

Thurgood Marshall College, University of California, San Diego
Commencement Address
Professor Pamela C. Cosman
June 12, 2004

Mr. Provost, honored guests, members of the faculty, graduates, and families:

I am honored and pleased to speak before you today. At the same time, I confess I'm not really a public speaker, having experienced several public-speaking disasters in years past. One of the list was when my parents transferred me to a French-speaking middle school. I ran up against the barrier that so many native English-speakers face: the nuances of French pronunciation. That first year, in a school play, I was given the smallest possible role, that of a ditzy young woman whose sole part was to rest her head on the leading man's shoulder and say "how I love to hold my head in the crook of your neck" "comme j'aime bien tenir ma tete au creux de ton cou." I practiced and practiced that accursed line, but when it came to the real performance, I mispronounced "cou" as "cul" with the unfortunate vulgar effect that instead of "crook of your neck," what I actually said was "crook of your rear end."

This event definitively eliminated French drama as a career, and nearly ruled out anything that involved opening my mouth. But everyone's career includes obstacles that must be overcome: each of you who is graduating today can think of the specific hurdles you have leaped over, or staggered over, to get where you are. It is in fact a wonderful achievement to join the ranks of the highly educated: some of you may be the first in your families to do so, and others may be the first to do so on these shores of freedom and opportunity. But whatever your background, all of you labored long hours, read countless books, pondered difficult equations, and wrote fifteen drafts of your essays. Today is a day for celebration of your achievement.

But, as every commencement speaker since the commencement of commencements has said, this is both an ending and a beginning, and you cannot rest on your laurels very long before being faced with a new set of daunting challenges, some of which I want to mention today. In particular, as a mother and a professor, as a wife and an engineer, I feel qualified to speak about balancing--balancing work and family, and balancing public and private obligations.

So let me tell you a bit about myself: I have four sons, ages 12, 11, 7, and 1. The first was born as I started my Ph.D. thesis. When I came to graduation, I had to march in the procession with one of those donut-shaped seat cushions, having given birth to our second child 6 days before. With a husband who was a surgical resident years before they limited the resident's work week to 80 hours, I had to juggle most everything myself. Here at UCSD, two more children arrived, and I found myself needing to restructure my teaching and eating schedule around the issue of morning sickness. It is acceptable to excuse oneself for a few minutes from a meeting with one student, but social norms frown upon vomiting in front of a large class. Some of you who took the

sophomore course on electric circuits from me don't know how close it came to being a truly memorable course.

Now I know that there are experts here in the area of work-life balance--hundreds of them--in the ranks of the parents of the graduating seniors. You worked, you made sacrifices, you deferred your own opportunities in favor of your children, and now you come, digital camera in hand, to claim your just reward--seeing your children graduate from Thurgood Marshall College, University of California, San Diego. In a sense, this is your day as well as theirs, the day when the success of your balancing act becomes manifest. So to you, the parents, I render honor and congratulations.

Although it is less obvious right now, today's graduates have also served a real apprenticeship in balancing--have you not? For the last 4 or 5 years, you have made daily decisions, consciously or unconsciously, about how much time to spend studying, and how much time to spend working to support your studying; how much time to spend with friends, playing music, keeping up with your culture or religion, putting off this week's laundry until next week, working for social change.

This is the problem of balancing work with "life." "Life" means different things at different stages, but one stage that has been well-studied is the child-bearing years, where "life" is easily defined as time spent with one's children. In a recent study of university professors, about 70% of male professors who are a decade out from their doctoral degrees have children, while only about 50% of female professors do. Statistics for other professions such as law and medicine show similar differences. Perhaps some women are opting to drop out of demanding jobs to have children, and the data suggest that those who stay in are often choosing to forego having children. This is an unfortunate set of choices, and it can affect men as well as women. In these high-pressure jobs, the structure of work is presented as being relatively immutable--a certain number of hours, days, or years must be worked in order to advance to the next stage. But perhaps it is not immutable; there are examples, here at UCSD and elsewhere, of more flexible and balanced work-life possibilities. I hope you, as future participants and potential leaders, can change the current culture of imbalance and open up new possibilities in your own lives.

One small thing I do to change the culture is to not cover up my commitments. When I leave a meeting to attend a child's school event, I say why I'm leaving. This takes some courage, since I'm the only woman faculty member in my department, amongst 50 men. But I've recently heard some of my colleagues do the same thing, and I wonder if I might have had some influence on them. I believe that if you're respected at work, then your commitment to balance will be respected too.

"Oh thrice and four times happy are those who plant cabbages!" said Rabelais, the great doctor of satire, and more simply, in Voltaire's words, "We must cultivate our garden." Both statements come in reaction to the troubles and excesses of philosophy, of courtly life, and the difficulties of getting things done in a complex society. Your garden can mean your family, in which case the cabbages that grow in it are those both prosaic and

miraculous creatures, your loved ones. If you cultivate your family, then reverses in the workplace lose their sting; not only that, but in understanding and managing family members, you get insights that help you understand and manage people at work. So in terms of balancing work and “life,” put life first, and work will follow.

The other balancing act I want to speak with you about is the balance between the public and the private spheres of life. As you all know, the goal of Thurgood Marshall College is training citizen-scholars, people whose high education is coupled with participation in public life and contributions to society.

You are, of course, citizens at several levels, and one of these is in your community, which is another garden in which you can nourish cabbages. Most of you have done some form of organized public service in the local community. Indeed for many, your service has been done at a remarkable place located here on the UCSD campus, a place that epitomizes the Marshall College philosophy: the Preuss School, where UCSD faculty and students join with the Preuss School staff to extend the opportunity of uncompromising, first-rate college preparatory education to underprivileged San Diegans whose parents did not go to college. The Preuss School is graduating its first-ever class this month, and of the 55 seniors, 50 will be going to 4-year colleges and universities, the first in their families ever to do so. This achievement is a source of enormous pride and joy for the faculty, staff, and students of Thurgood Marshall College. Some of the first Preuss graduates will join Thurgood Marshall as freshmen this autumn: their success is your success as well. I applaud all of you who volunteered your time to contribute to your community.

While it is tremendously satisfying to help locally, this is not to say that you shouldn't think globally. The four or five years you have spent at UCSD have been ones of tremendous upheaval in the world outside the walls of this beautiful, sheltered academy. While you were studying, the September 11 massacres occurred, horrors that forced us all to face the reality of international terrorism. While you were studying, our nation launched wars against sponsors of terrorism. I'm glad you kept studying, because in a nation at war, the role of the citizen-scholar is all the more crucial, and his or her responsibilities are all the more intense.

I can't help comparing your college years with mine in the 1980's. Ronald Reagan was President, 40 years of Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and while terrorism was in the news, it didn't affect most Americans personally. Those were more hopeful, sunnier times than these. You are graduating at a somber and uncertain hour. But it is at the darkest times that the greatest generations emerge. This week, the world marked the 60th anniversary of D-Day, the Normandy invasion. Those graduating seniors of 60 years ago experienced Pearl Harbor in their sophomore year as you experienced September 11 in yours, and they faced the same issues of isolationism and interventionism and war that you face as you graduate today. With their example in mind, I would submit that our goal as a country should be not only to defend ourselves by attacking those who have attacked us, but also to defend humanity by ridding the world of the scourge of terrorism. We must seek peace, but this is not the same as seeking

“peace in our time,” as Chamberlain famously justified the appeasement of Nazi Germany. In some sense, nations too must balance private and public obligations.

Now as then, the silent majority of the world's citizens will watch us and judge how we use our freedoms. Less than one percent of the world's 22-year-olds have the privilege of a college education. With the diploma that you receive today come certain obligations. It is critical that you participate in the civic life of your country--stay informed, vote in elections, and add your voice to the national debate. Your knowledge of history, your ability to advance science and technology, the arts, the humanities, justice, medicine, and journalism, and your sense of right and wrong--in a word, your scholarship and citizenship--may be tested in ways we can now barely imagine.

The walls of the academy disappear today, and now you have the whole world--your world, my world, and the world of your parents and your future children-- in your hands. Attaining and maintaining scholarship, and cultivating your family and community gardens, are the keys to doing the right thing as citizens, and to achieving balance in your life. By doing so, each in your own way, you'll serve your country, you'll honor your parents and yourselves, and you'll further the proud and growing traditions of UC San Diego and Thurgood Marshall College.