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Remarks by SU Chancellor & President Nancy Cantor Chancellor's Convocation for New Students

Friday, August 28, 2009

Today I'm very happy to meet you, and to welcome you. We're thrilled that you're here! This is your campus, this is your city, this is your world, and this is your time (to dance – and I'll explain that in a moment)!

This dome is full today of amazing alumni who have sat in your seats – would they all stand for a cheer – and faculty and staff who will be your partners – and let's cheer for them too.

Just a few months ago, here in the dome, our graduating students heard from Vice President Joe Biden, a graduate of the SU College of Law. As I look at you today, some of his words keep going through my mind. He said that we are standing at an inflection point in history, where the curve shifts, everything comes together and everything changes. The same can be said for you today – this is your inflection point, when you can shape not only your future, but all of ours.

As Biden said: “Absent ... input and leadership, the world will continue to careen in the direction the momentum is now taking” us. “Do nothing,” he said, “or take history into our own hands and bend it to the service of a better day.”¹

¹ Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Remarks at Syracuse University's 155th Commencement, Sunday, May 10, 2009.

Now, how do you, at this inflection point in your life, help us take history into our own hands? How do we bend the direction of the economy, the education of children, the sustainability of the planet, the possibilities for peace, the relations between peoples, sending the curves upward for a change?

Joe Biden said “imagine a country where creativity and scientific knowledge are valued.” Well, that place is right here, and that time is now, and that will help turn the curve upward for sure. But it will take more than our intellectual capital, and more than what you can learn in the classroom – as necessary as that is to constructing a better future.

It will require that you look outward, connect to others here and everywhere, as your wired generation can do so well. You have to be the world’s best *public diplomats*, and you need to start right away. You need to prepare *for* the world *in* the world. It's not too early---in fact, it's the right time---to start bending things in the service of a better day -- building long term relationships at every level that open the doors to communication, problem-solving and change. Public diplomats, that’s what you need to be.

Many of us suppose that diplomacy belongs to professional diplomats, to heads of state, to former Presidents who can travel to North Korea, to members of Congress. But these are the players on only one level of what Joseph Nye, former dean of the Kennedy School of Government, who will

keynote our public cultural diplomacy panel next month, has called a three-dimensional chess game.²

On the second level of this chess game are groups of nations and non-governmental organizations trying to deal with issues that require multinational attention and cooperation. And on the third level---whether we think about it or not--- are all the rest of us, hundreds of millions of people who drink the world's water and breathe its air, who imbibe each others' cultures, and who are deeply affected by the new global technology and economy. For whether we see each other or not, whether we know each other or not, we play vital roles in each others' lives. We are grass-roots public diplomats, and doing our job well, as Nye points out "is a two-way street that involves listening as well as talking."³

Of course, grass-roots public diplomacy is just as hard and just as delicate as the more formal conversations between heads of states and nations. It involves the risk of getting out there and experimenting. That is what you are here to do. And there are opportunities to connect, in real time, in direct ways, both in settings explicitly structured to do just that – as in the Dialogue Circles in your residence halls and Inter-Group Dialogue courses on campus – and in many less obvious places, in the laboratories and studios in which you'll do your work; in projects in downtown Syracuse, and around the globe through SUAbroad.

² Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, a member of the Perseus Book Group, 2004, pp. 4-5.

³ Nye, p. 111.

It can happen as you ride the Connective Corridor bus to immerse yourself in the many worlds of Syracuse itself, from the Syracuse Stage to Co-Lab at the Warehouse— and you can do that starting this Saturday night during “Feel the Pulse of Syracuse.” It can happen as you join Syracuse Say Yes to Education in a game-changing moment for 21,000 children across this entire city school district. It can also happen in the Syracuse Technology Garden downtown where you can work in a different kind of sandbox, doing innovation and entrepreneurship on the cutting edge. You can bend the curve in the service of a better, more sustainable world as you help us enact our campus carbon-neutrality plan, or reverse the fate of life in Onondaga Lake. You represent a talented band of public diplomats and we will count on you to design a more livable, equitable and sustainable world.

But to do that, you will need to listen as well as talk, interact across chasms, and make yourselves vulnerable, letting the tables turn on who is the expert and who is the novice, playing many roles beyond the familiar student and teacher. How do you start the conversations, large and small, weighty and trivial, that constitute good public diplomacy?

There are many answers, clearly, but for me, the arts – broadly defined – are amongst the best conversation starters, or as Twyla Tharp, one of the dance world’s best said – “Art is the only way to run away without leaving home.” And “running away” is what you and we need to do – leaving home to get in the world of others, in their space and voices, in order to listen deeply and talk broadly.

This is what happened when the great cellist Yo-Yo Ma gathered together the Silk Road Ensemble at the Tanglewood Music Festival in Massachusetts. The trade routes of the ancient Silk Road existed for more than 2000 years and spanned thousands of miles, connecting Europe and the Middle East with all of Asia. So the superb musicians who gathered in Tanglewood came from Mongolia, China, Uzbekistan, Iran, Armenia, Turkey, India, Japan and Korea.

Many of them didn't play the same scales or speak the same language. Some of them read music and some didn't. But as they began to learn and enjoy each other's music, they became aware of a vast universe of connections between them, and they began creating amazing new music that drew upon their different traditions.⁴ This morning, I want to play you just a few seconds of one of their pieces, "Battle Remembered," arranged by Zhao Lin. It pays tribute to the people of Kashgar, a remote crossroads at the western edge of China in one of the harshest deserts in the world. We can hear, see, and feel it in the music. [Musical Excerpt Played]

What is extraordinary about the conversations imagined through the arts is precisely the multiplicity of worlds evoked and connected. You will be able to do that as you engage your first year shared experience, with Shen Wei Dance Arts, who opened the Beijing Olympics with their dance, photography and technological wizardry. Next month you'll see their newest pieces centered in the culture, religion, and history of Tibet and Angkor Wat, and along The New Silk Road, where China, the Middle East,

⁴ Yo-Yo Ma, Album notes for the CD *Silk Road Journeys; Beyond the Horizon*, SONY BMG Entertainment, 2005.

and the West converge today to shape our futures. This experience should bend the course of your own lives and the communities you touch through your many conversations.

Shen Wei's work and the broader notion of public diplomacy itself speak to all the components of our inflected world today: to the history of how we got here; to the myriad cultures, languages, and values we bring to the table; to the ways in which the natural and social worlds converge and collide; and to the need for conversation and deep connectivity and communication---more perhaps than Twitter or Facebook or even the internet world of *Second Life* can provide.

As we watch the wonders created by Shen Wei's conversation with history and the future, each of us---and especially you as you take your first steps on the Silk Road of exchange in higher education--- must think about the best way to prepare for making a difference.

Here, we should heed the advice of Nick Donofrio, another Syracuse alum, who retired after 44 years as a chief innovation leader at IBM. To master this highly interconnected, ever-changing world, we need what he calls "T-educated" individuals – with deep (the vertical of the T) knowledge of one or two fields connected to broad knowledge across other fields (the horizontal on the T). Both are critical to bending the curve and solving complex problems.

Take your expertise – whether it is your major or your passion – and connect it broadly to other disciplines, other modes of understanding and

expression, other peoples and places, and most critically, to all the many inter-related concerns of our time – the environment, the economy, peace, education of children, health of everyone, democracy itself. Here at SU, you'll have plenty of company. Students and faculty from a wide range of disciplines---information studies, engineering, art, drama, history, social work, architecture, design, business, education, journalism, philosophy and writing, to name only a few---are deeply involved in ongoing partnerships with community groups, state and local government, businesses, artists, foundations, and the city's public schools. As you get involved, the truth is that you'll be surprised at your facility for public diplomacy, and at how much you change, as you become steeped in others' lives, in the pressing issues of our day, and the innovations that can make a difference.

Becoming a "T-educated" person involves preparing for a world of surprises, where you can't count on having one career or living in one community for the rest of your life. You can take this from me. I grew up riding the subway in the heart of New York City, but some of my most formative experiences turned out to be in rural communities, living in a coal mining town in West Virginia and in a fishing village in Norway. I was a girl who studied dance seriously and then went to college and ended up broadly spread across other fields – anthropology, math, literature and psychology. In graduate school, I studied social psychology, spending many years after that as a faculty member, only to become a university chancellor, surprising myself as much as anyone. It's not what I was expecting, but I do find myself using social psychology every day!

None of us can predict exactly what's coming next. We need deep, broad knowledge and experience, and we need wide, meaningful, and sustainable connections with each other so we can stay flexible, like Shen Wei's dancers. So we can be prepared to make the right bends in the road, not just get carried along.

And remember that no one does this alone. One way or another, we're all out there with you, dancing on the edge. So, just as Shen Wei's dancers do, please have fun in the process, for unlike them, you only get to dance college once – so get out there and let it all go!! *Go Orange!*