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Vanderbilt University  
Commencement May 13, 2016**

### **Chancellor's Address**

I love Commencement, especially on a day like today. Sunny and unseasonably cool and lots of smiling faces filled with great pride and perhaps even relief. Our Vanderbilt tradition allows only the Chancellor to speak at Commencement. I confess that I keep track of who speaks at other schools. President Obama spoke at Howard University and will travel to Rutgers. Michael Bloomberg delivered the Michigan commencement address. Steven Spielberg is speaking at Harvard. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar at Drew University. Matt Damon at MIT. Coach K delivers the address at his own school of Duke. Renowned public figures, national leaders, celebrities, and captains of industry dominate this field. And there are now websites that actually grade commencement speaker choices. Matt Damon was given an F. Never finished college, they observed. Kareem received an A, greatest of all time in his career and a progeny of the UCLA Wizard of Westwood, John Wooden. President Obama received a B, with the critic downgrading him because of what was characterized as “security hassles.” Shocking. Tough grading, and I was thinking “I’d be content with a C- or even beg for a W or an Incomplete, since I am really not a commencement speaker. I’m the *Chancellor!*”

There are some positive aspects to our tradition. I know many of you personally. In fact, I have noticed that I’ve become so familiar that many students now say “Hi Zeppos,” or “I had dinner with Zeppos” or “should I take Zeppos’ class,” rather than the more formal “Hello, Chancellor Zeppos...” Having served on the faculty for 28 years, I know Vanderbilt. Hopefully, I won’t make factual mistakes or give you my stock speech. I don’t charge an honorarium for the speech. And finally, for me, feedback counts. Matt Damon won’t leave MIT thinking, “I have to do better next year.” But I know I can always do better next year! Interestingly, I’ve never had anyone say, “Great speech, I wish you would have spoken longer!” But quite a few have said, “that was way too long!”

Today, however, I want to tell you a story, not give you a speech. It’s a story about my family. I have two older brothers, Jon and Evan. Every family has an amateur genealogist, and in our family Evan fulfills that role. Frequently, but randomly, envelopes from Evan packed with family history archives will show up in my mailbox at home. I’ll open them and find birth certificates, death certificates, wedding licenses, baptismal documents, and faded pictures or rubbings of gravestones. When time allows, I will read them with great curiosity. Much of the information is familiar: the date and place of my mother’s birth, the cause of my father’s death, the church where I was baptized. Once in a while I’ll learn something new — my paternal grandmother died in the great flu epidemic in 1918, only six days after my father’s first birthday.

Eventually, the envelopes slowed to a trickle and then they seemed to stop. I wasn’t surprised because as I envisioned a “mental family tree,” I assumed Evan had already sent me every dead relative’s milestone documents. Mind you, my family tree in the United States is not

a big one, since it was my grandparents who traveled from Greece to America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One day a big envelope arrived in my mailbox. It had my brother's return address, and so I knew it was something, at least in his judgment, important to the family archive. I said to myself, "What in the world is this? I thought we had exhausted the record." I put the envelope aside on my desk and went about doing whatever I was occupied with before the mail came. And to be candid, despite my love of history, I tend to focus on the here and now and the future, finding the personal past too easily romanticized.

Eventually, I had a free moment, and I thought I'll open the envelope. Inside, were two long pages so I knew these were not death or birth certificates, because those are usually smaller. Carefully, I pulled out a document titled "Petition for Naturalization...United States of America" along with a "Declaration of Intention." The year: 1926. I soon realized that this was my paternal grandfather's petition to become a citizen of the U.S. I had never seen these papers before. They were at once both grand and prosaic. The text demanded his "intention to renounce forever all allegiances and fidelities to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty particularly to" and in the blank they had inserted "Alexander King of the Hellenes." Wow! The King of the Hellenes! I laughed out loud at the notion that America, victorious after WWI, would have anything to fear from this "King Alexander," for I was quite sure he was not the Alexander of ancient times out to conquer the world! But such formal renunciation was required, I figured. It's all about his loyalty. The document also recorded some simple physical information about my grandfather. Described as "white with dark complexion, 5 feet 8 inches tall, and 145 pounds," he stood shorter than I, was perhaps similarly colored, but was a much lower weight. I figured his low weight was either the result of deprivation – he was a widower feeding four children – or I chuckled "maybe he was an early adopter of the now trendy Mediterranean diet." He was Greek! I noticed that this was not his first attempt to become a citizen. It was noted that he had been rejected earlier for "ignorance of government." Ouch! The word "ignorance" stung me as a teacher, especially one who teaches the United States Constitution.

I made my way to the bottom of the document, and there was his signature. In nice penmanship, it bore the name "John Zeppos." This pleased me. The handwriting was beautiful cursive that even the strictest grade school teacher would have complimented. It even crossed my mind that my handwriting and his were similar, as if his genes passed along to me included this trait. I looked closer and noticed what appeared to be a middle initial. It was an "X" and was accompanied by the notation "his mark." It hit me. My grandfather was illiterate. He could neither read nor write the language of his adopted country. For me—a lawyer, a professor, a Chancellor who lives in the world of inspired ideas, great words, a community of fluency in dozens of languages — it never occurred to me that my grandfather was illiterate. He was deemed "ignorant."

I sat in silence. I was stunned. I felt many different things. For some reason, it pained me, but I wasn't exactly sure why. I knew he had a hard, short life. Indeed, he died from pulmonary failure only 6 years after he became a citizen, no doubt caused by his work in a mill. He was buried, his son – my father – reminded me often, in an unmarked grave but was given

the rites of his faith. To ease my pain, my mind wandered to the world of fiction and fantasy. I thought of the movie, one of my favorites, *Field of Dreams*, where the lead character, Kevin Costner, heals his pain by reuniting with his father in a game of baseball, returned to his youth in the former cornfield. I thought, “All would be well if I could take my grandfather on a tour of Vanderbilt’s campus and show him my world, if only for a brief moment.”

My sadness then turned into anger at what I thought was really my “woe is me” side getting the best of me. I reminded myself of the uncertain and serendipitous path to success and to failure. I focused less on how far I’d come, and I channeled my favorite Talking Heads’ song – Once in a Lifetime’s lyrics “how did I get here?” What did the story of my illiterate grandfather really have to do with my life? Interesting? Moving? Yes. Inspiring to some? Perhaps. Unique? Hardly. Finally, I came to the realization that I am here because I am educated. And I mean not simply “here” today as your Chancellor and as a Professor at Vanderbilt – but “here” today unburdened from worry about the basic necessities of life, able to educate my children, to have good health care, to drink clean water, unafraid to vote, free to experience a broader, more diverse world.

Today, you sit at a ceremony similar to one that I sat in four decades ago. Like you, I was surrounded by many who loved me and invested in me. I knew that something special was being given to me. But I never quite understood the power of what I was given until I pored over those long-lost documents. I am grateful every day that I am in the presence of students and faculty who remind me of this power. And I know your life will unfold with good and bad, highs and lows, successes and failures. Of one thing I am sure: through not just the good, the highs and the successes, but the bad, the lows and the failures, it is education and your time at Vanderbilt that will be your source of strength and comfort.

So how does the story end? That evening, when I finished reading and digesting my grandfather’s citizenship documents, I safely tucked them away in a file. I often like to conclude a long day by lighting a candle. Their bright colors, shapes, containers, and natural fragrances are all of beauty to me. I also like to light a candle in memory of someone. This is a ritual in many places of worship and in many cultures. That night I lit three candles. One was for my grandfather, for I wanted to remember him, and I wanted to acknowledge my genealogical and psychological wrestling with a man that I never knew, whose DNA, if not whose penmanship, I inherited. Who were the other two candles for? They were for Arthur Schiefelbein and George Lang, two men I never knew and had not heard about until I read the documents earlier in the day. Turns out that my grandfather — the illiterate man — needed two witnesses to secure his citizenship, and Arthur and George, a merchant and a molder, signed on his behalf, “affirming that he was a person of good moral character...and was in every way qualified ...to be a citizen of the United States.” They signed, without Xs, but in their real hand. I felt that I owed them a thank you from me and my family, for this was a debt of gratitude unacknowledged for almost a century.

Undoubtedly, there are many people whom you will want to thank today. You leave Vanderbilt with the gift of education, the privilege of learning, and the security, freedom, and prosperity that can come with it. Health, freedom, equality, and prosperity do not just happen. They come about through the purposeful acts of many, most prominently those who receive the

gift of education. Cherish that education, nourish it every day; pass it on to others. Do whatever you can to lift others up. There remain many who could do amazing, good things if just given the chance. People who, perhaps, cannot write or whom people others call “ignorant.” Don’t give up on anyone and help those who don’t have what you have. It can be as simple as being able to just write your name. Who knows, someday you may do nothing more than affix your name to a document in support of someone who needs your help. And while it may take eight decades, someone, some day, may just become a college president out of this act of kindness and generosity.

Farewell graduates of 2016!