

On this evening, we honor you and your accomplishments. You have worked hard, with passion and dedication, and the awards you receive tonight are well-deserved.

I would like to take this moment to reflect on the word “honor.” That word appears in the title of tonight’s event (the Honors Convocation). Honors, in this context, refers to the awards that are being given in recognition of accomplishments. Used this way, the word is synonymous with distinction, glory, or fame, as well as the benefits that come with those.

Honor, however, has another meaning. It means also the adherence to what is right, to the practice of being ethical. In this way, it is synonymous with good character, principled action, integrity. In our present context, it refers to the honorable ways we presume you have worked to attain your successes.

This second meaning of the word “honor” may not be obvious from the title of this event, particularly in a world where external trappings and material gain take precedence over integrity. We need only look at the influencers and reality stars who dominate popular culture or to our political system to find people with an abundance of wealth and awards, but in many cases, substantially less, or potentially no, honor. We might also examine our collective tendency to conflate wealth and achievement with good character, and our seeming inclination to overlook lapses in honor if they bring material rewards.

Sophocles, in the 5th century BC, wrote that he would prefer to fail with honor than succeed by fraud. He was, even then, concerned about a human tendency to value honors over honor. Similarly, In the twelfth century, the Sephardi philosopher Maimonides warned that “Man’s obsession to add to his wealth and **honor** is the chief source of his misery.”

As you go out into the world in this 21st century, I hope you reject our contemporary obsession with honors over honor and remember the wisdom of the ancients, conducting yourself with integrity and treating all others with dignity and respect. I hope you do so even if others fail to recognize it, and even if it brings you hardship, not reward. Of course, if you succeed honorably, and through that success receive honors, enjoy them, for you will, as you have tonight, earned them.