Bill Cosby's Commencement Address at
Southern Methodist University, May 20, 1995

The following is a transcript of entertainer Bill Cosby's commencement address at
Southern Methodist University. He spoke extemporaneously.

Good morning. Good morning. Thank you. Thank you. I appreciate it, and at
these prices we have to move along quickly.

My wife asks me why I always go out this time of year to pick up an honorary
degree and talk. It's just a very special time. I get a chance to talk to people who
would ordinarily be in my audience after having paid to sit and laugh. I get to see
them and I get to see their children at a great, great moment. Certainly a moment
that in their life is very important.

I've been to enough schools to see that the graduating class is an island
surrounded by the people they owe. It's not only that you owe them money. As a
parent, I said to my children... Well, they were all there when I started talking. And
they all found excuses to leave. There was no one left but the dog when I finished.
But I said to them, "When you graduate from college, you pretty much guaranteed
yourself that any fool sitting for five years is going to get something out of it."

Obviously, we have the summa cum laudes, the magna cum laudes, the cum
laudes, and then about 85 percent are the "thank you laudes." Well, to the people
surrounding them, it's "thank you laude" we don't have to pay any more and listen
to their excuses, blaming the professors and the dog and noise in the hallway, etc.
But this is a "thank you laude" that SMU is going to send out into the world, who is
going to say he or she graduated from SMU. A pure "thank you laude." Somebody
who just did enough, and at times, was forced to do just enough. We would like to
think of these people in some sort of rehabilitative way as a late bloomer. A college
on, saying "I need a job." Let them know that you are a "thank you laude," but please don't use the same excuses that you used on your professors, because this is the real world out here and we want you to work. We want people with 3.8 averages to go get coffee. We want 3.9s to have a suit pressed and the car washed. We want 3.9s in the mail room. So please don't think that little piece of ribbon is going to do you any good. You're going to see "thank you laudes" down there where you are [at the employment office]. And I'm telling you right now, somebody's going to drop out.

But, the most important thing no matter what you will become is that you will have a chance to take in wisdom. The people surrounding you have that. They've always had it. You never listened. However, there is something you will experience that may force you to listen to at least 45 percent of what these people with wisdom have to say. That is debt. You are going to go into debt. You've always been in debt, but this time it is different because you are going to pay.

Your parents now have a clear reason to say, "You are going to pay." You've got a degree. I don't. You are going to pay. How many of you are the first person in your family graduating from college? Raise your hands. Raise your hands. You especially are going to pay, because all they are going to say to you is, "I don't have a degree, we worked hard to get (ahead), we did, and you're supposed to." You people are the ones in trouble. They expect you to be president tomorrow. Wisdom is what you're going to have to have.

You're fortunate to have the class of 1945 seated there. Instead of going out and popping a bottle of champagne or something, grab one or two of them. And you say to them, "You remember when you graduated." They weren't in this building certainly. I don't know where they were, out in the field somewhere. It was the old days. They might have just come up and gotten it [their diploma]. It was during the war. They might have had uniforms on. They might have just gotten it
People will frighten you about a graduation. They frighten you because they use words you don't hear often. "Godspeed." You say, "What?" "Godspeed," and they look at you seriously and they say it in those tones (loud deep voice). "And we wish you Godspeed." It is a warning. "Godspeed." It means you are no longer welcome here at these prices.

Journey — that word is always in graduations. You're going to take that damn hat off, and you're going to go get a job. You're not going on a journey. Take the bus. You know where they hire people. Get in line right away, because they're graduating all over the United States of America. And there are 800 tons of "thank you laudes" down there. And the good thing about "thank you laudes" is they don't stay in line too long. They come right back home. "Well, the place all filled up, Dad..."

We had a "thank you laude." Our first daughter, "thank you laude," came home and for three months she got up at 2:30 in the afternoon and left the house at a quarter to five to go look for work. In those days I was afraid of our children, because Freud had stepped in and I didn't want to be an evil parent and put pressure on her by saying, "Look. Get out." You know. Newspapers would pick it up. Bill Cosby. Evil father. After spending $200,000 on his daughter's education, threw her out of the house.

One day she came home at a quarter to six and said, "All the places are closed." So I was very sarcastic. And this is what lets you know your children don't have any wisdom. I said to her, "Well, dear, perhaps they'll come here." And my daughter looked at me and without malice of forethought said, "You think so?"

I'm going to tell you a story. This is not a story that I wrote. It is one that I heard, but I think it's a wonderful story. And if you heard it, don't tell your friends the punch line.
took his car keys away from him, and went away.

The man, standing there naked, walked home. The next morning he woke up, went to the sporting goods store, bought an outfit, camouflage, two rifles — automatic, infrared sights — went out to the same place and waited. Six hours. The bear came walking along. He fired 16 rounds. The bear ducked, rolled, hid behind a tree, ran up a tree and down a tree, dug a hole. The man missed. Both rifles empty. The bear got up, walked over to him, took all his clothes off of him, took the car keys, and kissed him on the mouth. The guy walked home.

Next morning he got up and went to the sporting goods store. He bought a camouflage outfit, two boxes of illegal hand grenades and dynamite. He built a little house up in the tree. The bear came by. He started throwing the hand grenades and the dynamite and missed. The bear looked up and called him down. The man came down, and the bear put his arm around him and said, "This is not about hunting anymore, is it?"

Class of 1995: This is not about getting a degree anymore, is it? This is it. Some of you are smart. You have applied for graduate school. My son is like that. He is working on his 17th master's degree, but I frightened him. I told him I am not going to ever die. Wisdom. Wisdom. You are going to have to be pragmatic and accept it that life is really a course and the sooner you accept certain things and stop trying to bend [life to] your own rules, you're going to get along and you're going to get ahead.

There are thousands of openings if what you believe in is sound and you stay with it. But certainly there are certain things you want do. "Well, I want to have a full campus life." All right. Some of you had a full campus life. Some of you haven't. Some of you have studied very, very hard and put your faces in there and wouldn't let a course go by without your pride of knowing what that course was about. These are the people who will have a full after-campus life because they will
University, because it's about my father. My father represents no more than any man or woman who sits up here. As we are getting an education, sometimes we get so excited about what we know that we want to show off. We want to show our parents. My father worked in a steel mill. He smelled like oil and ground steel, and he had sweat in any part of his shirt that bent. I remember my father as a little child. My father would bother me all the time. I would come home, and he would say, "What did you learn today?" And I didn't learn anything. I didn't want to learn anything. You know. There was a whole lot of "what did you learn?" and I tried to make up things I had learned. He said, "That's nothing. You come back and you tell me what you've learned." So I had to make up something.

I was in college. Temple University. And of course, Professor LaBlandt, Doctor LaBlandt, asked the question, and we would talk for two to three hours on this particular question. It was a wonderful course, just enlightening, but we could never satisfy him with answers. I came home one day, and my father was washing his hands. I came up to him, feeling quite superior to this man.

I said, "Dad, the most humorous situation occurred today in philosophy class. The professor was telling us a story about an exam that was given in psychology at Princeton, and the professor's question was 'why?' And the answer that got an A was 'why not?'"

My father said, "And this is what you all are talking about. 'Why not?' is not a good answer to 'why?' " And then he began to talk for 20 minutes about why 'why not?' was dumb.

I said, "Dad, it's not a big deal." And those of you who have fathers like this know you begin to back off. "Dad, you know it wasn't a big deal. Okay? Leave it alone."

"No, damn it, you bothered me. Now, I'm gonna..."

And then he got on Dr. LaBlandt. "And you tell that idiot. You tell him your father said that 'why not?' is not the proper answer to 'why?' The proper answer after you have been in the war, and after you have fought the
Obviously I did not have enough wisdom. I came back to him again. I had forgotten. I said, "Dad, we discussed for two hours. Dr. Zelwigger said, ‘What song would the Baltimore oriole sing if there were no Baltimore orioles?’"

My father looked at me and said, "And what answer did you come up with?"

I said, "Well, we haven’t come up with one, yet."

He said, "How long you been talking about this?"

I said, "Two and a half hours, and then we’ll go back Thursday to discuss it again."

He said, "How much you paying for that course?"

I said, "You know. I’m on a full ride. An athletic scholarship."

He said, "Well, make them pay you. You all are sitting up there discussing a bird?"

I said, "Yes. And it’s the only bird of its kind."

And he said, "And the question is ‘what song would it sing if he was the only one?’"

I said, "Yes."

And he said, "Nobody came up with the answer?"

I said, "Not yet. We’ve been going all around."

He said, "Well, if it’s the only one of it’s kind, he’d sing his own song, wouldn’t he?"

I said, "Well, we’re discussing this. That’s what we’re discussing."

He said, "Is that that same man that liked ‘why not?’"

Well, Thursday I went to class. I was nervous, but I waited, like the bear. And Dr. Zelwigger said, "We were discussing. . . ."

And I said, "He would sing his own song, because he is only one of a kind." I got an A. Got an A.

And from that, I also was taking abnormal psychology. When I told my father I was taking that, he said, "Well, you’ll ace that. No problem. If by no other means,
bells and horns and things going off and he would just... Whenever he heard anything, you know, a simple door bell and he was gone.

Anyway, the last one. I came to my father fully excited and I said to my father, "I've got one for you." I didn't say it, but I knew I had him, because we had gone four hours on this. I said, "Dad, is the glass half full or half empty?"
He said, "It depends on if you're pouring or drinking."
I killed my father shortly thereafter.

I will quote myself, and make it sound very Biblical. "Know ye that ye are the fruits — tutti-frutti. And know ye that ye also will hear that you are going forth." You're not going forth. You're going to take that damn hat off and you're going to get a job. And you're not going to sit on your laurels and walk around with a piece of paper, saying, "I did it. I've been under a lot of pressure. I really need a vacation."

My daughter went to college. She entered her freshman year. Ten days later she came home. I said, "What are you doing?" She said, "We're on a break."
This is not work. You've made it work.

Last. Two things.

Number one: This class of '95 is going to send money to this school. It is important for you to send money to this school. There's a lot of you sitting out there. You owe money. You owe for your education. You go to them and say, "I need a scholarship. I've run out of money." And they say, "Well, we'll see what we can find." Where do you think that money came from? It came from benevolent folk. Sitting there in the class of '45 probably are some people you got some money from. You guys have got to turn some money loose. And those of you who don't live in the United States, I want money from you before you leave. Leave your jewels. Everything. You didn't get 75 buildings because... Doak Walker can't run
The other thing is, all of the "thank you laudes:" I want you to, in your minds, find two professors. And while you're looking for a job, and you're sitting around, I just want you to think about a professor that you abused by doing nothing and looking for a C. I want you to write the professor and apologize. I'm honest about it. It will clear you up for when you get older and that professor's dead; you saw the professor working, and you knew the professor was a hard worker and a good professor. You sat there with your little jive self, and you said, "I'm just gonna take... Charlie, what's the answer on that. Give me the thing on... You got your book on that? Okay, I'll copy your stuff... But, really, I didn't know she had written the same thing I had written. And we had never gotten together. I swear." So you get a C. I just want you to be able to cleanse yourself; now that you're graduates, you are mature and you have wisdom. So we start by having good manners. Good slate. You got two professors. Pick them out. Send them just a short note. "Could have done better, but didn't. I respect you." Because professors take grading personally. And when they see that you don't understand, they think it's their fault, even on the college level. So when you come clean, that professor can feel good about himself or herself.

I want to thank all of you this afternoon. It's a holiday. It's a vacation. But also it's a day of joy. It really and truly is in spite of what I have said, which is true. But there's nothing like it. The next one will be your next graduation. But, also there will come a time when you will be sitting up there, and you will look down at your own "thank you laude." Hopefully, not. Every class can't have all "thank you laudes." Where will the "thank you laudes" come from? Your loins.

The bad news is that your "thank you laude" is 21 years away, which means SMU will cost $108,000 a semester. That's expensive for a seat.

Thank you.