THE NEW SCHOOL

2010 University Commencement Remarks from Bruce Edward Babbitt

Thank you President Kerrey. I am pleased to join you, the graduates, family, friends and faculty on this happy occasion.

I am especially pleased to be here at The New School, with its history and commitment to the American progressive tradition—a place where the arts and humanities remain at the vital center of education.

Preparing for this speech, I thought back to my own commencement several decades ago—and could remember very little—except it was a beautiful day—and the speech was way too long. I therefore promise to be brief.

Commencement speakers typically offer advice about the multiple issues that await you in the outside world. Today I will confine my remarks to just one such challenge—the onset of global warming, a process that threatens to transform the lives of every person in every country of the planet now and for generations to come. I think of rising sea levels that threaten to displace hundreds of millions in coastal areas from Bangladesh to Vietnam and China to Louisiana and the shorelines of our Atlantic coast. Of droughts that will devastate agriculture in the most vulnerable regions of Africa and Asia. And the oil spill spreading relentlessly across the waters of the Gulf is a stark reminder that we must reduce and end our dependence on fossil fuels that are driving global warming.

Today I ask you to consider—how do we break through the wall of complacency that blocks action on global warming. How can we mobilize a response to this oncoming threat?

The hour is late, but there is still time to awaken and accelerate the transformation toward a sustainable world. To justify such optimism, I would like to share with you a chapter from my own life experience.

When I began my education back in the 20th century, America was on vacation. We lived in a comfortable and complacent society of white suburbs and lifetime job security. And in white America, there was no place for blacks. Racial segregation was a practice sanctioned by law, backed by public opinion and enforced by lynch mobs. Then, in just a few years, attitudes began to change as waves of activism and reform swept the nation.

The civil rights movement demonstrated that our country can move from complacency to meaningful action and reform in quick succession. The question for us is how to trigger such a transformation today, in time to avert the worst consequences of global warming.

The most instructive lesson that I take from my time in the civil rights movement is this—change did not come from the top. It did not begin with elected officials. It came from the streets, from the bottom up, as individual Americans awakened to their moral and civic responsibility. It began with ordinary citizens—with lunch counter sit ins in North Carolina, freedom rides in Alabama, a bus boycott in Montgomery, voter registration, and rallies throughout the country.

Global warming has yet to generate a comparable grass roots movement. So far the issue has been largely defined and communicated by scientific elites. History tells us that is not sufficient. We must engage more broadly.

Our challenge is to instill this cause into our personal lives and outward into our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and local governments, building networks of concern and action at every level.

We can begin with personal commitment:

To live and advocate a low carbon life style.

To use our power as consumers to drive change in the market place.

To make transportation choices that moves the market away from oil.

I am often asked whether I advocate civil disobedience—the answer is yes—so long as it is civil in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr.

Al Gore has urged civil disobedience to protest the construction of new coal fired power plants—and his leadership is forcing change upon the electric power industry. The other essential lesson from the Civil Rights era is the importance of values in motivating political change. We only need recall the leadership role of religious leaders, their churches and congregations in the Civil Rights movement.

Today in the campaign against global warming we

have not yet effectively engaged with the ethical and religious traditions that counsel concern for our environment. We must do so. Americans may not be deeply moved by biodiversity or equity for future generations, but they were and are moved by religious belief.

There are many ways of expressing ethical and religious values. I personally see the evolution of the natural world as an expression of divinity. My friend and evangelical leader, Calvin DeWitt, describes himself as a two-book Christian, explaining that he finds the word of God both in the Bible and in the book of Nature. Judaism connects to the natural world in multiple meaning and metaphor. As do other beliefs in the religious inheritance of our world.

Finally in each of our lives, we must renew our connections to the natural world in a direct and personal way—whether watching a sunset along the Hudson, a flock of geese winging toward the Arctic Circle, or taking our children to explore a neighborhood park. Reason alone is not enough- it must be supplemented by passion and commitment. We cannot save what we do not love.

I urge you to take these values out into the world—to leave here with a personal commitment to begin anew the transformation of our planet.

Thank You.