

Commencement Address at Bradley University  
Saturday, May 16, 2009

Thank you very much. President Glasser, University trustees, faculty, parents, and graduates:

It's a privilege to be with you, and to meet the newest alumni of our great school. Congratulations, Bradley University class of 2009.

President Glasser was kind to mention that I completed my studies here in half the usual time. My goal today is to give you a commencement speech in half the usual time.

I'm betting that after sitting through so many lectures, you're not in the mood for another. This is a day for simple things – for partings and thank-you's that have a lot of feeling, but don't require a lot of words.

There's so much to be grateful for on graduation day, especially when you think of the people who stood behind you these four years, and long before that. This is a proud moment in their lives, too – so may I suggest a round of applause for the parents of the class of 2009.

I guess my role this afternoon is to condense for you some wisdom from these many, long years since I was a Bradley undergrad. I applied here way back in '99. And I know what you're thinking: Wow, the guy remembers Bradley from the last century – where'd they find this old dude?

It's kind of nice being thought of as something of an elder, because these days all I'm known for is being the youngest one in the crowd. Stephen Colbert came by for an interview, and then told his viewers, "I sat down with Congressman Schock before his mother called him in to dinner." And I certainly didn't feel like anything special when I first showed up in the nation's capital. They told me to take a number for room draw and report to freshman orientation.

I was sworn in on January sixth. And I was very touched at first to learn that sounds of celebration were heard all across the Bradley campus that evening. Then a friend explained, "Sorry, Aaron, it

wasn't for you – that's the night the Braves gave Illinois State a lesson in serious basketball.”

I'm only four months into my new job, and I do hope to stay there a little longer than I did at Bradley. I know, as well, that I've got some very fine examples to live up to, in two predecessors who are both Bradley alums. Congressman Bob Michel, class of 1948, served with distinction for four decades, beginning in the days of Eisenhower – and before that he was an Army hero in World War Two. Congressman Ray LaHood, class of 1971, served 14 years, and now makes all of us proud in the Cabinet of President Barack Obama.

It's a privilege to carry on the work of Bob Michel and Ray LaHood. But I'll admit that when I ran for Congress at 27, it wasn't to keep the seat for Bradley. And, of course, I knew some people would say it was too early – that someone barely older than the constitutional minimum ought to just wait a while. If you're in your 20s, the advice you're most likely to hear is “not now.” And often enough, that turns out to be the right advice.

So I did some careful thinking before making a move. I knew there were risks – although the way I look at it, that can be said about practically every path in life. There's always a chance that things won't work out. But while the risks remain, the opportunities don't linger for long. There are times when we have important decisions to make, and the only thing that stands between us and a great opportunity is the fear of failure. And the big thing I've learned is never to let fear make your decisions for you.

You don't have to live long in this world to learn the truth of that. You'll never hear anyone say they regret setting a goal and striving to reach it, even when they've fallen short. I'm glad I noticed that early on, though at this point in life I try to spend less time giving advice than gathering it.

Some of my new colleagues in the Congress have been around a long time. One senator was there when Harry Truman was president. I've gotten to know one member who was also elected when he was

still in his 20s – and will soon mark his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday. It's not hard to suppose that I came into office with a different perspective on many things. And I know that part of my job is to let an old institution hear the voice of a new generation.

There's a saying that every congressman spends his first six months in the Capitol wondering how he got there, and the rest of his term wondering how the rest of them got there. Well, the first part of that is true. Yet when I look around the House of Representatives I find a good deal more to admire than to look down upon. I know that I still have plenty to learn from colleagues who have lived and served much longer than I have. I recommend the same approach in all of life. Most everybody has something to teach, if you're willing to listen.

Wisdom comes from many sources, and when you're looking for it, party affiliation isn't always the best guide. If you spend too much time watching cable TV, or reading the same blogs every day, or even listening to the same professors, there's a temptation to think all the smart people, all the good people, all the ones worth listening to, are neatly assembled on your side of every question. That's rarely ever true. And when we take the measure of others, there are much higher standards than whether they happen to think or vote the way we do.

The conventional view is that you've got to draw lines – between this group and that, between the ones you talk with and the ones you talk about. But nothing positive ever comes of that attitude. And besides, it's boring – a sure way to narrow your thinking, close off other ideas, and turn away good will. The fact is, you can go a lifetime admiring someone and trying to be more like them, without ever knowing or much caring what their politics are.

I'll spare you a long discourse on what makes for a good life or a good person, because I'm still working on that myself. But I'm pretty sure that fine words do less to build character than seeing the real thing right in front of us, or in an example from the past.

I think of a story about Ronald Reagan back during his Hollywood

days. As a biographer tells it, Reagan had a reservation at a nice restaurant, and it somehow got lost. He got mad at the mix-up and yelled at the manager – really let him have it. It's hard to picture rudeness in the man, but that's what happened. The biographer was surprised, and asked the manager if he ever saw Ronald Reagan after that. He said, "Oh, sure, the next morning when he came to apologize."

You and I have a lot of living to do, and when we fall short of our own standards, we could do worse than to own up to it with that kind of humility and grace. Sometimes the surest sign of a person's character comes after a stumble, small or large. The test isn't always in meeting the highest mark, but sometimes in missing it, and how a man or woman keeps trying to do more and become better. As the saying goes, the best sermon is a good example.

There are many to be found. I've met quite a few people since graduating from Bradley. You will, too – even if you're not trying to put up a yard sign on their front lawn. And it's worth remembering that the best human qualities are widely dispersed. Like wisdom, neither side can claim to have them all. When you choose your friends, what matters most is goodness of character and the way they treat others, especially the most defenseless. Kindness, decency, and honor have no political affiliation, and in a free country they never will.

Everyone who collects a Bradley University degree this afternoon has already set a pretty good example yourself – of meeting high standards with hard work and perseverance. Years from now, when you look back on this wonderful day in your lives, you may have a little trouble remembering who the commencement speaker was. But you'll never forget the feeling of accomplishment, the hopefulness of the moment, and the sense of possibility that is yours right now.

May there be many more such moments ahead for each one of you. May the pride and good wishes that fill this auditorium today carry you onward to even greater things. I wish all of you success and happiness, wherever life takes you. Congratulations and good luck to

the class of 2009.