WINTER COMMENCEMENT

Cornell Students Graduating in January 2004

Jeffrey S. Lehman

December 20, 2003

January 2004 Graduates of Cornell University. Relatives. Friends.

On behalf of my colleagues on the faculty, it is my privilege to welcome you to Barton Hall, for this morning's celebration of those students who are completing their degree requirements here at Cornell University. As you all know, this is my first year as President of Cornell. And so the opportunity to address you now is especially meaningful for me.

And yet, I fear, I am going to disappoint you. For I am not going to do what you, the graduates, are expecting me to do.

You are expecting me to beg you to stay. We've only had a few months to get to know one another. And so you are expecting me to call out to you, "No, no, don't go. I can't bear the thought of your leaving!"

Well, I am not going to do that. I know that disappoints you. And I understand why. It is because that's how YOU are feeling. You don't want to leave. And you are projecting your own emotional state onto me.

I must say that I have been impressed by how well you have concealed your emotional turmoil over the past few weeks. An untrained eye might have been deceived by the spring in your steps and might not have discerned just how distraught you really are.

But you don't fool me. I am a professor. I have been trained to see beneath the surface of things. To recognize the subtle clues that suggest you really do not want to graduate. The clearest sign is the set of exams you just handed in this past week.

But, devoutly though you may wish it, you may not stay. It is time for you to move on to new challenges. And so we assemble in this majestic space to celebrate you.

Now the laws of the state of New York require that I admonish you that you are not quite graduates yet. You will not be receiving a diploma this morning. We are required to withhold that piece of paper until we have graded the aforementioned examinations and have confirmed with the Deputy Associate Dean of Swimming that you have in fact satisfied all of the requirements for a Cornell degree.

Nonetheless, we have enough confidence that you have done everything you need to do that we have gone ahead and scheduled this ceremony to celebrate what might be described as a certain level of maturation in your status as Cornellians. You might not quite be graduates yet, but at least we can think of you as fully ripened Cornellians.

What does it mean to be a fully ripened Cornellian? It means that you are now prepared to join an extraordinary community of 200,000 women and men around the world who share with you the experience of an education at Cornell University.

For even as you leave Ithaca, you will find that you do not fully leave Cornell. Part of this amazing University will travel with you, assimilated into your very being, wherever you may go. And you will be amazed at how many of your experiences in adult life will bring you a startling recollection of just how much this revolutionary and beloved university has insinuated itself into your soul.

You will feel it whenever you go to public sporting events, at that moment during the playing of the National Anthem, when you come to the verse about the rockets' glare and you catch yourself looking around to see who else in the crowd wants to emphasize one word more than the others.

You will sometimes feel it when you go to the movies. A couple of nights ago, I went see The Return of the King, the third installment in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. There's a moment when the hobbit Sam reminisces with Frodo about how much he misses the days when they would

gather with friends at the Green Dragon. Obviously, since I was seeing the film at Pyramid Mall, there were quiet smiles all around the theater. But I know that there will be similar smiles when the film is seen in New York City and Los Angeles and Tokyo.

You might even feel your when you go to a 3-star restaurant and you find yourself saying that the entrée is quite good, but still lacks some of the subtle flavor balance of a PMP.

Well, perhaps not. But you get my point. During your time on the Hill you have acquired a set of experiential and cultural references that in part define who you are, and that connect you with others who share that vocabulary, even if they were at Cornell decades before you, or decades after.

But the connection goes much deeper than a shared set of rituals and landmarks. For your identity as Cornellians means that you share certain intellectual values, and certain ideals.

I want to take a few minutes this morning to talk about two of those qualities. The first quality is a reverence for the well-chosen phrase. The second is a commitment to the well-being of others.

Reverence for the well-chosen phrase. Part of what distinguishes Cornell from other universities is its exceptional breadth. We Cornellians are poets and programmers, mathematicians and veterinarians, artists and engineers. But no matter whether we are destined to make our careers with numbers or drawings or by performing open heart surgery, we all revere the well-chosen phrase.

When it was announced that I would become Cornell's President, two friends of mine gave me a book. I had read the book before, but I did not own it, and I was grateful for the gift.

The book is a collection of essays by a former editor-in-chief of the Cornell Daily Sun, E.B. White. It is called, "Essays of E.B. White," and you should all own copies. If the Campus Store runs out, you can order it from Amazon.com.

After graduating from Cornell, White went on to a career as a writer at the New Yorker that brought him recognition as perhaps the greatest

essayist of the twentieth century. The essays in this book span topics as diverse as farm life, New York City, railroads, and pollution. But three of the best essays come near the end. Each is a testament to a writer. The first is to Mark Twain. The second is to Don Marquis, the creator of Archy and Mehitabel. And the third is to Will Strunk, E.B. White's English professor at Cornell.

After writing the essay about Strunk, White was asked to revise and amplify his old teacher's little book, The Elements of Style, which had gone out of print. He did so, and the book became a best seller, the book you know as "Strunk and White." But it was this essay, published in the New Yorker, that kept the "little book" from vanishing into history.

The essay is about the book, and about Strunk. And I want to read a couple of paragraphs to you because they have much to teach us about White's approach to writing and to people. After explaining to readers of his essay just how Strunk went about structuring the book, White continues:

> "From every line [in the book] there peers out at me the puckish face of my professor, his short hair parted neatly in the middle and combed down over his forehead, his eyes blinking incessantly behind steel-rimmed spectacles as though he had emerged into strong light, his lips nibbling each other like nervous horses, his smile shuttling to and fro in a carefully edged mustache.
>
> "'Omit needless words!' cries the author on page 21, and into that imperative Will Strunk really put his heart and soul. In the days when I was sitting in his class, he omitted so many needless words, and omitted them so forcibly and with such eagerness and obvious relish, that he often seemed in the position of having short-changed himself, a man left with nothing more to say yet with time to fill, a radio prophet who had outdistanced the clock. Will Strunk got out of this predicament by a simple trick: he uttered every sentence three times. When he delivered his oration on brevity to the class, he leaned forward over his desk, grasped his coat lapels in his hands, and in a

husky, conspiratorial voice said, 'Rule Thirteen. Omit needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!'"

White's portrait of Strunk in this paragraph is vivid, entertaining, and loving. Each phrase is well chosen. We know that White labored over every word, every metaphor, in order to be sure that he caught his reader just so. And when we read it, we smile and we admire, we understand White's message and we appreciate the craft with which he delivered it.

When Professor Strunk wrote his book in 1918, it was not easy to write carefully. It was psychologically demanding to keep revising, to keep laboring over a phrase until it was right. When E.B. White wrote his essay in 1957, it was every bit as difficult to choose a phrase well.

But I would submit that today, for you, our January 2004 graduates, it is harder still. We live in the miraculous age of text messaging on our phones and instant messaging on our computers. And when we know that someone on the other end is waiting to read what we type, we experience an unprecedented pressure to write quickly. Better to type fast than to write well. If you have to say good-bye, type "gtg" and quit. It would be rude to make your friend hang around and wait while you try to come up with some clever, original sign-off.

But here's the problem. As Cornellians, as the great-great-great-grand-students of Will Strunk, we all hear an inner voice saying, "Whenever you write, do the work. Revere the well-chosen phrase." But that doesn't work for IM.

So here's what we must not do. We must not allow the pressures of an IM world to corrupt our innermost values. We must tell ourselves that the kind of writing that we do on IM and text messaging isn't real writing. It's OK for it to be boring and unimaginative. It's like a phone call. It's meeting a different need.

But when we do any other kind of writing, any kind of writing where the reader isn't sitting on the other end waiting for us to hit "send," then the old Strunk and White rules must kick in. We must do the work. We must revere the well-chosen phrase. We must revere the well-chosen phrase. We must revere the well-chosen phrase.

The second quality I will discuss this morning is reverence for the well-being of others. It is always somewhat risky to try to speak about this subject before a large audience. As the Canadian scholar Michael Ignatieff accurately observed in his classic little book, The Needs of Strangers, our ordinary language feels frustratingly weak whenever we try to talk about such topics.

Ignatieff wrote, "Words like fraternity, belonging, and community are so soaked with nostalgia and utopianism that they are nearly useless as guides to the real possibilities of solidarity in modern society." Yet we all know that, even in modern society, those words point towards an underlying truth: we can and do take a special pleasure in our solidarity with others, with feeling personally responsible for other individual members of the community and for the community as a whole.

During your time as Cornell students, you may have come to appreciate that truth in the form of an analytical insight when, sitting in a microeconomics class, you noted the fallacy of assuming that people's utility functions are independent from one another. Or you may have come to appreciate it in the form of an experience, through a public service activity in Tompkins County. Or even more likely, you came to appreciate it during one of those distinctively collegiate moments when you were able to be a true friend to a fellow student who needed you.

The point is this. Whenever that moment of appreciation came, it was as important to your Cornell education as anything you learned about writing from a first-year seminar teacher or a dissertation advisor.

To link these two ideas together – reverence for the well-chosen phrase and solidarity with other people – we can return one last time to E.B. White. White died in 1985, just before the genomics revolution revealed how much we can learn about human beings through the study of animals like rats, pigs, and spiders. And yet in a sense he was able to anticipate that development 50 years ago in his greatest book, a book about people, and a rat and a pig and a spider, Charlotte's Web.

The last two sentences of Charlotte's Web are poignant and they are lovely. They read, "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both."

January 2004 graduates of Cornell, you are about to embark on lives of service to a society that desperately needs you. As you go, let me conclude by sharing a few hopes that we, your teachers, hold for you:

May you enjoy the special pleasures of craft — the private satisfaction of doing a task as well as it can be done.

May you enjoy the special pleasures of profession — the added satisfaction of knowing that your efforts promote a larger public good.

May you be blessed with good luck, and also with the wisdom to appreciate when you have been lucky rather than skillful.

May you find ways to help others under circumstances where they cannot possibly know that you have done so.

May you be patient, and gentle, and tolerant, without becoming smug, self-satisfied, and arrogant.

May you omit all needless words.

May you know enough bad weather that you never take sunshine for granted, and enough good weather that your faith in the coming of spring is never shaken.

May you always be able to confess ignorance, doubt, vulnerability, and uncertainty.

May you frequently travel beyond the places that are comfortable and familiar, the better to appreciate the miraculous diversity of life.

And may your steps lead you often back to Ithaca. Back to East Hill. For you will always be Cornellians. And we will always be happy to welcome you home.

Congratulations.