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Vassar College Commencement Address



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Thank you. Thank you, Fran, for that introduction. As Milton's wife said to Milton of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "Seems a little long to me, but I liked it."

Not long ago I was reading about the problem of gridlock on the freeways of Southern California -- the traffic jams which cripple the city, stranding millions and laying waste to time and energy and the environment. Gridlock is as serious and as impenetrable a problem as any we face, a dilemma without cure, without solution, like everything else in the world it seems.

Some smart folks concocted a computer simulation of gridlock to determine how many cars should be taken off the road to turn a completely jammed and stilled highway into a free-flowing one. How many cars must be removed from that commute until a twenty-mile drive takes twenty-five minutes instead of two hours? The results were startling.

Four cars needed to be removed from that virtually stuck highway to free up that simulated commute -- four cars out of each one hundred cars. Four cars per one hundred cars; four autos out of every one hundred autos; forty cars from each thousand; four hundred out of ten thousand. Four cars out of one hundred are not that many. Two cars out of every fifty; one driver out of twenty-five drivers.

Now, if this simulation is correct, it is the most dramatic definition in earthly science and human nature of how a simple choice will make a jaw-dropping difference to our world. Call it "The Power of Four." One commuter in your neighborhood could put the rush back into rush hour. So, if merely four people out of a hundred can make gridlock go away by choosing not to use their car, imagine the other changes that can be wrought by just four of us -- four of you -- out of a hundred.



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Take a hundred musicians in a depressed port city in Northern England. Choose John, Paul, George, and Ringo -- you have "Hey Jude." Take a hundred computer geeks in Redmond, Washington -- send 96 of them home and the remainder is called "Microsoft."

Take *The Power of Four* and apply it to any and every area of your concern.

Politics: Four votes swung from one hundred into another hundred is the difference between gaining control and losing clout.

Culture: Two ticket buyers out of 50 can make a small, odd film profitable.

Economics: By boycotting a product 1 consumer out of 25 can move that product to the back of the shelf, and eventually off it altogether.

Four out of 100 is miniscule and yet can be the great lever of the Tipping Point. *The Power of Four* is the difference between helplessness and help. H-E-L-P -- a four-letter word like some others with many meanings.

The graduating class of 2005 can claim, with perhaps more credibility than any other class in history, that during its four years of college the world went crazy. In the fall of 2001, our planet earth and the United States of America were different sorts of places -- in tone, in tolerance, in peace and war, in ideas and in ideals -- than they are on this spring day in 2005. These past years have been extraordinary, the express rate of change well beyond the usual standards of culture, and well above the personal watermarks you have stamped as college students. As college graduates, you now live in a brand new world, with new versions of political upheaval, global pandemic, world war and religious polarization, the likes of which have rarely visited our planet all at once -- and thank God for that.

Today's main purpose is to celebrate your entering into society, but the fact is you have all been very much steeped in it already -- Poughkeepsie being the proxy and microcosm of the whole wide world. None of you were untouched by the events in September of your freshman year, none unaffected by the ideological movements of local and geo-politics since. All of you have been staring your individual fate and our collective future right in the eye for the last four years. The common stereotype would have you today, cap in the air, parchment in hand, asking yourself "What do I do now?" You, the class of 2005, have already had many, many moments during your time at Vassar when you asked yourself that question. You might have added the word "hell" to some such four-letter word to that phrase: "What the *hell* do I do now?" In which case, today might not be all that different from other days on campus -- except your parents are here and they might take you out for better food.

On Commencement Day, speechmakers are expected to offer advice -- as though you need any, as though anything said today could aid your making sense of our one-damn-thing-after-another world. But things are too confused, too loud, too dangerous to make "advice" an option. You need to hear something much more relevant on this day. You need to hear the most important message thus far in the third millennium.



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You need to hear a maxim so simple, so clear, and so evocative that no one could misconstrue its meaning or miss its weighty issue -- so, here goes.

It's not a statement, but it's a request, It's not a bit of advice, but it's a plea. In fact, it's a single four-letter word. It's a verb and a noun which takes into account the reality of your four years at Vassar as well as the demands of the next four decades you spend beyond this campus.

It's a message once made familiar by the Beatles -- those Northern English lads who embodied *The Power of Four*. Help. HELP. HEEEEELLLLLLLLPP!

We need help. Your help. You must help. Please help. Please provide help. Please be willing to help. Help, and you will make a huge impact on the life of the street, the town, the country, and our planet. If only one out of four of each hundred of you choose to help on any given day, in any given cause, incredible things will happen in the world you live in. Help publicly. Help privately. Help in your actions by recycling and conserving and protecting, but help also in your attitude. Help make sense where sense has gone missing. Help bring reason and respect to discourse and debate. Help science to solve and faith to soothe. Help law bring justice, until justice is commonplace. Help and you will abolish apathy -- the void which is so quickly filled by ignorance and evil.

Life outside of college is just like life in it: one nutty thing after another, some of them horrible, but all interspersed with enough beauty and goodness to keep you going. That's your job -- to keep going. Your duty is to *help* -- without ceasing. The art you create can glorify it. The science you pursue can prove its value. The law you practice can pass on its benefits. The faith you embrace will make it the earthly manifestation of your God.

Here at Vassar, whatever your discipline, whatever your passion, you have already experienced the exhausting reality that there is always something going on and there is always something to do. And most assuredly you have sensed how effective and empowering it can be when more than four out of one hundred make the same choice to help.

You will always be able to help.

So do it. Make peace where it is precious. Help plant trees. Help embrace diversity and celebrate differences. Help stop gridlock.

In other words, help solve every problem we face -- every single one of them -- with *The Power of Four* out of a hundred. Help and we will save the world. If we don't help, it won't get done.

Congratulations. Good luck. And thank you.