

Penn State Commencement Speech by Head Football Coach Joe Paterno

June 16, 1973

It is a great honor for me to have this opportunity to talk with you on a most important occasion for you and for Penn State.

When Dr. Oswald called me to his office a few months ago and, on behalf of your student committee, asked me to be your speaker, to be honest, I was thrilled. However, I wasn't sure I should do it. I wondered whether it was good for the University or whether it was fair to you. Could I contribute something which would make this commencement a more meaningful experience for you?

Some of you have every right to feel let down that after four years of hard work, you have to listen to a coach at your graduation. Furthermore, what would outsiders think of this great University, having such an unlettered individual represent its academic community? But in spite of these and other misgivings, I accepted. I accepted because I realize that in a day when materialism is rampant, many of you felt that my interest in doing other things besides making money has in some way helped you to reaffirm your deal of a life of service, of dignity, and a life of meaning which goes beyond financial success.

Again, the fact that there has been generous praise from many places for my decision to remain at Penn State, made me wonder just how strong, at any price, has become our commitment to materialism and that perhaps I could say something to you which could put things in perspective. However, I assure that in stepping outside of my role as a football coach, I do it with great trepidation and humility. Who knows, I may even be the only commencement speaker this year who doesn't give his opinion on Watergate. Although I do want to make one comment on President Nixon's role in the affair, I'd like to know, how could the president know so little about Watergate in 1973 and so much about college football in 1969?

Now allow me to make some observations.

I chuckle at people who blame the "system" for our problems, just as I laugh at those who claim that we should have blind faith in our government and our institutions. What is this notorious "system"? In my game, people talk about offensive formations as the cure-all. After we lost to Oklahoma in the Sugar Bowl, many people asked, "Are you going to switch to the wishbone formation?" Believe me, it isn't the plays or the offensive system, which gets the job done. It is the quality of the players which makes the formation effective. And, it is you who make the organization work for you and you who will become victims of this system, if you fail to execute

your responsibilities to yourself and to your fellow human beings. You have a part to play and, if you loaf or quit, don't sit back and complain that our method is no good. If each of us is easily seduced by expediency, by selfishness, by ambition regardless of cost to our principles, then the spectacle of Watergate will surely mark the end of this grand experiment in democracy.

One of the tragedies of Watergate is to see so many bright young men, barely over thirty, who have so quickly prostituted their honor and decency in order to get ahead, to be admired, to stay on the "team." These same young people within the short period of the last ten years sat in convocations such as this. They were ready to change the world. They didn't trust the over-thirty generation. I warn you – don't underestimate the world – it can corrupt quickly and completely. And heed Walter Lippman who wrote several years ago: "It is a mistake to suppose that there is satisfaction and the joy of life in a self-indulgent generation, in one interested primarily in the pursuit of private wealth and private pleasure and private success – we are very rich but we are not having a good time – for our life though it is full of things, is empty of the kind of purpose and effort that gives to life its flavor and meaning."

What Lippman wants us to realize is that money alone will not make you happy: Success without honor is an unseasoned dish, it will satisfy your hunger, but it won't taste good.

This is why I enjoy coaching at Penn State so much. We set high goals for our people. My squad even has to listen to me quote Browning who said: "A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for." We strive to be No. 1. We work hard to achieve our goals and when Saturday comes and we walk on the grass in this stadium, we stand as a team. We tighten up our belts. We look across at our opponents. We say, come on, let's go, let's see how good you are, let's play. We are ready. We play with enthusiasm and recklessness. We aren't afraid to lose. If we win, great, wonderful – and the alumni are happy for another week. But win or lose, it is the competition which gives us pleasure.

It is being involved in a common cause which brings us joy and memories which endure in teammates. It is making our very best effort, that we have stretched to the very limit of our ability, which makes us bigger men and more able to stretch again: to reach even high as we undertake new challenges.

I'm sure that it is obvious to all of you that you are going out into a fragmented, disillusioned, and often times, confused society – a society which has promised more than it is now willing or perhaps able to deliver to our minority groups and, among others, to our poverty victims. There is corruption, fear, mistrust, lack of leadership, unequal justice, privileged economic groups, and all the abuses you would expect in a nation without consistent direction – in a country without a common purpose and a people unsure of moral commitments. We are experiencing the frustrations of a society which is desperately struggling with itself, afraid that at any moment, it will be ripped apart by deep-rooted racism which, regardless of all our enlightened medication,

persists as a cancer which defies cure. We cannot get rid of a war we do not want to fight. We cannot wash our hands of the blood that has been shed when we only wish peace and freedom for everybody. We are a decent people struggling with ourselves.

I read in The Washington Post last Sunday a quote from Dr. Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish scholar. Commenting on Watergate, he said: "When I first arrived in America 30 years ago, I discovered a country constantly struggling for its soul. I suspect you grow weary of the struggle and occasionally wish for the peace that comes with not caring. But your ideals are deeply rooted in your life, preached, taught, and exhorted until they are part of the air you children breathe. Even in your failures to live up to that idealism, you salute it. You still believe that high principles would rule even when they do not. Wait brother, America will return to first things."

Wait brother, America will return to first things?

Hopefully, we will return to first things but it will not happen quickly or easily, and I would mislead you if I told you we are close to solving our problems or that I believe that this group in its lifetime can make this world perfect. Perfect is an awesome word. It denotes something that we may not even recognize when we see it or have it. So you may not make our society perfect but you can make it better and I guess it follows that first, you must get better before you can get perfect. We like to tell our football team, do the little things right and the big things will take care of themselves. Don't look for the touchdown run all the time: Think about hitting in there tough play after play and then, boom, all of a sudden, a big play will present itself. I remember telling one of our quarterbacks who was being promoted as the pre-season All-American quarterback when he asked what he had to do to make it, I told him, "Just play your game, do all the little things right, don't think about spectacular plays, and if you have the ability and a little luck, the big plays will come and you will be an All-American."

W.H. Auden said it beautifully when he wrote on the death of Sigmund Freud: "Everyday there die among us those who were doing us some good and knew it was never enough but hoped to improve a little by living."

Live your life so that by some little thing, you will improve our world just by living. But be realistic enough as you continue your adventure in life to understand that regardless of how strong you and how smart you are, you will at times become discouraged. The problems we face are agonizingly complex because they ultimately deal with people and their institutions.

And, you must have infinite patience, much understanding, and above all, great maturity. Our forefathers who carved out this country had blind faith in America. They had no obligations to the rest of the world and they had only to be concerned with what was best for their nation. They had never been beaten and they had supreme confidence. Our state of mind is different. We cannot morally escape our responsibility to the rest of the world and we can never again do what

is right just for America. We will never again have a supreme confidence that everything we do is right – not after Vietnam and Kent State. Not after assassinations of Martin Luther King and John Kennedy, not after the death of Bobby Kennedy, and not after Watergate. But this doesn't mean we can be less decisive than our forefathers.

We must always act but when we are wrong, we must be mature enough to realize it and act accordingly. This is where greatness lies and national frustrations end. We must be mature enough to admit we didn't win in Vietnam, that we don't really have peace with honor, that we can't force all of our citizens to love each other – then we can stop tearing ourselves apart. We shall act, and we shall act with good intentions. Hopefully, we will often be right, but at times, we will be wrong. When we are, let us admit it and immediately try to right the situation. Our country right or wrong. Yes. But love her enough, respect her enough that when she is wrong, we stand bigger for admitting it.

There is another thing I tell my team. I tell them to keep hustling, go all out on every play no matter how bad things look – because if you keep hustling, something good will happen. A familiar cry up and down our sideline when things are going badly is: “Keep hustling, something good will happen” and usually, it does.

So keep hustling. You'll do all right. Enjoy yourselves. Enjoy life. Have some fun. Our squad enjoys kidding me because on a nice day before a game, I like to walk into the locker room and say, “Boy, what a day – oh, to be young again.” I tell them—enjoy the game, you will only get to play so many in your life. The same goes for you, because you see misery and inequality and frustrations around you. Is this a reason to commit yourself to a miserable existence? That's nonsense. Do your best. Maybe you will be the uncommon man who can do more than anyone, but in any case, do as those two great losers in life, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, did, “Have a hell of a good time doing it.”

Let me end on a personal note. We have loved you because you have given us our challenge, our joy of living. You have inspired us to stretch. You have disrupted our comfortable thinking. You have made us re-evaluate, think again about our ideals and our principles. You have made us look again at our souls.

We hope you have loved each other because a little bit of you is inside one another. John Steinback said in *The Grapes of Wrath*: “Maybe man doesn't own his own soul, only a piece of a big man.”

I cannot adequately describe to you the love that permeates a good football team – a love of one another. Perhaps as one of my players said: “We grow together in love – hating the coach.”

But to be in a locker room before a big game and to gather a team and to look at grown men with tears in their eyes, huddling close to each...reaching out to be part of each other...to look into strong faces which say "If we can only do it today"...to be with aggressive, ambitious people who have lost themselves in something bigger than they are – this is what living is all about.

We have shared four years together, years we will never forget, and we hope this short journey has made us all a little better.

We wish you godspeed and we wish you good luck, but most of all, we wish you peace.