Stanford celebrates 100th commencement

STANFORD -- With both drawing on personal experience, 78-year-old John Gardner gave Stanford University graduates a formula for remaining vital through a long life, and University President Donald Kennedy offered advice on how to survive difficult times.

Gardner was the featured speaker and Kennedy delivered a "farewell to the graduates" at Stanford's 100th commencement Sunday, June 16.

"If I may offer you a simple maxim, 'Be interested,'" said Gardner, the founder of Common Cause and now the Haas Professor of Public Service at Stanford. "Everyone wants to be interesting, but the vitalizing thing is to be interested. Keep your curiosity, your sense of wonder. Discover new things. Care. Risk. Reach out."

Reflecting on Stanford's widely publicized troubles with the federal government during the past year, Kennedy told the graduates: "You may at some time or another suffer adverse public attention, as I have. Only then will you know how essential it is to have and hold your own standards for yourself.

"If you rely too much on the view others have of you, you will be vulnerable to the casually formed opinions of strangers. But if you trust your own values, you can endure harsh public criticism and even learn from it without the loss of self-esteem."

The ceremony, held in Stanford Stadium under a cloudless blue sky, was attended by approximately 3,100 graduates and 30,000 spectators. The graduates displayed the high spirits and antics that have come to be associated with Stanford commencement. At least one roller-skated into the stadium and several were blowing soap bubbles as they strolled to their seats. Among messages taped to their mortarboards were "Just Barely" and "Hire Me." Four young women carried a colorful handmade poster thanking their parents and wishing their fathers a happy Father's Day.

Historic occasion

The historic nature of the 100th commencement was touched on by both Gardner and Kennedy.

Gardner acknowledged the presence in the audience of a woman who had been alive for Stanford's first commencement, his 100-year-old "alert and vital" mother.

Kennedy quoted from contemporary newspaper accounts of that first commencement, held in June 1892 in Encina gymnasium. According to the San Francisco Call, the 27 men who received bachelor of arts degrees "were all of them handsome, and the two ladies in the receipt of similar honors were bewitchingly beautiful and supremely intellectual." Kennedy noted that the newspaper said nothing about the men's intellectual achievements.

Kennedy on trials of past year

Kennedy devoted much of his talk to a discussion of Stanford's difficulties with the federal government over the issue of indirect cost recovery, problems which he said "brought to the institution we all love the
sour taste of public disapproval."

University officials, he said, have had to admit "to being mistaken about some things, and failing our own standards of excellence in others."

But despite public apology and aggressive reform, he said, "we learned that the special social value of great universities, so self-evident to those of us who have spent our lives in them, is not held everywhere.

"For some of our critics -- in our government as well as in the media -- the admission and rectification of mistakes is not enough," he said. "Their view seeks conspiracy as an explanation rather than lapse of judgment, and invokes fraud even where error is more plausible. It is a harsh and even punitive view, and from it we have learned that outside the family, neither institutional integrity nor high purpose guarantees the regard on which we had come to rely.

"We need to remember that we must have the confidence not only of the Stanford family but of the society that supports us.

"Stanford means too much to us, too much to the nation, to let it suffer long from human error," he told the graduates. "It belongs, after all, not to my generation or even yours, but to your children's. So we will repair the defects, and make Stanford ready for those who will follow you."

Kennedy urged the graduates not to draw from his experience any negative conclusions about the perils of leadership. Leadership entails risks, he said, but it also brings joy and satisfaction.

"And I want you to know that I would not consider trading, even for relief from the agony of the last several months, the extraordinary privilege I have had here for 11 years."

Gardner on commitment, community

In his address, Gardner stressed the importance of commitment "in this transient, rootless, pluralistic society. Your identity is what you've committed yourself to. If you make no commitments, you're an unfinished person.

"It's a popular view today that the important thing is to find out who you really are, to liberate the 'real you.' But self-knowledge isn't enough. You build meaning into your life through your commitments -- whether to your religion, to your conception of an ethical order, to your loved ones, to your life work, to your community."

Rebuilding community is a particularly complex task in the contemporary world, Gardner said.

"A community of any size has within it diverse subcommunities," he said. "So the problem -- whether in the Stanford student body or in contemporary Europe -- is to achieve wholeness incorporating diversity.

"The goal is not to achieve wholeness by suppressing diversity, nor to make wholeness impossible by enthroning diversity, but to preserve both. Each element in the diversity must be respected, but each element must ask itself sincerely what it can contribute to the whole. I don't think it is venturing beyond the truth to say that 'wholeness incorporating diversity' defines the transcendent task for our generation."

Returning to his topic of lifelong motivation and energy, Gardner said, "Life is an endless unfolding and -- if we wish it to be -- an endless process of self-discovery, an endless and unpredictable dialogue between our own potentialities and the life situations in which we find ourselves.

"Perhaps you think that by age 35 or 45 or even 55 you will have explored those potentialities pretty fully. Don't deceive yourself! The capacities you actually develop to the full come out as the result of an interplay between you and life's challenges -- and the challenges keep coming. And the challenges keep changing."

The United States "is facing a test of character, all the more profound for being diffuse, all the more difficult for not being precipitated by enemy attack," Gardner concluded.
The test, he said, "is whether in all the confusion and clash of interest, all the distracting conflicts and cross purposes, all the temptations to self-indulgence and self-exoneration, we have the strength of purpose, the guts, the conviction, the spiritual staying power to build a future worthy of our past."

The ceremony ended with the Fleet Street Singers doing a standard rendition of "The Stanford Hymn." Then, as the graduating seniors chanted "Rap! Rap! Rap!" the singers returned to perform their rap version of the hymn. After the faculty had left the stage, the Stanford Band scrambled onto the stage to entertain the crowd.

This is the text of President Donald Kennedy's Commencement address, delivered June 16, 1991.

And now, my friends, it is time to consider -- according to our ancient tradition -- the vital question: Is there life after Stanford?

All of you, in one way or another, will have to face that question. The scholar-educators among you will confront it in overheated classrooms in unfamiliar places, as they struggle with the conversion from expert learner to novice teacher. Those just hatched as lawyers will soon be reaching for 2300 annual billable hours, while remembering what it was like -- in the time before Life After Stanford -- to have a life of their own. The doctors will discover that what may just now have seemed like a watershed really wasn't, and that Life After Stanford really is Endless Education. And you, down there, the Centennial Seniors, will take your various routes to the future; and you will think often of how different that future is from the way you imagined it on this day.

I hope you will all think, too, of the character of the Stanford life you left behind, and of the ways in which it has changed you. This community has many special qualities. One, to which you have grown very accustomed in the past few years, is its openness and trust. As new alumni -- can you believe it? -- you may soon come to realize how much responsibility you actually had here. And there is also a lot of accountability: We report our flaws, trust one another and put the facts on the table. A by-product is that whatever the issue -- CIV [Cultures, Ideas and Values], racially harassing speech, indirect cost recovery or sexism in academic medicine -- we find our family differences on network television. We should not be embarrassed at such public exposure; it is a natural consequence of institutional prominence and our habit of openness.

A related quality is the custom of learning together -- not just from the curriculum, but from living together and confronting challenges collectively. The texts of the past are important; but so, too, are the passages in present life that demand transformation and stimulate growth. These times of reckoning were called "teachable moments" by Jim Lyons, and they will provide especially durable memories for Life After Stanford.

Your time here has spanned a great divide of change. It began in the late '80s, just as our national enthrallment with money and satisfaction was beginning to wane. You brought Stanford a new commitment to public service. You participated in significant intellectual innovation, through the enthusiasm you gave to international and interdisciplinary studies, to the environment, and to the CIV debates. You reinforced our faith in the brilliant judgment of [Undergraduate Admissions] Dean Jean [Fetter]. And of course you were the first Stanford class since 1967 that, in four years here, never surrendered the Axe.

Great accomplishments, great movement. But this past year -- your last --
was memorable in a different and difficult way. It brought us a series of problems in Stanford’s relationship with the federal government, and it brought to the institution we all love the sour taste of public disapproval. We cannot, even at a time of celebration, ignore the seriousness of this episode. That would be dishonest, and it would neglect the wisest of all aphorisms: that those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

What have we learned? We have learned that despite our best expectations and despite our confidence to the contrary, we at Stanford are not immune to errors of judgment. Our pride in our management systems and our internal communication proved to be misplaced. We failed to understand that we were expected to accommodate to a new and evolving standard of accountability. We have had to own up, in short, to being mistaken about some things, and failing our own standards of excellence in others.

We have followed that recognition with public apology and with aggressive reform. But that process itself has brought another form of learning. We learned that the special social value of great universities, so self-evident to many of us who have spent our professional lives in them, is not held everywhere. For some of our critics -- in government as well as in the media -- the admission and rectification of mistakes is not enough. This view seeks conspiracy as an explanation rather than lapse of judgment, and invokes fraud even where error is more plausible. It is a harsh and even punitive view, and from it we have learned that outside the family, neither institutional integrity nor high purpose guarantees the regard on which we had come to rely.

We need to remember that we must have the confidence not only of the Stanford family but of the society that supports us. Thus we are deeply engaged in the process of recovery and reform. Stanford means too much to us, and to the nation, to let it suffer long from human error; it belongs, after all, not to my generation or even yours, but to your children’s. So we will repair the defects, and make Stanford ready for those who will follow you.

Now let me speak more personally, and from the heart, because if our tradition of teachable moments means anything, the best gift I can give you as you depart is a frank accounting of my own learning in the last few difficult months. Like all advice it comes with a warning label: The giver is seldom the perfect practitioner. My mother put it more simply: "Do as I say, not as I do."

First, you may at some time or another suffer adverse public attention. Only then will you know how essential it is to have and hold your own standards for yourself. If you rely too much on the view others have of you, you will be vulnerable to the casually formed opinion of strangers. But if you trust your own values, you can endure harsh public criticism and even learn from it without loss of self-esteem.

Second, few of us are so free of self-doubt and so independent that we can entirely ignore such assaults -- so the loyalty of those who know us best is revitalizing. I remember some words from a prominent man who was asked, in the midst of a trying episode of public disaffection, how he stood it. He answered, a little grimly: "The guys I care about know." During personal crises you become exquisitely sensitive to the rewards of the loyalty and love of those who really matter to you -- and of those in whom you miraculously discover those qualities at the moment of trial. Conserve and treasure those relationships; you will need your friends -- just as they will need you.

Third, there will be pain -- but pain is a teacher and you have to learn from it. In a speech to Stanford alumni in Los Angeles early in April, I reminded them that I was a biologist before taking up other things, and therefore understood the evolutionary significance of pain. It is supposed to prevent the recurrence of stupidity. In yesterday’s remarkable baccalaureate address, we were reminded that these painful experiences are, in terms of self-understanding, even more valuable than the successes. If you hide the pain too well from yourself, you may miss the lesson; and if you hide it too
well from others, they may decide that you’re insensitive -- or, maybe worse, that you just don’t get it.

Fourth, your dignity is a priceless asset. I don’t mean social dignity -- the capacity to say the right thing, or to dress properly for the occasion. There is a deeper personal dignity that takes the hard shots with grace, doesn’t look for the nearest place to dump the blame, and -- above all -- doesn’t whine. No one can take your dignity away from you, but you can lose it. It is very much worth keeping.

Fifth, and most important: Please don’t draw from my experience any negative conclusions about the perils of leadership. Leadership, as John Gardner told you, entails risks. But it also brings joy and satisfaction. You should know that I would not consider trading, even for relief from the last several months, the extraordinary privilege I have had here for 11 years.

The arena, as Theodore Roosevelt called the high-risk domain of public life, is a rewarding and dangerous place. Great forces are at work there -- forces you can barely steer most of the time, and can never control. But there you ride upon the majestic tectonic plates of social change and popular will. As they move and shake you, you come to understand them as others cannot. Sometimes, just when you think you know them well enough to predict their movement, they knock you off your feet. Then you must recall the homily of Marian Wright Edelman’s father, which she related here last year: "It doesn’t matter how many times you fall down; it’s how many times you get up again." Support with all your might those who elect to enter the arena with you, to share the joy and the risks. Cultivate a wary indifference toward those who watch but never play, and tolerate them when they contribute occasional blinding flashes of hindsight.

Last of all: Which arena? I have one worry about your inclinations, and it emerges from many studies of your cohort of university students; it is a mistrust of government and other large organizations, and an appetite for the personal independence you associate with ventures of small or local scale. One illustration: Though more committed than your forerunners to public service, you are considerably less likely to vote.

I worry about this non-involvement with national political life, and I fear, too, that if your preferences prevail, we will neglect a national need to make the big systems work better. There is a myth abroad in the land that says we can somehow get along on venture capital and smokeless information, without big government or big production. That is nonsense. We have to make ships and steel as well as software, and we can’t run a nation on local or special-interest politics. We need large systems to solve large problems, like rebuilding cities and rehabilitating the environment and addressing poverty. A nation of entrepreneurs insistent on their own space will not get those jobs done.

So I urge you not to shrink from the big tasks. Don’t turn away from them because they are risky, don’t turn away from them because they are public, and don’t turn away from them because they are large. Our society needs the grand ventures, and the grand ventures need you.

Finally, I want to thank you for all you have meant to Stanford and to me during these past years. You and I know that this is a special place, and that nothing will change that. But you should also know that in this year particularly you have brought me a great sense of pride and personal joy -- the joy of knowing, beneath the smog of harsh and often distorted criticism, what splendid things go on here. More than that, many of you have brought me the gift of your friendship and support, and for that I thank you.

Whatever your views about these challenging, trying times, I hope you will take good memories of Stanford with you. To assist that hope, I send you off with words I use at this moment each year -- words said at another commencement by Adlai Stevenson:

"Your days are short here; this is the last of your springs. And now, in the serenity and quiet of this lovely place, touch the depths of truth, feel the hem of Heaven. You will go away with old, good friends. And don’t forget
This is the text of the Commencement address delivered Sunday, June 16, by John W. Gardner, the Haas Professor of Public Service.

I am honored to have been given this opportunity, an honor too to be sharing the platform with you, Don, at this centennial commencement.

As many of you know, I returned to the university two years ago after 50 years in the East. Of course I had to go through the inevitable period of missing Washington. That took a couple of days.

There can’t be many in this audience who were alive 100 years ago when the first commencement occurred. But I do know of one alert and vital woman who meets that description and is here today. She supplied you with your commencement speaker and she put me through Stanford, so I want to acknowledge the presence of my 100-year-old mother.

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We are here to honor this year’s recipients of degrees, but since it is the centennial commencement we are also celebrating an act of faith and vision on the part of Leland and Jane Stanford. I consider myself fairly inured to the pain and tragedy of this life, but I’ve always thought that the loss of a child is the one event that would leave me completely shattered. For the Stanfords to fashion out of their grief a vibrant, living memorial is a tribute to their spirit. And when I think about Leland and Jane Stanford, that’s what I think about.

Wallace Stegner, in his remarks on Founders’ Day, dealt brilliantly with the historical background of this centennial occasion. I want to talk about you who are receiving degrees today - you and your lives ahead.

Let’s begin by assessing your present situation. I don’t agree with David Starr Jordan that you are children. You are now, for better or worse, adults. At puberty you were made self-conscious by the apparent attention of others. Now you are old enough to know that most people aren’t studying you critically; they are thinking about themselves.

Up to this point your jury in most matters has been packed by your elders. Now you must be willing to be judged by your peers - if you think you have any.

At age 16 you were old enough to doubt. Now you’re old enough to believe again and to bring doubt and belief into some kind of productive balance.

In your mid-teens you became old enough so that your parents could stop punishing you. Now you’re old enough to stop punishing your parents.

I once wrote a book called Self-Renewal that dealt with the decay and renewal of societies, organizations and individuals. I explored the question of why civilizations die and how they sometimes renew themselves, and the puzzle of why some men and women go to seed while others remain vital all their lives. And it is the latter question that concerns me today.

In the years ahead you will find that some of your contemporaries, even ones in fortunate circumstances with responsible positions, seem to run out of steam earlier than need be.

One must be compassionate in assessing the reasons. Perhaps life just presented them with tougher problems than they could solve. It happens. Perhaps something inflicted a major wound on their confidence or their self-esteem. Perhaps they were pulled down by the hidden resentments and grievances that grow in adult life.

I’m not talking about people who fail to get to the top in achievement. We can’t all get to the top, and that isn’t the point of life anyway. I’m talking about people who have stopped learning or growing or trying. And I don’t deride that. Just to keep on keeping on is sometimes an act of courage. But I do worry about men and women functioning far below the level of their possibilities. It need not happen.
As you settle into your adult lives, you cannot write off the danger of complacency, boredom, growing rigidity, imprisonment by your own comfortable habits and opinions. A famous French writer once said, "There are people whose clocks stop at a certain point in their lives." I could without any trouble name a half dozen national figures resident in Washington, D.C., whom you would recognize, and I could tell you roughly the year their clock stopped.

If you are conscious of the danger of going to seed, you can resort to countervailing measures. At any age. You can keep your zest until the day you die. If I may offer you a simple maxim, "Be interested." Everyone wants to be interesting, but the vitalizing thing is to be interested. Keep your curiosity, your sense of wonder. Discover new things. Care. Risk. Reach out.

Learn all your life. Learn from your failures, from your successes. I know that some of you are a little frightened - more than a little - of what's ahead. You know a lot - perhaps too much - about the ways in which lives get messed up. Bright illusions aren't your problem. But someone said, "Life is an error-making and error-correcting process." When you hit a spell of trouble, ask yourself, "What is it trying to teach me?" Sometimes it's confusing but Irene Peter pointed out that today if you're not confused, you're not thinking clearly.

We learn from our jobs, from our friends and families. We learn by accepting the commitments of life, by playing the roles that life hands us (not necessarily the roles we would have chosen). We learn by taking risks, by suffering, by enjoying, by loving, by bearing life's indignities with dignity.

The lessons of maturity aren't simple things such as acquiring information and skills. You learn not to engage in self-destructive behavior, not to burn up energy in anxiety. You learn to manage your tensions, if you have any, which you do. You find that self-pity and resentment are among the most toxic of drugs. You conclude that the world loves talent but pays off on character.

You discover that no matter how hard you try to please, some people in this world are not going to love you, a lesson that is at first troubling, and then really quite relaxing.

You learn to live along the way. You don't let the nagging pressures of life smother moments of beauty that can never be recaptured. Careless people treat unique moments as throwaways and live to regret it.

Those are hard lessons to learn early in life. As a rule you have to have picked up some mileage and some dents in your fenders before you understand. As Norman Douglas said: "There are some things you can't learn from others. You have to pass through the fire."

You bear with the things you can't change. You come to terms with yourself. As Jim Whitaker, who climbed Mount Everest, said: "You never conquer the mountain. You only conquer yourself." You master the arts of mutual dependence, meeting the needs of loved ones and letting yourself need them. You can even be unaffected - a quality that often takes years to acquire. You can achieve the simplicity that lies beyond sophistication.

I suppose every man and woman with the capacity to face reality - which eliminates most of us at once, including your speaker no doubt - recognizes that humans want meaning in their lives. Robert Louis Stevenson said, "Old or young, we're on our last cruise." We want it to mean something.

In the stable periods of history, meaning was supplied in the context of a coherent community and traditionally prescribed patterns of culture. On being born into the society you were heir to a whole warehouse full of meanings. Today you can't count on any such heritage. People run around searching for identity, but it isn't handed out free any more - not in this transient, rootless, pluralistic society. Your identity is what you've committed yourself to. If you make no commitments, you're an unfinished person. Freedom and obligation, liberty and duty, that's the deal. It's a popular view today that the important thing is to find out who you really are, to liberate the
"real you." But self-knowledge isn't enough. You build meaning into your life through your commitments - whether to your religion, to your conception of an ethical order, to your loved ones, to your life work, to your community.

Gandhi said, "Almost anything you do might be insignificant, but it may be very important that you do it." What he was saying, I think, is that you can't know the end of your efforts but you have to make an offering.

The aim is that you not suffer the contemporary fate of rootlessness and hollowness and faithlessness, that you not succumb to the ailment of the age, the tyranny of the imperious, imprisoning self.

The commitments that people make to values beyond the self are manifested in various ways - in their family and community life, in the way they treat any and all humans, in the goals and standards they set for themselves. There are men and women who make the world better just by being the kind of people they are. They have the gift of kindness or courage or loyalty or integrity. It really matters very little whether they are behind the wheel of a truck, or running a business, or bringing up a family. They teach the truth by living it.

One reason for the decline in the observance of ethical values is that the soil in which such values are rooted - the family and community - is being blown away in the dust storm of contemporary life. Families fall apart. People lose connection. More and more rootless people drift through life without a sense of belonging or allegiance to anything. Rebuilding community is one of the challenging tasks ahead.

But in the contemporary world, a community of any size has within it diverse subcommunities. So the problem - whether in the Stanford student body or in contemporary Europe - is to achieve wholeness incorporating diversity.

The goal is not to achieve wholeness by suppressing diversity, nor to make wholeness impossible by enthroning diversity, but to preserve both. Each element in the diversity must be respected, but each element must ask itself sincerely what it can contribute to the whole. I don't think it is venturing beyond the truth to say that "wholeness incorporating diversity" defines the transcendent task for our generation.

Today our communities need us, desperately - need our loyalty, our understanding, our support. Thanks to Don Kennedy's leadership, Stanford students are among the most active in the nation in service to the community beyond the campus.

But Stanford itself is a distinctive community which also needs our attention. Curiously, as you leave it, Stanford as a community will become in some dimensions more real to you. You will move into a larger Stanford community - dispersed throughout the world, sharing relatively few common activities, composed of many generations and yet bound together by a common allegiance. The physical beauty of the campus creates a sense of place that never leaves one. Deeper is the intellectual experience, intangible but powerful. And deeper still the personal bonds. Fifty years from now you will rediscover, away back in the cluttered attic of your memory, acts of friendship exchanged long ago, remembered with tears.

As many of you know, I count it as one of the marks of maturity that men and women nurture the institutions that nurtured them, not uncritically but lovingly, not to preserve them unchanged but to renew them as the times require.

Leland and Jane Stanford dreamed a remarkable dream. And what they created not only served the future - it helped to shape that future. We ourselves are moving toward a future we can only dimly discern. To pretend otherwise would be fatuous. Great currents are sweeping us along. Yet we must begin now to gather the knowledge, formulate the concepts and design the institutions that will enable us to survive that future, and perhaps with luck have some part in shaping it.

In those tasks, no instruments will be more helpful than the research universities. And Stanford stands in the front rank. We must strengthen it, protect it, improve it, renew it and help it to move to new levels of
greatness.

But I began this speech talking about you and your futures, and I want to return to that theme as I conclude.

One of the enemies of sound, lifelong motivation is a rather childish conception we have of the kind of concrete, describable goal toward which all of our efforts drive us. We want to believe that there is a point at which we can feel that we have arrived. We want a scoring system that tells us when we’ve piled up enough points to count ourselves successful.

So you scramble and sweat and climb to reach what you thought was the goal. And when you get there, you stand up and look around and chances are you feel a little empty. Maybe more than a little empty.

You wonder whether you climbed the wrong mountain.

But the metaphor is all wrong. Life isn’t a mountain that has a summit. Nor is it - as some suppose - a riddle that has an answer. Nor a game that has a final score.

Life is an endless unfolding and -- if we wish it to be -- an endless process of self-discovery, an endless and unpredictable dialogue between our own potentialities and the life situations in which we find ourselves. By potentialities I mean not just intellectual gifts but the full range of one’s capacities for learning, sensing, wondering, understanding, loving and aspiring.

Perhaps you think that by age 35 or 45 or even 55 you will have explored those potentialities pretty fully. Don’t deceive yourself! The capacities you actually develop to the full come out as the result of an interplay between you and life’s challenges - and the challenges keep coming. And the challenges keep changing.

We are just beginning to recognize how even those who have had every advantage and opportunity unconsciously put a ceiling on their own growth, underestimate their potentialities or hide from the risk that growth involves. It is my hope that you will keep on growing, and that you will be the cause of growth in others.

Let me conclude by saying as plainly as I can that this nation is facing a test of character, all the more profound for being diffuse, all the more difficult for not being precipitated by enemy attack. The test is whether in all the confusion and clash of interest, all the distracting conflicts and cross purposes, all the temptations to self-indulgence and self-exoneration, we have the strength of purpose, the guts, the conviction, the spiritual staying power to build a future worthy of our past. You can help.