

# Dartmouth Commencement 2003

## Keynote speech by David McCullough

**June 8, 2003.** President Wright, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, eminent honorees, members of the Dartmouth Class of 2003, worthy parents, friends of Dartmouth, visitors from abroad, fellow citizens, I am extremely grateful -- particularly grateful -- to receive this highest of honors conferred by this venerable, beloved college, and to be asked to speak on this justly celebrant days-of-days.

I first came to Dartmouth for a Winter Carnival more than fifty years ago and I've been coming back ever since. I've been a guest lecturer; I've done research for my books in the Baker Library; I've had the distinct privilege of teaching here as a Montgomery Fellow. I've walked the walks, feasted on breakfasts of memorable amplitude at Lou's; and I've loved it all.

And I wish to thank former presidents David McLaughlin and James Freedman, as well as President Wright, for their friendship and hospitality over the years; and to thank especially the Dartmouth faculty and the library staff for the work you do and for the gracious way you welcome and accommodate such guests as I have been.

So here we are. Sunday, June 08, 2003. Here we are (as Thornton Wilder might have set the scene) in Hanover, New Hampshire: latitude 43 degrees, 42 minutes; longitude 72 degrees, 17 minutes. Here on the glorious spring morning we gather on the Green at Dartmouth, one of the most beautiful, historic places anywhere in America, right in the heart of good old New England.

In overall size, by American standards, New England isn't much. The whole six New England states amount to less than Nebraska. In fact, there are seventeen states larger than all of New England. The biggest American cities, the great concentrations of commerce, of political, industrial, and media power, are all elsewhere.

But it was here in New England that the American Revolution ignited and changed the world; here that the abolition movement took hold, and that a Wellesley College professor named Katherine Lee Bates wrote "America the Beautiful."

New England gave us the first book published on this side of the Atlantic, the first school in America, the first college, and the first written constitution in history to declare that it shall be the "duty" of the government to provide education for everybody, a radical idea at the time.

The Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was drafted by John Adams in 1778, just two years after the Declaration of Independence and a full decade before our national Constitution.

...it shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates in all future periods of this commonwealth to cherish the

interests of literature and the sciences...to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity...and all social affections and generous sentiments among the people.

This being necessary, wrote John Adams, for the "preservation of their rights and liberties." A system whereby the people govern themselves will not work, he was saying, unless the people are educated.

Here in New Hampshire, the people so admired what Adams had written, they adopted the same clause almost without change for their own constitution.

Nowhere in America have institutions of education -- schools, academies, colleges, universities -- flourished for so long or in such numbers or with higher standards than in New England, and to the immeasurable benefit of the nation.

It is with this in mind, and in this setting, that I would like to address the subject of teachers and teaching.

In studying the life of an historic figure such as John Adams, who began as a teacher and who, as a parent and author, never stopped teaching, one is reminded in striking fashion of a fundamental lesson of history and of life -- that no one is, or ever was, self-made.

We are all what we are in large degree because of others who have helped, coached, taught, counseled, who set a standard by example, who've taken an interest in our interests, opened doors, opened our minds, helped us see, who gave encouragement when we needed it, who reprimanded or prodded when we needed it, and at critical moments, inspired.

Very often they were our parents, very often our teachers. If your experience was anything like mine, some of your first heroes outside the family were your teachers.

John Adams is a striking example of the transforming miracle of education. His father was a farmer, his mother almost certainly illiterate. Because of a scholarship to Harvard College he discovered books and all his life he would speak of his indebtedness to his favorite professor, John Winthrop. Others of those we call the Founders expressed similar gratitude. Thomas Jefferson wrote that Dr. William Small at the College of William and Mary "fixed the destinies of my life."

Each of us can remember teachers who made a difference in our own lives. Imagine how much larger this assembly would be were they all here with us this morning! And how we would want to greet them!

One of my favorite teachers in high school in Pittsburgh was Carl Cochran, who later had a long career on the faculty of Colby-Sawyer College over in New London. Carl taught English and art. He could also build anything with his hands. He was a champion gardener. He had humor and kindness and a way of summoning the best that was in those he taught.

There are no more important members of our society, none more important to our whole way of life, than our teachers. Yet too often and for too long they've been treated like glorified baby sitters who are supposed to look after our children while we go off and do the important work. In truth, it is they who are doing the work that matters above all.

We don't just want a good education for our children, we want an education second to none. But we've been letting down badly in how we teach those who teach. In the field of history the consequences have been serious, often alarming. It is no exaggeration to say that we are raising a generation of young Americans who are by and large historically illiterate. When seniors at fifty-five leading colleges and universities were asked in a survey who was the American general at Yorktown, more of them answered Ulysses S. Grant than George Washington, while six percent decided it must have been Douglas MacArthur. And this is only one example.

Of course there are many exceptional teachers, gifted, dedicated teachers doing exceptional work everywhere in the country. But far too many teachers everywhere have been trained in schools of education with no concentration on any one subject. It isn't just that they don't know much about history. They don't know much about math or botany or English literature either. And what you don't know, as a beginning teacher, you can't very well explain or have your heart in.

One of the most gifted and influential teachers of the past fifty years was Margaret McFarland, professor of child psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, whose numerous proteges included the man who reached more children than any American ever, the late Fred Rogers, "Mr. Rogers," who was the commencement speaker here last year.

As Fred Rogers once explained to me -- indeed, as he was happy to tell many people -- all that he did with his television programs was based on the teaching of Margaret McFarland, whose message, in essence, was this: In teaching attitude matters above all.

"Attitudes aren't taught, they're caught," she would say.

If the teacher is enthusiastic about the history of the American Revolution or Shakespeare or the workings of the internal combustion engine, the students get that right away. If the teacher is uncertain, indifferent, or maybe a bit bored with the material, the students get that, too, right away.

"Show them what you love," said Margaret McFarland.

You can't love what you don't know much about. You can't convince, stimulate, hold the attention, **teach**, if you don't know what you're talking about.

Teaching is an art, not a formula. "Teaching," wrote Gilbert Highet in one of the best books on the subject, "is not like a chemical reaction; it is more like painting a picture or making a piece of music...You must

throw your heart into it."

This college has a long tradition of emphasis on teaching. An old "Description" of Dartmouth states very clearly the bedrock premise that the faculty must be "teachers as well as scholars," and that the college offers "a liberal arts education rather than vocational and professional training."

The best possible education for our teachers is exactly that, a full-fledged liberal arts education -- in which, in my view, history ought to be required.

If you think how many children a well-educated teacher can affect in a career in the classroom, you might be inclined to believe as I do, that a full liberal arts education for our teachers is the best kind of homeland security for the long run.

We must revise the way we are teaching our teachers and the sooner the better. We must insist on drastic changes and improvements in the textbooks we subject our children to. So many textbooks are so extremely dreary. It is almost as though some were designed intentionally to kill any desire for learning.

And we must not leave the whole job to the teachers. We must set the example at home. We must talk about books with our children. We must show them that we, too, in our time, "cherish" literature and the sciences. We must take them on trips to museums and galleries and libraries and great historic places, and show them the meaning and enjoyment we ourselves find in such places.

Were it up to me to decide where the focus of our efforts ought to be in the schools, at what particular stage in the process, I would concentrate on grade school, and especially the fourth, fifth, and sixth grade levels, when those young minds are like sponges.

We all know children that age can learn foreign languages faster by far than later in life. But they can learn **anything** faster. Further, they want to learn.

So let us teach them, inspire them, give them imaginative, generous-spirited, **educated** teachers, and the rest will follow.

And now on to you of the Class of 2003 -- the great Dartmouth Class of 2003 -- in time-honored tradition, I offer a few words of advice to take as you will:

Whatever you do in life, don't do it lukewarmly. Be the kind who forges ahead. And don't ever quit because you're behind.

Don't use a long fancy word when a short plain one does the job.

Remember there are truly exceptional people in life. Learn to recognize them. And to respect them.

Read. Read every change you get. Read to keep growing. Read history. Read poetry. Read for pure enjoyment. Read a book called *Life on a Little Known Planet*. It's about insects. It will make you feel better.

Don't be in too big a hurry. You can miss a lot of the best things in life that way.

Write some real letters. Teach a child to sing a song. Go exploring in your own town. Go west by train.

Someday tell your own children about the teachers who meant a lot to you.

Never check out of a hotel without tipping the maid.

Work hard. And don't work just for the big payoff. Choose a life in which the work itself is the payoff.

We live in serious, dangerous times. But remember we've been through serious, dangerous times often before, and emerged a stronger people for it. "Great necessities call out great virtues," said Abigail Adams, speaking from experience.

Sometime, somewhere along the line, do something for your country.

And sometime gather up some brushes and paints and go out somewhere in the open air and paint a picture. I mean it. Give it a try, even if you never have -- especially if you never have.

It was said of the American painter Robert Henri, who was also a brilliant teacher, that he painted like a man coming over the top of a hill, singing.

That's how to go. Congratulations to you all. And Happy Days!