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The Value of an Open Mind in a Fast Changing World

President Natalicio . . . Thank you very much for your kind introduction, and for inviting me to join you.

I feel honored to be a part of this moment of pride and satisfaction for the graduates and their families here at “The Don.”

I imagine that most, if not all of you graduates -- when you are not thinking about the festivities to follow the commencement -- are giving some thought to the future . . . wondering where it will lead you . . . pondering perhaps what your careers will be like . . . and whether your ambitions will be fulfilled.

You have far to go . . . on a journey that we all hope will be as exciting as it is long . . . as satisfying as it is exciting . . . and as rewarding emotionally and intellectually . . . as it is materially.

Now, long journeys require preparation. And I would suggest that, in a very real sense, your years at this great university were intended to do exactly that . . . get you in shape, condition you, prepare you for the future.

Preparing for the future has never been simple, if only because we never know what it will bring.

But how do you prepare for the future these days -- when the pace of change has become so hectic and relentless, and promises to become even more so as time goes on. ?

Of course, to do well in one's work requires some basic tools and discipline.

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But, I think the most important preparation for the fast-changing future ahead of us is to cultivate an open mind.

I can almost guarantee you that some parts of your journey will be a piece of cake.

But then there will be times when you'll wonder how you're going to make it, and maybe even shed a tear or two.

The people who make the most of the happy times, and of the sad times as well, are those who have prepared themselves well . . . those whose minds are open to all the possibilities and opportunities so evident in the best, and so hidden in the worst of times.

### Open Minds and Diversity

Keeping an open mind is one of those clichés that people often toss around. But when you look at it more deeply, you find some fundamental wisdom.

To appreciate what we mean by an open mind, just think of what it means to have a closed mind.

The closed mind is narrow, its range limited to what is familiar and comfortable. It clings to the status quo, and is threatened by changing conditions in a changing world.

A closed mind looks at change and sees disruption, looks at disruption and sees peril, looks at peril and flees from opportunity.

An open mind, on the other hand, looking at reality in full, sees change as one of life's cues, signaling that it's time to move on and move forward.

Sometimes, life throws you a curve ball and gives you no choice but to change and adapt.

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My parents found that the store they had built from nothing was being taken from them by the new Castro regime. I guess my parents could have remained as employees of the state, working in the business they had once owned.

Not surprisingly, they decided it was time for the whole family to leave Cuba and, before I knew it, I found myself in Chicago, speaking a language totally different from the one I had grown up with, and experiencing temperatures very different from Havana's balmy climate.

At least I landed in a city with two major league baseball teams.

Being forced to leave your home may be an extreme example of change. Nevertheless, it is symbolic of the constant changes many people experience in their lives, often when they least anticipate them.

But maybe “constant” isn’t the right word either.

Our times aren’t characterized by **constant** change so much as a constantly **increasing** pace of change -- change at all levels -- on the job, in the economy, in society as a whole.

These days, we have very little choice but to open our minds to change. In fact, the open mind may be the only way to survive and thrive in the modern world.

For example, not very long ago, the few women who were in the work force were generally to be found only in certain positions. Women were relegated to posts that were thought of as “women’s” jobs.

Never a doctor, always a nurse. Occasionally, a lawyer. And never an engineer.

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In fact, at one point, few women were to be found on the faculties of our major universities. And, if you wanted to find a woman university president, you had to ~~look in a certain area~~ ~~and~~ ~~gratifying~~ evidence that that is no longer true of higher education.

And who knows, President Natalicio?

Some day perhaps one of the few remaining male preserves will give way, and a woman will become Commissioner of Major League Baseball, although, since I hold similar aspirations, we do need to talk about that.

Today, thankfully, we find increasing numbers of women lawyers, physicians, engineers, and business executives. The chief executive officer of one of the top computer companies is a woman, as is the CEO of one of the most successful Internet firms.

Truly, I think one of the things we, in this country, can feel proudest of is the progress we have made in opening an increasing number of minds to the value of diversity.

These days, for example, the business world more and more sets aside gender, religion, race, national origin, sexual orientation -- all those accidents of birth and genetics -- in favor of talent and skill.

Not what you are but what you want to accomplish . . . not where you come from but where you want to go . . . not how much you have, but how much you have to offer . . . these are the things that count now.

In the United States, minds have probably never been more open to what constitutes an American, and that is probably the primary reason our country occupies positions of world leadership at so many levels.

Our openness is why we have many competitors, but few real rivals.

### Open Minds and Good Cooking

The open mind is a liberating force, not just in critical life choices, but in changing styles, preferences . . . and tastes.

For many, many years “serious” cooking meant French cooking.

And there is no question that French food has always been among the most sophisticated -- not to say delicious-- in the world and that French chefs undergo the most rigorous education and training before practicing their art.

To think “serious” cooking was to think French . . . Larousse Gastronomique . . . the Bible of French cooking.

And to aspire to be a great cook was to study at Cordon Bleu in Paris and walk in the footsteps of the great Escoffier . . . the DaVinci of French cooking.

That is until one of my personal heroes came on the scene. Some of you may have heard of Julia Child.

In the 1960s, she wrote several highly successful bestsellers on French cooking, and had a very popular cooking show on TV.

I discovered Julia Child while a student at the University of Chicago in the 1960s.

I was rooming with three other students, and we alternated the cooking duties, each taking a turn cooking for the others.

Don't ask me how it happened, but it wasn't long before the four of us transformed cooking from a necessity for survival to a competitive sport.

Each of us began trying to outdo the rest, producing increasingly complex and sophisticated meals. Julia Child and her wonderful cookbooks became one of our competitive weapons -- our play book, so to speak.

While Julia Child started out writing **French** cookbooks, she soon went beyond that and in the process helped redefine serious cooking.

She felt you could apply the kind of superb cooking techniques and cooking discipline developed by the French to any kind of cuisine and produce great food.

Whether it was pizza, barbecued chicken, or paellas, on the one hand . . . or quenelles, coq au vin and Veal Orloff, on the other, Julia Child didn't care. As far as she was concerned, the right technique and care would make it infinitely better, which is how she came to write some fourteen books on cooking.

That last thing you'd associate with Thanksgiving Day is French cooking, yet for years, I have been making my family's Thanksgiving turkey from a Julia Child recipe.

I think Julia, by being open to all the possibilities, started her own French Revolution and spread gastronomic excellence beyond the borders of one country.

After Julia Child, good cooking was no longer synonymous with French food alone.

Now, I do not mean to create an international incident with our allies, and imply that Julia Child, an American, single-handedly revolutionized French cooking.

Serious diplomatic repercussions might follow, given how justifiably passionate the French are about food. After all, imagine how we would feel if France started lecturing us on the proper way to play our national pastime . . . Baseball.

Many French chefs participated in this cooking revolution, especially those involved with what became known as "nouvelle cuisine." Nevertheless, I think the rise in the quality of cooking in the US is attributable, in no small part, to Julia's throwing open the kitchen doors to good cooking no matter what kind of food you were working with, especially in her very popular cooking programs on public television

Predictably, good cooking in the United States, even reflects the diversity I mentioned a moment ago.

Italian, Mexican, Chinese food -- along with dozens of other cuisines -- are all as American as apple pie. And some are even fusing together in a culinary version of the melting pot.

Julia's revolution in good cooking . . . the acceptance of other people's foods . . . there's something hospitable in that . . . something welcoming . . . something reflective of an open mind, and an open spirit as well.

### Open minds and Careers

I would be willing to bet that, when she was cooking on television in the 1960s, Julia would sometimes wonder how she came to be doing that.

I'm sure she didn't graduate from college thinking: I'll master the art of French cooking and go on television. When she graduated from college, in the 1930's, the only place you found television was in the research labs.

Only after World War II, almost ten years after her own graduation from college, did her future begin to unfold.

She moved to Paris and decided to attend the great French cooking school, Cordon Bleu.

Then in the early 1960s, she saw television as an opportunity to popularize French cooking, and reach many more people than could be reached with her cookbooks.

Nothing meticulously planned. Just an open mind seeing opportunity

She and the others of that generation lived through a time of profound upheaval. But I venture to say that you are walking out of this university today into a world that changes faster day-in and day-out than at any time in history.

And perhaps in no area does the world change faster than in my own field of information technology, where I am sure many of you will be seeking to build careers, either directly or in areas heavily influenced by the advent of computers.

As information technologies get more and more powerful and less and less expensive, they are permeating every aspect of business, society, education, government and our personal lives.

On top of that, the Internet has come along to connect all of that technology and, in the process, link everyone and everything.

Over the next years, we will see whole career fields completely redefined, and new ones created.

Digital publishing, e-commerce, and music technology are examples of brand new disciplines that did not exist until recently.

Life Sciences is a brand new, emerging discipline that promises to revolutionize health care through the analysis of vast amounts of information.

Some of that information will come from analysis of the human genome, some from increasingly detailed mapping of the body's organs, including the new frontier of brain mapping research.

We will learn how to diagnose and treat diseases that today we barely understand.

Many of you may go on to careers in these new fields, though I doubt that you have had much formal training in them.

After all, they are so new that we barely know how to describe them, let alone how to teach them.

How does one prepare for or engage in a career about which we know little? Again, you need to keep an open mind.

You need to look at your various studies not just in terms of the state of the art, but in terms of all the possibilities.

What you've learned in school thus far has many different values. Much of it has value in itself.

But, in this day and age, its primary worth may be in the techniques and disciplines that you've developed and can now apply to opportunities for which your increasingly open minds are reaching and those of which you may never have dreamed.

A fast changing world can seem alien, disconcerting, and threatening. It's a rare person who knows where things are going, and what they must master to control the course of their careers.

But, if you approach such a fast changing world in terms of all the new opportunities that it presents you, and approach such opportunities with the right frame of mind, with an open mind, you will find, as Julia Child did, that the world can be your oyster.

I wish you all the success and happiness that can come with an open mind