Professor Bryant "Tip" Ragan's Commencement Speech

University of Texas, Department of History

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Thank you for that warm welcome! Let me first offer my congratulations to the Class of 2010! Being here to celebrate with you today is honestly one of the high points of my life. I would never have guessed at my own graduation ceremony twenty-nine years ago that I would have the privilege of talking with a future graduating class on this momentous occasion.

Commencement speeches are challenging. As a faculty member, I'm well aware of the difficulty of saying something that is not a cliche or superficial. And talking in front of my former professors is particularly nerve-wracking; I feel as if I'm going to be graded again! My thanks to Dennis McEnnerney, my life partner, for helping me keep things in perspective while I've prepared these remarks.

This ceremony is designed to mark the end of one phase of your lives and the beginning of the next. When I sat in your place, I was

overwhelmed with excitement, already a bit nostalgic about my years at Texas, and nervous about the new chapters of life that were waiting for me to write. I think I turned out ok, and I know that you will, too!

I don't really need to talk about jobs or the host of practicalities that you will attend to over the course of the next months and years. Your liberal arts education has given you the tools in order to succeed, analytic, communication, problem-solving, and leadership skills. The university also has terrific services to help you at this juncture. Let me assure you--you will be fine.

But before you walk across this stage, I would like to talk with you about the less pragmatic, but equally important things that I believe the University of Texas, a liberal arts education, and a major in History, have done for you and me.

What makes the University of Texas such a unique place to grow as a person? We could cite many factors, ranging from great libraries and research centers, to brilliant students, to a world-class faculty. But the

foundation upon which all of these wonderful qualities rest is, of course, intellectual freedom.

When I was a student, I saw the word "freedom" practically every day. On my way to Garrison Hall, I would read on the Tower the biblical inscription, "Ye shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free." This injunction presented me with the first major philosophical challenge of my liberal arts education. What I was learning in the classroom seemed to suggest that the idea really worked in reverse: you need freedom in order to search for the truth.

You historians will recall that in the Middle Ages, the *artes liberales* comprised study that was appropriate for someone who was *liber*, free, not a slave. *Liber* implies being unrestricted, unprejudiced, frank, autonomous. All too often, as the Wars of Religion between Catholics and Protestants in the Age of Reformation show, when people started from the position of "knowing the truth," it didn't lead to freedom, but rather to the oppression of other people who refused that particular truth.

Inspired by the scientific revolution, which rejected such absolutist forms of knowledge production, Immanuel Kant also suggested in his answer to the question, "What is Enlightenment?" that we need to work to free ourselves and others in order to strive for the truth, even if it's never completely attainable.

You and I have been fortunate, haven't we? The University of Texas has provided us with an unusually free environment to pursue knowledge, to learn. And we chose to study history.

The most important course I took that put history to the question was a seminar on historiography taught by Howard Miller. On the first day of class, Dr. Miller asked why we study history. We went around the circle, and most of us tried to sound profound, usually giving some kind of answer like, "We study history so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past." Dr. Miller's smile kept getting broader and broader. I now have a better idea why he was amused. What evidence do we have that anyone, or any country for that matter, ever really "learns" from the past?

It's safe to say that I've thought about Howard's question pretty much every day since. I wish I could say that at the ripe age of fifty, I have a satisfying answer to offer, some wisdom to impart. I do know that history is not like some of our sister disciplines in the social sciences, in which one finds a "problem" in contemporary life and then tries to do research designed to solve that particular political, social, economic, or psychological problem.

History, in contrast, is not so instrumental. It is more contemplative, more meditative. I believe that it helps us uncover our humanity.

Now we could spend countless hours talking about the wonders of history, but you guys want to graduate! So I'm just going to mention three important ways that I think that history shapes us as individuals. First, history stokes our passions. Second, it encourages us to be more cosmopolitan by introducing us to historical subjects who are very different from us and consequently makes us more open-minded and tolerant. And third, it demands that we be honest--with ourselves, with our historical subjects, and with our own contemporaries.

1. Passion

You and I know that most people think that historians are boorish, pedantic, and impractical. They really don't know us, do they? We are a passionate people! Studying the past (studying dead people!) make us more alive! Did any of you have the opportunity to hear Jan Meisel talk about medieval warfare? She could tell a good story! She brought me into the Middle Ages, making me want to shake those fourteenth-century French, and say, "Stop being so chivalrous! Kick those English out of your country, once and for all!" In my course on Stuart England, I found Brian Levack's excitement about seventeenth-century British society simply breath-taking. Was the gentry rising? Was it falling? Or was the story more complex? Inquiring minds had to know! Now, on the other side of the classroom divide, I can only hope to excite the passions of my students, even half as much as the professors who taught me here at Texas.

2. Cosmopolitanism

In our age of self-involvement, many people (not real historians) think that the main point of history is to show that people are pretty much like us, wherever they lived, whenever they lived. And if you keep

things on a superficial level, I suppose that they might be right. After all, everyone eats, everyone loves, everyone dreams. But historians, from Herodotus, to Sima Qin, to Ibn-Khaldun, have always known that what is really interesting about the past is how different people were from us and from each other. What people ate, how they loved, and what they dreamed--what a multi-colored tapestry of experience.

In my junior seminar, I discovered that there was a relatively new field, "the history of childhood." (Remember that this was back in 1980.) It had never occurred to me that families might be different, and therefore worth studying in different historical contexts. I was excited to know that the way we organize family life is quite culturally specific, only one of a number of possibilities that have existed in the past. In another course, a terrific seminar taught by Bob Abzug, I read my first book in women's history, a study of the Grimke sisters. I was fascinated to see how women's experiences were defined in antebellum America, showing once again how fundamental things can change so significantly. I wish I could talk to each and every one of you about what surprises you have discovered about the past. Your thesis titles alone make me curious. It would be fascinating to learn from you, Rachel Burkhart,

what Soviet spies were thinking in early 20th-century China. I'd love to hear about the Nizari Ismailis, Aasha Rajani. All of you have important contributions to make.

"Meeting" people in the past, speaking with them, enables us, then, to think in ways that we would never have thought about in the isolation of the modern world. Opening our minds to these very different lived experiences practically demands that we become more tolerant individuals.

3. Honesty

History insists that we be honest. You all know that we cannot know everything about the past, and as historians we have to be at times quite speculative and creative. Nonetheless, we believe that there is a good to being honest about history. Unlike politicians who let their ideological imperatives drive the teaching of history, real historians strive to be true to the past, regardless of what they find.

Please allow me to give a personal example. When I was a gay teenager in Houston, at a time when homosexual relations were illegal in this

state, the negative stereotypes that I heard, over and over, were that homosexual men were either effeminate, pederastic, or both. But when I came to UT, my professors and classmates made me feel valued and gave me the free space to discover who I was. In the safe haven of the ivory tower, people like me were free finally to investigate the history of homosexuality. And what did we find? We found that people who had sexual relations with others of the same sex were not always demonized or persecuted. In fact, they were often valued and seen as normal. At the same time, in many societies, homosexually-inclined men were effeminate, in their gestures, clothing, etc. And in many other societies, adult men did typically have sexual relations with adolescent males. (I'll note that the same case holds true for heterosexual men, as well.) I guess that for political reasons, I wish that the historical record looked a bit different. But you can only imagine my excitement in 2003, when the Supreme Court finally eliminated sodomy laws in this country. In Lawrence v. Texas, Justice Kennedy relied heavily on the work of historians to argue that the wide variety of homosexual experience in the past shows that we must be open to changing attitudes about sex in our own society, and that imposing an intolerant and absolutist

standard on homosexual women and men goes against our commitment to freedom.

When I discussed earlier that nagging verse on the Tower, perhaps I was a bit simplistic. A better way to put it? You need freedom in order to search for the truth, but then the pursuit of that truth can in turn make more freedom.

So what do I wish for you? I want to encourage you to take the idea of freedom that you have found here at UT and live that ideal wherever you find yourselves. Living freely creates more freedom. I want you to continue your interest in history, even if not everyone here becomes a "professional historian." I want you to live passionate lives. I want you to engage people who are different from you, whether they are dead or alive. And I want you to live and speak with integrity. These values are dear to us as historians, as Texans, and as humans. Thank you! Congratulations, again! And HOOK 'EM, HORNS!!!