

# Anderson Cooper – Yale University

## Class Day Address, May 21, 2006

Thank you very much. Thanks. Thank you. Who else but a Yale student would describe hosting a reality show as expanding my journalistic capabilities. I love that, love that. Yeah. Were it only true.

Members of the Class of 2006, friends, faculty, parents, members of the Taliban: Thank you very much. [Cheers and applause.] What? What? Oh, come on. Come on. What are you going to do, bury me up to my head in the sand? Hey, I've been there, I've been there.

I have to be honest, I was a bit nervous to come back to Yale. I graduated with the Class of 1989, 17 years ago, and I still have this recurring nightmare ... Trumbull, yes, thank you, Trumbull. Sure, why not? [referring to Trumbull College] I still have this recurring nightmare that there's some exam I haven't completed in one of those throwaway science courses like "Intro. to Psych" or something. [Laughter and some boos.] Oh, come on, I love "Intro. to Psych." I just really didn't want to take a science course. And actually last night I literally had a dream that the campus police had an outstanding warrant for my arrest if I returned to Yale. So I was a little bit nervous.

And the other reason I was reluctant to return to campus is that being here actually allows the Yale Alumni Association to get a pinpoint on me. Because you don't know this about the Yale Alumni Association yet, but let me just warn you: For the rest of your life, they will hunt you down. No matter where you go, no matter what country you live in, they will find you, and they will write you letters and they will squeeze you for every cent you make. Seriously, enjoy the next 24 hours because right now you are still students. Tuesday morning they will have all your numbers, all your addresses in the database and they will start tracking you. If Osama bin Laden was a Yale graduate they would know what cave he was in, exactly. It's true. President Bush should get the Yale Alumni Association on the case.

I was actually very excited to meet many of you today until I actually did meet you and realized how young you are all and how old it makes me feel. Tre Borden [Class of 2006 Secretary] informed me that actually most of you were born the year I graduated from high school, which is personally a terrifying prospect for me. It's also a little worrying because the only thing I remember about my high school is my senior prom — well, actually the after-prom party — and I only remember bits and pieces of it. But if what I remember is true, it is very possible that some of you are my children. Especially you with the blue eyes and prematurely gray hair, right there. Let me just say that if that is true, for legal reasons I can't say whether or not you are my children, I'm bursting with pride today. And I'm sorry for not being around for the last 20 years or so.

Seriously, it is a pleasure to be here on what is a remarkable day. It's a beautiful day if it doesn't rain and a very special day in your lives. You've worked incredibly hard to get here, to get through here, and I hope you're all very proud of yourselves. You should be. And I'm sure you've already done this, but I hope that at some point this weekend — I'm sure everybody's encouraged you to do this — that you look your parents in the eye and hug them close and thank them for everything they have done to get you to this moment and this spot. Because as hard as it's been for you, I guarantee you it's been twice as hard for them. [Applause.]

I wasn't really sure what to talk to you about today and I asked Tre and he said, "Well, you know Class Day is such an important day, and I'm sure we'd love to hear some of your memories of it." And that calmed me because the truth of the matter is I have absolutely no memories of this day. I thought back to my own graduation and, I mean I'm sure I was here because I have the little clay pipe and I remember I had the pipe because my mom found it my room that night and accused me, thinking it was a pot pipe. And so we got in a big argument about it and my roommate decided to solve the argument by taking out this two-foot water pipe that he had in a locked box in the living room and comparing it, to show that in fact, that was not a pot pipe. It went well, yeah, it went very well. [Laughter.]

So I have no actual memory of sitting here in a funny hat listening to a speaker, which I actually find calming because, frankly, it doesn't matter what I say, because you all are not going to remember this by, you know, tomorrow. But your parents are going to remember this because they paid through their noses for it, so I will try to make it memorable for them, if for no one else. I do remember Commencement ceremony: I remember the cap and gown, the polyester, I remember the procession, I remember being excited and nervous and completely confused about my future — feelings, I imagine, that most of you are experiencing in some form. When I graduated, when I was sitting here I imagine, I hadn't actually applied for any jobs and I really had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. [Cheers.] Yeah, that's right. Raise your hand if you're in that position. I remember asking my mom for advice, something I rarely did growing up because my mom is not the most practical person on the planet. The last time I'd done that was in middle school, when I was having problems in math class and I asked her for some advice and she told me to wear vertical stripes because they're slimming. I didn't know what that meant.

But her advice to me at Yale graduation was "Follow your bliss." I was hoping for something a little more specific, like plastics. [Laughter.] What, plastic? You like plastic? All right. But in retrospect, follow your bliss was pretty good advice. My mom didn't actually coin the phrase — actually it was a professor at Sarah Lawrence College named Joseph Campbell who did — and my mom had seen a taped interview on TV. It kind of shows you our relationship — she was giving advice she had gotten off of television. I'm thankful she wasn't watching Montel Williams or something, or Fox News. I kid, because they have huge ratings. They kill me.

The problem, of course, with follow your bliss (and I actually think that's pretty good advice), but the

problem with follow your bliss is actually trying to figure out what your bliss is, and that's not an easy thing to do. Like many of you, I have a liberal arts degree, which is to say, I have no actual skill. And I majored in political science [cheers]. You're excited about it now, but believe me, it doesn't go very far. It means you can read a newspaper, but other than that, I'm not really sure what else. I also focused a lot of my studies on communism, which when the Berlin Wall fell, I was totally screwed. I know, it was a happy occasion for a lot of people, but believe me, on this campus, believe me, all of the Russian studies majors were very down in the dumps. The one thing I knew I liked was television and particularly television news. I watched a lot of it growing up so I figured okay, I've got a Yale degree, I'll go give that a shot, I'll apply for an entry-level job at ABC News, a gopher position. Like I'm totally qualified for this: answering phones, I'll go do whatever Peter Jennings wants. I could not get this job. It took six months; they strung me along; I did interviews. I could not get the job, which shows you the value of a Yale education.

But it actually was the best thing that ever happened to me. I decided that if no one would give me a chance, I'd have to take a chance, and if no one would give me an opportunity, I would have to create my own opportunity. So I came up with this plan to become a reporter. I figured if I went places where there weren't many Americans, I wouldn't have much competition. So I decided to start going to wars, which my mom was thrilled about. It was a very simple plan, but it was moronic, but it actually worked. I made a fake press pass on a Macintosh computer — actually, I didn't even make it to be honest, a friend of mine made it because I'm computer illiterate — and I got a home video camera that I borrowed and I just decided to go to wars. I snuck into Burma and hooked up with some students fighting the Burmese government and moved into Somalia in the early days of the famine. I spent really the next two years going from one war-torn country to another: Bosnia, South Africa for Mandela's election. I was in Rwanda for the genocide, which makes ultimately doing "The Mole" a natural step, as you can see where I'm going.

I may have gone to school at Yale, but I always think that in many ways I was educated on the streets of Johannesburg, in Kigali, in Sarajevo, in Port-Au-Prince. And I've learned when you go to the edges of the world, where the boundaries aren't clear, where the dark parts of the human heart are open for all to see, you learn things about yourself and you learn things about your fellow human beings and what we're all capable of. We're capable, really, of anything, great acts of compassion and dignity, as we saw in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. We're also capable of great acts of cowardice and brutality and stupidity, which we also saw in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The funny thing is that just two years after doing this, of going on my own and going into wars, ABC News called me up and offered me a job as a correspondent. I was just about 27; I was the youngest correspondent they hired since they hired Jennings and Koppel years ago. For me, it was a lesson: two years before I tried to get an entry-level job and I thought that was the path, because that was the path that everyone took. And had I gotten that job there was no way I would have had the opportunities that I had;

there was no way I would have seen the things I've been able to see.

When I was graduating and trying to decide what to do with my life, I really felt paralyzed because I thought I had to figure it out all at once. I had to pick a career and start down a path that I'd be on for the rest of my life. I now know that it totally doesn't work that way. It certainly didn't for me. Everyone I know who's successful, professionally and personally, could never have predicted when they graduated from college where they'd actually end up. My friends from Yale who are happiest are the ones who thought less of where they'd be in 10 years and what steps they'd have to do now in order to make partner 10 years from now in a law firm or build their 401K. My friends who are happiest now are the ones who kept taking steps based on what they felt right and what felt like them at the moment. If I had gotten that job on the set of ABC News there's no telling where I'd be now.

When I started going to wars I had no clear goal in mind. There was no path that promised me success or job security. But I was listening really to myself and followed my passion, and I'm more convinced than ever that if you do that, you will be successful. I'm not talking about rich — perhaps you will be — but you'll be fulfilled, and that's the greatest success you can have.

I always wince ... I'm kind of rushing because I see the skies darkening, which frankly happens wherever I go, so if I whip out my rain slicker, you all are totally screwed. I always wince when someone says that college is the best four years of your life, because, frankly, for me it wasn't. I hope it's not for you either. Every year after college just gets better. Your confidence grows; you're living the life that you've chosen.

It's so interesting to me how real life has very little to do with what you've learned here, and yet, what you've learned here, what you've struggled to achieve, will help you. I can't exactly say how: It's not something that can necessarily be defined. When I first went to war in Somalia I was surrounded by teenagers with guns and grenade launchers, there was nothing particular that I've learned at Yale that allowed me to survive. When I was in Rwanda in the genocide and was surrounded by bodies and had seen terrible things, there was no one particular class that I've taken that helped me get through. And yet something about the experience here — the friendships, the accumulating of facts and theories, the confidence I gained over the course of four years — allowed me to go to those places and helped me chart my own course.

At Yale I met some of the smartest people I know but that kind of academic success really means very little once you've left this campus. I've never been asked what my grades were at Yale; that only happens if you run for president, and frankly, as we've all seen, it doesn't even matter. No one has ever asked me to talk about my senior thesis paper and I've never gotten a job because I was on the lightweight crew team. All those things were hugely important to me at the time, but right now, in truth, they are kind of dim memories for me. And I'm not saying they're frivolous or unimportant, they're not, and I treasure all the

opportunities I had here at Yale.

But when you graduate, the slate is wiped clean. Outside of college campuses, I think we're encouraged today to see things through a very limited lens. On cable news, anchors have become caricatures, wearing their politics on their sleeves or their lapels, claiming that they're looking out for you and if you only watch their show or read their book, you'll be able to understand how things really are. It would be kind of humorous if it weren't, frankly, dangerous. On reality TV shows you watch people swapping lives, but a genuine swapping of ideas is something you rarely see outside of the college campus. We're fighting not just a war of terror but a war of ideas, and I think it's important that as a class, we all understand the importance of understanding other people's ideas, our enemies' as well as our friends'.

I'm not very good at giving advice. We all know that's Bill O'Reilly's job and he does it very well. I actually Googled graduation speeches to see what kind of advice other people give at these kind of things, and believe me, they're incredibly cheesy. Goldie Hawn told graduates at AU, and I quote, "While you are continuing to walk down that sometimes bumpy road of life, develop the art of laughter and joy. Keep in your backpack of treasures the whole you, the best you, the you that won't fear failure." [Laughter.] Yeah, think about it. Think about it. Backpack of treasures. Very true. Yoko Ono gave a Commencement speech (she didn't sing it, she actually talked at it.) She said: "I say you can't stand if you've got too much muck in your head. Let it go, and dance through life." So true, so much muck, you know? Muck is a big problem. Of course. it's easier to dance through life if you have a billion dollars, but I digress.

Since my mom gave me advice from television, I'm actually going to give you advice from a movie, because that's the best I could come up with, frankly. It's one of my favorite movies: "Lawrence of Arabia." (Cheers.) It's a cool movie, I know. There's a line in it where Lawrence says, "Nothing is written." And for you, I think, on this day, at this moment in your lives, I think that is especially true. Nothing is written. You've been taught how to write for yourselves. This weekend, the slate is wiped clean. There are no words that you have to use. There are no sentences you must complete. You stand before a field of freshly fallen snow; there are no footprints that you have to follow. Nothing is written. And I hope you know that it is truly a rare and wonderful place to be. Congratulations, Class of 2006. You deserve it."

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**Anderson Cooper Biography**

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Anderson Cooper anchors “Anderson Cooper 360°,” an unconventional, wide-ranging news program airing on CNN/U.S. weekdays. Cooper, who joined CNN in December 2001, served as CNN’s weekend anchor before moving to prime time in March 2003, following the war in Iraq and then to a two-hour, late evening timeslot in November 2005, following Hurricane Katrina.



Since joining CNN, Cooper has anchored major breaking news stories, most recently the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast. He traveled to Sri Lanka to cover the tsunami and was in Baghdad for the Iraqi elections. Cooper also anchored much of CNN’s live coverage of the funeral of Pope John Paul II in the Vatican City as well as the Terri Schiavo story in Florida. For “America Votes 2004,” he moderated a Democratic presidential candidates’ forum the network sponsored with Rock the Vote.

Before joining CNN, Cooper was an ABC News correspondent and host of the network’s reality program, “The Mole.” Cooper anchored ABC’s live, interactive news and interview program, “World News Now,” as well as providing reports for “World News Tonight,” “20/20” and “20/20 Downtown.” Previously, he was a New York-based correspondent for ABC News, reporting primarily for “World News Saturday/Sunday.”

Cooper joined ABC from Channel One News, where he served as chief international correspondent. During that time, he reported and produced stories from Bosnia, Iran, Israel, Russia, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa and Vietnam. He also reported national stories that were broadcast over the Channel One News school television network and seen in more than 12,000 classrooms nationwide.

Cooper has won several awards for his work, including a National Headliners Award for his tsunami coverage, an Emmy Award for his contribution to ABC’s coverage of Princess Diana’s funeral; a Silver Plaque from the Chicago International Film Festival for his report from Sarajevo on the Bosnian civil war; a Bronze Telly for his coverage of famine in Somalia; a Bronze Award from the National Educational Film and Video Festival for a report on political Islam; and a GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding TV Journalism for his “20/20 Downtown” report on high school athlete Corey Johnson.

Cooper graduated from Yale University in 1989 with a bachelor of arts degree in political science. He also studied Vietnamese at the University of Hanoi. Cooper is based in New York City.