

Thank you President Cowen. Members of the graduating class. Faculty. Family. Friends. Somewhere among you there is a human being who just realized that he's not about to see an arena football game for free. Whoever you are, thank you too. The doors are now locked.

It's both an honor and a shock to be here.

An honor for me.

A shock for you.

Not long after President Cowen asked me to give this talk, I received a copy of an article that appeared in the Tulane Hullaboo. The writer, to put it mildly, was upset that I'd been asked to address you. She wrote that no group of students have been so deeply insulted by the choice of commencement speaker since the University of Pennsylvania selected Big Bird.... Big Bird.... My little brother sent me that article. It made him very happy. I thought it was unfair to Big Bird.

So I should probably begin with an apology. But I can't. I'm too flattered to be here. I grew up in Uptown New Orleans and like many uptown New Orleanians, my family has long and involved relations with Tulane University. Monroe Hall is named for my great-grandfather, Blanc Monroe. My father graduated from the Tulane Law School. First in his class.

I didn't go to Tulane but I feel as if I did. Like every New Orleans boy I had an important decision to make: Tulane Or LSU? Even as a boy I could tell there was a difference. LSU people told jokes about Tulane people. Tulane people told jokes about LSU people. The difference was that Tulane people didn't think of them as jokes. They thought they were true stories. I remember one of these. It was about halftime at the old Sugar Bowl stadium, during a Tulane-LSU football game. Two guys- one from LSU, the other from Tulane-stand side by side in the bathroom. The Tulane guy finishes, zips up, and walks out. The LSU guy finishes, washes his hands and runs after him. "Excuse me, he says, "but at LSU they teach us to wash our hands after we pee. The Tulane guy turns to him and says, "At Tulane they teach us not to pee on our hands.

When I was ten years old that seemed to me to capture all the important differences between the two schools. I'm not sure that it still doesn't.

Anyway, I'm a Tulane fan. And this morning I will take it for granted that you should feel proud to be graduating from Tulane. I want to use my remaining few minutes to talk about the two things that all of you dressed in black share in common.

The first is this city. As all of you know by now New Orleans is an unusual place. One of my literary heroes, A. J. Liebling, said that if you want to understand New Orleans you have to stop thinking of it as the southernmost city in North America, and start thinking of it as the northernmost city in South America. In theory, it's a mess. Whenever people add up the statistics New Orleans winds up leading the North American League only in the bad categories- crime, poverty, obesity, illiteracy, various exotic forms of cancer. If all you knew of New Orleans were its stats you'd be running for the exits. Seriously. You'd be hauling tail across the Causeway to Mississippi. Looking for Civilization.

Yet you still came here. And you stayed. Because you knew, or you sensed, that a place is more than the sum of its numbers.

In a funny way, I think what's special about this place you've chosen to be educated in is how wholesome it is. It has been slower to fragment than most of America. It is always trying to connect the present to the past. To keep all the pieces together.

Just after I published my first book, I had a New Orleans moment. I was on a book tour. On a book tour you run around the country and try to pester people into paying attention to you. It's a bit like running for President, but without the sex. In the middle of this book tour I had a moment: I appeared on the David Letterman Show. The week or so after that I got a glimpse of what it meant to be a minor celebrity. I'd walk down the streets of American cities and strangers would stop me.

The book tour came to New Orleans. When I arrived at my parents' house my mother asked me to go buy her a carton of milk at Langenstein's. And so there I was walking down the aisle. I was, to put it mildly, pleased with myself. I'm thinking: I've been on Letterman. I've arrived! I'm thinking: Even though I was just on Letterman here I am, still humble enough to buy groceries at Lagenstein's. Just then an elderly woman stops and points. Then she's pushing her cart towards me. And just before I could say 'ah yes, I'm that guy from Letterman,' she said, "you're Malcolm Monroe's grandson, aren't you? I'd never met the woman. But she pointed to my eyes. And she said, "I see your grandfather in here. I never felt so recognized.

This is what is peculiar about this old place. It's a place that embraces and loves what is old, simply because it has been around. It's a place that cherishes family values so deeply that it doesn't need the phrase. It's a place that is always focusing on what is, or seems to be, permanent.

This brings me to the other thing- the cruel thing- that you graduates have in common: you must now leave. Not New Orleans. School. They give this ceremony a happy name: commencement. They only do that because it's so unpleasant to watch young people weep in public. The fact they make you dress in black for it should have been a clue. You're being banished. You are being ejected from this lovely and loving place out into the world. And the world you are heading out into is uncertain.

It seems more uncertain now - but that's an illusion. A lot of what will happen to you, and around you, you can't control. The question is: in what spirit do you approach this uncertain world?

I wish I had some original advice to offer. I don't. So I'm going to do something very much in the spirit of New Orleans. I'm going to pass on to you the advice my father gave me, passed down to him by his fathers before him. He only ever told me three things, and he told me them when I was, like you, graduating from college. Just before the graduation ceremony he gave me the first tip. It turned out that we had a family motto. I'm not sure if it was emblazoned in Latin on top of our coat of arms but it might as well have been. Six generations of Lewises in New Orleans had lived by it, he said. And then he recited:

Do As Little As Possible
And That Unwillingly
For It is Better to Receive a Slight Reprimand
Than to Perform an Arduous Task

No one else will ever give you this advice, for fear of being sued. But it can be useful. And it relates directly to my father's second piece of advice:

Under no circumstances, however dire, should you become a lawyer.

Now my father didn't mean this literally. HE was a lawyer. And there were lawyers he greatly admired lawyers who loved the law. What he meant was, don't be lawyer because you can't think of what else to be. What he meant was if you have any kind of choice you shouldn't do a thing just because it gives you an easy answer to the question: what do you do for a living? When you get out of school you feel slightly desperate to answer that question. You want it settled. But it's never going to be easier than now to keep it unsettled. To take a chance. To find something worth taking a chance on.

My father's third and final piece of advice came right on the heels of the first two pieces, and more or less contradicted them. Money, he explained, is very important. All by itself it may not make you happy. But it won't make you sad either.

Now this brings us to one of the oddest things about American life at least outside of New Orleans. We are, as a nation, the richest people ever to walk the earth. We know more about money than any people in history. And yet the more we have the more importance we attach to the getting of it.

When I got out of college there was a new phenomenon. Wall Street was hiring people as fast as they could walk in the door, and paying them more than young people had ever been paid. I lucked into one of these jobs. Two years in they handed me a bonus of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars and told me that if I hung around a few more years I would be rich. Two million dollars a year, minimum. (Back then two million a year was real money.) The trouble was that I now had something I loved to do: I loved to write. I didn't know anyone who made a living by writing but I had an offer from a New York publishing firm, to write a book that explained why anyone would pay me millions to do anything. They'd offered to give me forty thousand dollars to write it.

Now my father had told me that money was very important. But he had also told me, more vigorously, not to be a lawyer. And on Wall Street I was, in effect, a lawyer. I was just there because I couldn't think of what else to do. And so I called my father and very excitedly told him I was going to quit this million dollar job to write a book! He went silent for about five seconds. "You might just want to sleep on that, he said. A few minutes later he had a thought. He said, "why don't you just stay on Wall Street long enough to get really rich and THEN write your book? It can be a book about how you got rich.

This sounded sensible. The trouble was when I looked at older people on Wall Street I couldn't imagine any of them ever walking away to write a book. They didn't have the necessary passion, and I knew that if I hung around that place I wouldn't either. And so I quit, and I wrote my book.

And, in a sense, it cost me. I never got really rich. But I have memories that I wouldn't trade for money. One is when my sister called me from New Orleans to say that my father was wandering the streets of downtown looking for someone to brag to that his son had had published a book. He had entirely forgotten how much it cost.

Your parents want you to make them proud. And you should. But you've got to do it yourself. And to do it yourself you may have to ignore their advice. Do what

you love before you figure out how much love will cost you. And never forget: if you do it right, there's no need to wash your hands afterwards. That much would be true even if you had gone to LSU. Thank you and Godspeed.