

00001 GARDNER WEBB COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

00002 OF

00003 OLIVER MAX GARDNER III

00004 09 May 1992

00005 10:00 o'clock a.m.

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00007  
00008 A TALE OF TWO CRUTCHES  
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00011 Chairman Bost, President White, Members of the Board of  
00012 Trustees, Members of the Board of Advisors, Members of the  
00013 Faculty, Members of the Student Body graduating seniors, family  
00014 members, and friends of Gardner Webb, it is indeed a high honor  
00015 and a distinct privilege for me to speak here today at these  
00016 graduation ceremonies. It is also a very special honor for me to  
00017 be here almost 50 years from the very day this College was  
00018 renamed in honor of my Grandfather and Grandmother.  
00019

00020 My Grandfather, Governor O. Max Gardner, always attributed  
00021 his success in life to his education. He served this State as  
00022 Lt. Governor and Governor and later served under FDR as  
00023 Undersecretary of the United States Treasury and then under Harry  
00024 Truman as our Ambassador to Great Britain. During his term as  
00025 Governor of North Carolina, he caused the legislation to be

00026 passed whereby the State assumed control over all primary and  
00027 secondary schools in North Carolina and created the Consolidated  
00028 University of North Carolina System that we still have today.  
00029 And all along the way, he knew that the only thing that separated  
00030 him from his past was his education. He often said that but for  
00031 his education the highest office he could every have hoped for  
00032 would have been dog catcher of Cleveland County.  
00033

00034 When President White asked me to deliver this address, my  
00035 first thoughts were to give you a history of Governor Gardner's  
00036 struggles from a impoverished orphan in Shelby to the highest  
00037 diplomatic office offered by the United States in 1947. However,  
00038 I have elected to speak on another topic for two reasons. First,  
00039 it would take much too long for me to give a speech on the life  
00040 and times of Governor Gardner. I know that every senior here  
00041 today wants me to follow the KISS principle--keep it simple and  
00042 keet it short. Second, I wanted to deliver a message that would  
00043 transcend history and leave you with something that you could  
00044 always remember and hold onto. A message that offered something  
00045 more than a biography of the man and the woman for whom this  
00046 institution is named. I wanted to leave you with a message that  
00047 would endure and hopefully conquer the test of time.  
00048

00049 It then dawned on me that I should share with you today the  
00050 story about the two crutches I keep in my Law Office and about

00051 the one man who used them. It is a story of great courage, of  
00052 eternal optimism, and of great hope. It is the story of a man  
00053 whose hope was for the future and not the past or the present.  
00054 It is the story of hope that became faith; of faith that became  
00055 strength; and of a message that can deliver us today from the  
00056 persecution and starvation of our own souls.

00057  
00058 In the Book of Romans, Chapter 5, Verse 1, the Scriptures  
00059 tell us that "We rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that  
00060 suffering produces perserverance; perserverance, character; and  
00061 character, hope." The story of my young man and his two crutches  
00062 is the best example of the ultimate truth of these words.

00063  
00064 The man behind the two crutches died almost 31 years ago,  
00065 long before most of you were even born. However, the meaning and  
00066 purpose of his life are with us today and his spirit is present  
00067 with us at this time, at this place, on this campus at these  
00068 graduation ceremonies. For you see, in addition to everything  
00069 else he truly loved this school. It is my hope that the message  
00070 I bring you today about this young man and his life will endure  
00071 the test of time and will truly live on with you as you remember  
00072 this address in the years to come.

00073  
00074 When our young man graduated from the UNC School of Law in  
00075 January of 1950, he was truly one of the most outstanding and

00076 promising young men in all of North Carolina. He was the son of  
00077 a former North Carolina Governor and Ambassador to Great Britain.  
00078 He was the nephew of another North Carolina Governor who was at  
00079 that time a member of the United States Senate in Washington. He  
00080 was the heir of a family of great Baptist philanthropist and  
00081 religious and political leaders. He was the husband of a  
00082 unusually beautiful and exceptionally talented woman and the  
00083 father of two young sons. He was a man of great grace,  
00084 exceptional dignity and strong personality. He was at home in  
00085 the White House, the State House, the Court House, or even a Mill  
00086 House in Shelby. In those early days of 1950, many political  
00087 leaders in this State said that all of these qualities would  
00088 surely lead him to the Governor's Office in Raleigh and probably  
00089 even to the White House in Washington.

00090  
00091 Then suddenly, without any warning, like a dark and unseen  
00092 hand in the night he was stricken with a terrible disease. At  
00093 the time, he was 28 years old and he was running unopposed for a  
00094 seat in the North Carolina State Senate. His illness forced him  
00095 to withdraw from what would be his first and his last political  
00096 campaign.

00097  
00098 After three years of testing and more testing at some of the  
00099 most prominent medical centers in America, the doctors finally  
0100 confirmed that our young man had a severe and in fact terminal

00101 case of Multiple Sclerosis. There was not then and is not now  
00102 any cure for this disease. This is a disease that attacks the  
00103 central nervous system and in the most severe cases deprives one  
00104 gradually but inexorably of all of his or her motor skills and  
00105 body functions. It is a disease that leads to a gradual but  
00106 painful death in the most serious cases. It is a slow and  
00107 persistent killer that takes a little more life from its victims  
00108 each and every day.

00109

00110 In the case of our young man, his first symptoms were  
00111 blurred vision. He next had trouble picking up things such as  
00112 keys, coins, knives and spoons. Over time, he lost the ability  
00113 to walk and this is where the two crutches were first used.  
00114 He often boasted that he could walk as well as any man with those  
00115 two crutches and even better than some athletes. But, eventually  
00116 the crutches were not enough to support his ever weakened body  
00117 and he was confined to a wheel chair. When his back was no  
00118 longer strong enough to allow him to sit up, he was confined to a  
00119 hospital bed. He gradually lost the ability to use any of his  
00120 limbs and eventually lost the ability to speak. He was  
00121 eventually reduced to communicating by means of letters pushed  
00122 into place on a board by a pencil held between clenched teeth.

00123

00124 During the 11 years our young man struggled with MS, he  
00125 never once complained to anyone about his condition. He never

00126 once expressed resentment that MS had so viciously and without  
00127 any remission attached his body. He never once became bitter or  
00128 depressed about his condition. He never lost his faith and he  
00129 never lost his enthusiasm for life.

00130  
00131 Rather than loosing his enthusiasm for life, he he elected  
00132 to rededicate his life to solving the problems of the  
00133 handicapped. With this new goal, he pressed on all fronts in the  
00134 1950's for freedom of access for handicapped people to all public  
00135 and private buildings; he formed the "Open-Out" Clubs throughout  
00136 North Carolina in an effort to bring the handicapped out of their  
00137 homes to meet with others who faced similar problems; he  
00138 tirelessly campaigned for laws that would provide equal  
00139 opportunities for handicapped people in the work place; and he  
00140 pressed hard on all fronts for the end of all forms of  
00141 discrimination especially discrimination based on race, sex,  
00142 creed, color or any type of physical or mental handicap.

00143  
00144 He was a man who constantly reminded his two young sons that  
00145 all men and women should be considered equal under the law and  
00146 should always be treated as equals by them. He despised  
00147 prejudice in all of its forms and prayed for its elimination from  
00148 our society. He was a man of great vision and his social and  
00149 political views were clearly far ahead of his own time.

00150

00151 Over the course of his 11 year battle with MS, he was  
00152 interviewed by many newspaper, radio and television reporters.  
00153 During one interview with Kays Gary, the noted columnist for the  
00154 Charlotte Observer, he was asked how a man could maintain such a  
00155 strong enthusiasm for life and for solving so many problems in  
00156 the world about him when there seemed to be no future for him and  
00157 absolutely no chance for his recovery from his deadly illness.  
00158 The young man forced a smile and then slowly and laboriously with  
00159 pencil between his teeth pushed letters across his alphabet  
00160 board, painfully spelling out the words: "There is always hope."

00161  
00162 I think of this young man and of his struggle with a deadly  
00163 disease on a daily basis because you see he was my Father, O. Max  
00164 Gardner, Jr. Although his hope for his own recovery was not  
00165 realized, his death in 1961 did nothing to tarnish the brilliance  
00166 of his courage, the raw force of his undying hope, and the  
00167 strength of his optimism in the face of impending and certain  
00168 doom.

00169  
00170 I have also kept those two old crutches with me in my home  
00171 and in my office for the past 31 years. My wife says they seem  
00172 to be with me as if they belonged to me for my own use. However,  
00173 those two old crutches provide me with great inner strength on a  
00174 daily basis. Because you see, whenever I feel depressed or  
00175 simply overwhelmed by the people and events of this world,



0176 whenever I start feeling sorry for myself because of my own  
0177 problems and shortcomings, I just look at those two old crutches  
0178 and I think of all the pain and suffering that my Dad experienced  
0179 and of his tremendous courage, faith and hope. And, my problems  
0180 always seem almost non-existent or a least insignificant in  
0181 comparison to those faced by my Father.

0182  
0183 The force of the image of those two old crutches transcends  
0184 my own personal experiences and therefore can be a source of  
0185 great strength for you. We are now in the midst of a major  
0186 recession and each one of you must face tremendous uncertainty  
0187 with respect to your own professional and financial future. Each  
0188 one of you will also have to face many personal and family  
0189 tragedies as you move through this life. Suffering and living go  
0190 hand in hand.

0191  
0192 Accordingly, when you find yourselves beaten down by the  
0193 waves of woe on the desolate shores of doubt, I hope that you  
0194 will think back on these two old crutches and on the man who used  
0195 them and that you will find them to be a beacon of clear light, a  
0196 steady and strong anchor in the storm, and a source of great  
0197 inner strength.

0198  
0199 Although my Father has been dead for more than 30 years, his  
0200 spirit of hope and his courage of faith are with me daily. This



00201 was his special gift to me. The strength of these two old  
00202 crutches and the images they create will hopefully be my special  
00203 gift to you on this the day of your graduation.

00204  
00205 Good luck and God be with each and every one of you.

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00208 gw-commencement/d-3/webbley