babies, with more or less the same potential for growth and play and education, for learning to live good lives. But millions of those agemates of yours are dead now because of preventable violence, preventable disease or preventable hunger. Many more are severely handicapped for life by the traumatic experiences they have faced already; lots are in prison, especially here in the U.S.; more are drowning their sorrows in addiction, or battering themselves in some

hopeless, interminable war. Only a minority of your agemates are healthy, well fed, well housed and gainfully employed; even fewer are graduating from a university. But those other human beings are all of a piece with you and with me; and if we have come to understand things properly, what is happening to them is happening to us as well.

Years ago a relative of mine in Mexico City was reading in a newspaper that the U.S. was going to punish any countries that joined in the effort by the OPEC to raise the world price of oil. “Carajo,” he said, “estos gringos ya no caben en el mundo!” “Dammit! These pretentious Yankees can’t fit in this world.” What he was noticing about us, as a people and as a government, was the opposite of a spirit of solidarity with other human beings. He was talking about the attitude Latin Americans call prepotencia, that we think we are bigger and stronger and better and know all the answers, and are therefore entitled to more attention and a bigger share of everything than anybody else. College graduates in this country, if we don’t watch out, tend to suffer from that attitude a lot.

The beautiful word “solidarity” has a curious history. Dictionaries define it as “a feeling of togetherness resulting from common interests, sympathies or goals,” or “consensus & like-mindedness,” or “cooperation & mutual dependence.” Trade unionists have made it a principle of support for each other’s struggles, like when they refuse to cross picket lines, or lock arms and sing the hymn “Solidarity Forever” when faced with repression.

For me the meaning starts with the ongoing Solidarity Movement to mobilize public opinion in this country against U.S. military intervention abroad, and in support of the

universal principles of human rights and sovereignty. Our righteous movement has accomplished a lot over the years; but it hasn't always been good at listening or being accountable to the people it aims to support. As mostly educated Americans we've been very slow in the Solidarity Movement to learn from those people, and bad about keeping them in mind once their struggles drop out of the newspapers.

What we need to change and heal this sick world is a solidarity that is bigger, and deeper & more sustainable than that. A solidarity that is rooted in the heart and in the individual lifestyle as well as in political work. A solidarity that is steady and unpretentious, that as the slogan goes "lives simply so that others may simply live." This is the solidarity of midwives with women giving birth, the solidarity of real teachers with young people, the solidarity of the new social movements everywhere that strive to obtain just the minimum requirements of a healthy life for families and communities. The solidarity of the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina who say they're not interested in power, but only in strength – the strength that it takes to sustain a loving struggle for justice that reaches out to people everywhere, for as long as we live.

Some people are not cut out for activism; most people are not cut out for risking their lives in the struggle for justice for all. But all of us are quite capable of practicing love, and respect, and solicitude, and cooperation with other human beings of every color and belief, whether nearby or far away. We are capable of sustaining that spirit of active solidarity in whatever kind of work we choose to do. We can help every day in unspectacular small ways to make life a little bit easier and happier and more hopeful for

some other people some of the time; we can get out and vote according to the dictates of our consciences instead of for the lesser evil; and we can give our wholehearted moral and financial support to those who organize full-time for bigger kinds of change.

That is what Merrill College was set up 33 years ago to help train you and help you to discover a calling to do; that is what your parents and teachers and the taxpayers have hoped that you would learn to do as citizens of this country and this world, whether we've known how to tell you so clearly or not. And that is what we are counting on you to do with this education you've worked so hard to acquire. Solidarity forever! Go forth, and multiply, and make your very different marks on the world. But do it like the best women and men you are capable of being, in ways that – not so much publicly as deep in our hearts – will make all of you, and all of the rest of us, truly and gratefully, lastingly proud!