“THE LAST LECTURE”
Delivered to the Class of 2008
by Professor Gerald Unks
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
April 23, 2008

NOTE. At Professor Unks’ request, this speech has been edited to the extent that several humorous anecdotes have been removed.

My name is Gerry Unks, and I approved this message.

Thank you, Ashley. What a flattering introduction. Are you sure you were talking about me? It’s like the Irishman who died. And at his funeral, the priest was eulogizing him—going on about all his wonderful virtues. And his wife interrupted, and stood up, and said, “Excuse me, Father, but I want to look in the coffin. The man you’re describing doesn’t sound like my husband.”

For those of you in my class, I’d like to introduce myself—Gerry Unks. Haven’t seen you in a while; the final exam’s next Monday.

To the best I can recall, the last time I delivered a speech outdoors was in 1957. It was to a group of about 7,000 Boy Scouts at the national jamboree in Valley Forge. Speaking outside is weird. You can’t see the eyes of the audience very well, and the acoustics are terrible. Speaking to the multitudes—assembled on the lawn—is not my forte. So bear with me.

So this is your senior send-off. So long to the Class of 2008. And what can I tell you? Your organizers asked for a lecture, no less—and I am reading verbatim—a lecture that "primarily focuses on life lessons and advice—something inspirational." Well, first off, the word "lecture" says to me "long speech," and, second, I know that there is no vice worse than ADvice. And be inspirational? Me? Inspirational? Hell, I’m a college professor; I can’t inspire anyone. Why I can’t even inspire the guys in the last row of my class to close their laptops and stop watching pornography!

And keep it short? I asked one of my students what I should do, and he said, "Get everybody to stand up, thank the Alumni Association for a great meal, join hands, sing ‘Climb Every Mountain’, and split to Franklin Street."

Well, you deserve more than that, but I am going to keep it short. There is no point in laying a bunch of clichés and platitudes on you, and then telling you that "you are our destiny," and then bidding you farewell as you sail off into tomorrow. That is sort of the obligatory content of a speech at an occasion like this. But not for me!

I have no forecast of the future. Nor do I have a list of eternal truths. If you wanted eternal truths, you should have come to me in 1967, when I started here as an assistant professor. I had lots of eternal truths then. You couldn’t shut me up. But now I’m not so sure about things. As I’ve grown older, I have grown less certain—more tentative. Truth is harder to find. I have more questions than I have answers. The other day I told a colleague, "I think I’m getting dumber every day." This speech is going to be a short one because I don’t have much eternal truth to tell you.
Near the end of the play, “Our Town”, by Thornton Wilder (which incidentally is my favorite play), Emily asks the Stage Manager, “Do human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?” And he replies, “No. The saints and poets, maybe. They do some.” On this send-off evening, I invite you to try to realize your life—while you live it, appreciating its wonder every minute. No small order!! But I might as well lay it on you at the top.

You have been schooled exceedingly well, but now it is time for you to get an education. And by education, I do not mean all that nonsense about "the school of hard knocks" and "the real world" and "forgetting all that book-learning you’ve gotten in college" and getting out into "the real world" and bumping heads with everybody—cut-throat style. Actually, I may be going to talk about the very opposite of that crazy idea.

Plato said that “a good education consists of giving to the body and to the soul all of the beauty and all of the perfection of which they are capable.” Shakespeare referred to “sucking the sweets of sweet philosophy.” John Dewey said, “The end of education is more education.” I am going to call the sort of education you need "cultivating your humanity." And in that cultivating process, begin to realize how wonderful life is “while you live it every, every minute.” I am going to list a few activities that have helped to move me toward realizing my life.

Support the Arts
First, if you want to realize life, I suggest you support the arts. It scares me when I go to a play or a concert or walk through a museum and see so many old people like me and so few young people like you—and next to no children. Where are tomorrow’s patrons going to come from? Support the arts. Indulge yourself in them. You will find in them a quality of truth and beauty that you will find nowhere else. My favorite art experiences?: Attending most plays on Broadway; going to the Art Institute of Chicago and seeing American Gothic and Night Hawks; hearing the New York Philharmonic perform Beethoven’s Third. And there are all of the local art experiences. The North Carolina Symphony. The North Carolina Museum of Art is a treasure. You don’t have to travel far to find an artistic experience.

Travel
And, speaking of travel, I suggest that you realize your life through travel. And when I suggest travel, I am not talking about a trip to the beach; I mean really travel. No single activity has broadened my perceptions and deepened my understanding of myself and of the world more than has traveling. And when you travel, act like a student of the world’s cultures with an open mind, and not like a visitor at a zoo. Too many Americans are so ethnocentric and closed-minded that they travel only to stare at a cathedral, visit a tomb, have their picture taken in front of some great antiquity and—above all—to validate what they already believe. Everything different they see as inferior. Every other sentence they utter begins with, “Well, in America, we…”

After 9/11, my students had many reactions. In a very rough sense, they could be divided into two groups. One group wanted to cancel all their foreign travel plans—to stay away from the rest of the world and hunker down close to home in good old “safe” America. Another group of them took a different path. They wanted to get out into the rest of the world, see it and learn from it and try to, above all, answer the question, “Why do so many people around the world hate the country that we love?” I tend to believe that that second group was educating itself. The first group was exhibiting the same sort of mentality that makes gated communities popular.
After the wonderful family vacations I had when I was a kid, I did not do any serious traveling until I was 35. I say that only so you’ll realize that you still have plenty of time to get traveling. My favorite and most moving sites: The Taj Mahal in Agra, India; the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. My favorite city: London. *A place it is your duty to visit:* Any of the Nazi death camps in Europe. My favorite country: The United States.

But don’t just travel to the biggies. Wherever you go, traveling is an opportunity to learn—in a village or small town, at a corner bar, looking at a sunset.

This summer, why don’t you and a friend or two get in a car and drive to the Pacific Ocean, visiting the national parks of the West on the way. *No airplane flights allowed.* Drive there. Eat at local diners and stay in second-rate motels. Talk to people. And on your way out, drop down to New Orleans and sign on with a missionary group for a few days. They’ll take you. There’s plenty of work. And as you work, wrestle with this question: “How can the richest country in the world tolerate such gut-wrenching poverty?”

*Volunteer*

And you will move toward “realizing life while you live it every, every minute” by volunteering. Go to a school and volunteer to tutor a kid, or go to the public library and join a group of volunteers who read to children. While you’re there, ask about opportunities to teach adults how to read. Work at the homeless shelter. And I’m talking about working there on a regular schedule—not just on Thanksgiving. On Thanksgiving Day, all the upper-middle class, white liberals—trying to deal with their guilt—go over and volunteer at the homeless shelter. They pull up in their Mercedes-Benzes, BMW’s, Lexuses, and SUV’s. On this one day of the year, the parking lot at the homeless shelter looks like the parking lot at the Deke house. Make volunteering a habit.

*Develop a Passion*

And you’ll be moving toward realizing life when you become passionate about something. My passion is teaching. Now I’ve probably made a mistake there because it may not be a very good idea to have your job as your passion—at least that’s what some people say. But nonetheless, teaching is my passion. It has filled my days and my nights and my heart. I have had a 42-year-long love affair with the UNC student body. As a great journalist once noted, "Teaching is the only form of giving that does not diminish the giver; on the contrary, it enriches him." Some say that my passion shows through in my classes. I am passionate about every child’s getting a first-rate schooling experience.

I’ll never forget the day—it was September 20, 1958—when I had just finished my first four weeks of teaching high school. I went to my school mailbox, and there was an envelope in it, and in the envelope there was a pink sheet of paper that said, “Pay to the order of Gerald Unks the sum of $339.” That was my first month’s salary. (My base pay was $440, and after taxes it was $339.) At that point, I realized something. It was almost an epiphany! I had just spent 20 days having the time of my life—as much fun as counseling at Boy Scout camp—I had loved it; it was fantastic. And, get this, I could do this for the rest of my life! And now, here’s the capper: They were willing to pay me to do it! And I have pulled this scam for nearly 50 years. On April first, I went to my mailbox in Peabody Hall, and here was an envelope and it had a piece of paper. “Pay to the order of Gerald Unks”—a little more than $339. But it was the same old scam. They were paying me to do something that I would really have paid *them* to do.
At some point every semester, I urge my class to find something they love to do and then get someone to pay them to do it. You’re only going around in this life once, and you might as well make it “doing something that you love.” Don’t fall for the idea of “earning a lot of money doing something you don’t like” so that later on you’ll be able to “do what you love.” That’s a trick. You’ll never get away from earning, and you’ll never get around to “doing what you love.” It’s like what Grandpa in “You Can’t Take It With You”—another of my favorite plays—asks the stuffy businessman, who has spent his entire life accumulating things and knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. He asks, “How many of us when we are young would settle for what we actually get when we are old?” if someone walks out of this University and says that all he cares about is accumulating a lot of money, he should be required to repeat the collegiate experience because he has missed the point. But you may disagree.

**Acknowledge a Power Greater than Yourself**

I’ve got one more activity that helps me “realize life while I live it, every, every minute,” and it just may be the most important activity of all: Acknowledge a power greater than yourself. Call that power whatever you want—God, Jehovah, Yaweh, Vishnu, Allah, Ahuramazda—or call it nothing at all. Worship it if you choose. But acknowledge the power’s existence. Accept the fact that there is a force in this world that is greater than yourself. You do not completely control yourself or the world.

**Appreciate the Atmosphere of Freedom in Which You Were Schooled**

Though we may not have thought about it, the real hero of this evening is not sitting or standing here, but it is here all around us. Of course, it is the University. Now I’m not talking about the faculty and the administration or the students. They come and go. What I’m talking about is the University as an institution—as an almost sacred idea. We celebrate this University’s birth in October, but I celebrate the University more intensely when I come to commencement in December and May. I see all of these young people leaving us and going out to somewhere to do something, and I know that they are going to do it better because they encountered an institution known as the University. As a teacher I know that my students pass through me; I never know how each of the stories ends. But I am pretty sure it is a better story because of the University, and I have never heard of a person who was hurt by getting a college education. And I think I am most sad when I encounter some student who has come to this great liberal arts institution—created to challenge his beliefs about himself and the world—and all he has sought to do is to validate what he already believes.

UNC has many claims to fame, and it has many traditions. But to me, its noblest of them all is its devotion to the free exercise of thought. Freedom of speech and freedom of press were the talk of the day when UNC began in 1793. The Bill of Rights was only two years old! And freedom of speech and press and assembly have been on the University’s mind ever since. Generating new ideas and protecting free inquiry has been the University’s agenda from the start.

It is noteworthy that the University has been the shelter for all sorts of ideas that ran against the public disposition of the time. In the 1850s, the University was accused of being a hotbed of abolitionism. Then, later it was a hotbed of evolutionists. And then, a hotbed for pacifists opposed to World War One. And then, a hotbed for communists. And then, a hotbed for integrationists. And on and on. In so many instances, the University has been the forum for the unpopular idea. Ask your parents about the Speaker Ban Law. Later, the University allowed a Ku Klux Klan member to speak on campus. Irrespective of how unpopular or stupid or hateful an idea may be, it can be discussed here. I have never been prouder to be a part of the University than when it defended the students’ and the professors’ right to read and discuss the summer reading assignment, *Approaching the Qur’an*. On national television, no
less, the Provost defended eloquently the tradition of free thought and free expression on this campus. It was front-page news in The New York Times. And I was very proud.

And the University has protected academic freedom—the right of the professor, within his field of expertise—to explore, teach, and publish any idea or purported form of knowledge without fear of reprisal from his employer. It’s a far more elegant idea than “if you have tenure, then you can’t be fired.” You were schooled well because your professors were not gagged by the whims of church or state or public opinion.

For four years, you have pranced around in an institution that values, above all, truth and the act of seeking truth. The University has wanted you to know the truth. At the University—in its atmosphere—you have enjoyed the right to know. The freedom to explore ideas, wherever they led.

It is safe to say that here at the University was the freest environment that you have ever experienced and—quite possibly—ever will. And that environment of freedom deserves your continuing, lifelong support. “Giving back to the University in order to ensure that your children have the same free space as you enjoyed” is a big step in the direction of realizing life as you live it.

Closing
The finest definition of education I have ever encountered did not appear in an education book. (Frankly, most education books are incredibly dull, and that includes mine.) No, the finest definition of education I’ve ever encountered was in Life Magazine. It was a year after President Kennedy had been murdered, and it was on the editorial page. I can’t recall the title—"Kennedy a year later; Kennedy remembered." Whatever. And in it, they were speaking about Kennedy as a teacher. And they said he was like a good teacher—“instructing us in realities and suggesting dreams.”

I have never found a better definition of a teacher, nor a better definition of education, nor a better reason to teach a course, nor a better way to realize life than to instruct in realities—recognizing that that of necessity will entail an examination of the nitty and the gritty and the downright unpleasant—but at the same time, suggesting dreams—the possibility of hope and of change. Remembering always that our education is the grandest of enterprises, and it is what we know after we have forgotten all of the facts.

I close with an old Irish blessing: May the hills rise up to meet you. May the wind be ever behind you, and may God hold you in the palm of his hand.

And good luck to you all!