

**Commencement Address
Treasurer Mark Gordon
Northern Wyoming Community College
May 13, 2017**

Dr. Young, Dr. Englert, Chairman Healy, Members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff of Northern Wyoming Community College, family and friends of the graduates, ladies and gentlemen of the graduates gathered here today, thank you for the honor and the privilege of speaking to you today as we commemorate an important event for this institution and for all of you, graduates of the 2017 Class of Northern Wyoming Community College.

This is a time to say “well-done” and to savor this moment for a bit. It is not, however, a time to forget that you have so much more to do or that you will have to do all of it in a world that is changing rapidly and fundamentally and in ways we are only beginning to understand. Even as this day is a watershed day in your lives, so too are your lives pivotal to our nation’s and our world’s future. No pressure. Just saying.

But today Class of 2017 your work, those long nights, those early mornings have all paid off. You have arrived at this moment encouraged by your parents and other family members, friends, classmates, professors and others at this institution. You have studied, worked, and achieved this noteworthy milestone. You can be justifiably proud, but remember and appreciate that their faith in you, their desire to see you succeed, and their support that energized your perseverance.

Let’s take a moment to acknowledge all of those we should thank on this day. Please stand Class of 2017. Find all of those who believed in you, who inspired you, and don’t forget it is Mother’s Day Sunday. Catch their eye. Now thank them loudly and enthusiastically. Ready “Thank You!”

I am truly honored to be asked to address you today, however, I soon realized giving a commencement speech is harder than I thought it would be. To be sure commencement addresses are as old as time practically, and they cover a litany of familiar topics such as “the world is what you make of it,” or “believe in yourself.” Some speeches exhort graduates to meet challenges with confidence, or aspire to a dream. I thought about how I could add something useful and new to those thoughts but I passed because I suspect you all already are confident, know you have a purpose, and though it may not all be clear today, I expect each of you has a dream. All of that is right and proper. But it seemed a bit pedestrian for a day like today.

Moreover, I know you know that the world you are already part of is one you can make better. Growing up or going to school in Wyoming, you know that like driving a car, if you aren’t paying attention or staying alert behind the wheel, all kinds of weather, or some hulking four-legged beast might amble out in front of you unexpectedly. If you are not on it, the results can be a bit awkward. In order to make the world better, you have to pay attention to what is happening. So that topic also seemed pretty obvious.

So I did what anyone trying to write a term paper might do, I googled commencement speeches and came across one given at Wellesley High School by David McCullough, Jr. It was different. He reminded the assembled graduates that despite the significance of the ceremony, each was dressed exactly alike in a shapeless, formless uniform and that each graduate regardless of any accolade they might have received in their time as a student would receive essentially the same diploma as every other graduate but for the name on it. Nice congratulatory message, huh? The point he was making though was that it is what comes next that really matters. It is how you go on to live your life that will make a difference. So it was actually a thought provoking message.

But that message also seemed to diminish the value of the degree you are earning today, so I dropped that notion. The degree you have earned will better equip you from this day forward not only to get a better job, secure faster advancement, and stay employed regardless of how well the economy is doing; but the disciplines you have learned here will show themselves to be invaluable as you move on through your life in a world that is increasingly fluid. "Change is inevitable but successful change is not" as a friend often reminds me. The degree you have earned from this institution, from your work, and your teachers makes the odds that you will successfully navigate change vastly better.

But I still wasn't satisfied I had found the right subject matter for today because, you see you are about to graduate into a world "filled to the brim with idiots." At least is how comedian Lewis Black describes it. He says, "Since there are so many idiots out there, you may actually start to think you are crazy." I wanted my message to you to be no matter how wild things may seem to be, you are not crazy!

I want to take a moment to briefly consider the world, our economy, and our role in it. Don't worry, this is not a survey course and you needn't worry about taking notes. But let's just take stock of a few particulars of where we are right now.

We are still engaged in America's longest war and we need to remember those members of all our branches of the military as well as their families for their service to bring some order in a progressively more perilous world. In addition to Afghanistan now Russia, China, and North Korea occupy our thoughts. Globally, there are more conflicts afloat today than any time since World War II. Even as we speak the Middle East is being remade even as the technological advances we have seen in oil exploration and production have diminished the economic importance the region's natural resources. Still, how can we afford to walk away from an area that is a virtual powder keg for so much going on in the world today?

Thank goodness we live in America where I can be reasonably sure things are stable, right? That too is changing: how, why, where, and what we shop for are all different from what they were even a decade ago. The little bookshop I used to own on the Main Street of Sheridan, is now closed as customers found the alternative Jeff Bezos started in his garage easier and more comprehensive than what our little store could offer locally. The convenience Amazon brought to buying books now extends in some way to more than 50% of all commerce in the US. And funnily enough, those same customers that used to rely on the community gathered at the local bookstore for

recommendations now get suggestions on-line that have been determined by algorithm. More people belong to his Amazon Prime today than go to church, or own a landline phone. Everything customers do on-line then becomes part of a data universe that enables machines to better refine suggestions about what those same customers might be interested in. Is this a bad thing? It depends but it is different and accelerating.

Self-driving trucks are delivering beer in Colorado and coal in Wyoming. Machines read X-rays more accurately than doctors do and voice recognition now takes orders in fast food restaurants. 3D printers extrude spare parts on the space station and the remotest parts of our world. All of these are amazing technologies that are reordering our world as we speak. They hold out enormous promise for improving our lives and also promise for replacing familiar jobs.

When economists talk about technology these days they often talk about the “facile externalities” of it. An externality is anything that happens as a result of a given economic action, and a facile externality is the possibility that if machines can do things better than people, people might no longer be needed. And yet, how can one earn a wage if a human no longer needs to do the job? It is a sobering thought. Real enough, though that some European countries are considering implementing a “universal wage” as a way to pay people just for being alive.

It might sound fun to get paid to do nothing, but to my mind it is crazy – idiotic even. The need to have meaning in one’s life is something even our Declaration of Independence recognized. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Happiness itself is not a right, something you just get for being alive. You have to work for it.

Still, the same sort of technological advancement that has the potential to replace humans can also revolutionized our work as it has with medicine. Machines are now more accurate and better able to read X-ray’s than humans, and now, thanks to that same technology, doctors anywhere in the world have instantaneous access to vast quantities of data and history from all over the globe. Those resources and that ability will help facilitate how doctors interpret what a machine detects and respond more quickly to unfamiliar medical situations.

At present it is almost impossible for us to comprehend what these developments will mean to our future. But it is clear technology can either facilitate our slothfulness or radically improve our lives. It is all a matter of keeping perspective.

Think about India. A huge proportion of India’s population lives in abject poverty and a significant percentage of her youth grow up stunted owing to perhaps some of the world’s worst pollution and malnutrition. The overall standard of living for Indians is clearly well behind our own, yet over 90% of her population, poor and rich alike, is registered biometrically by either a finger print or an iris scan. Consequently, all you need is your finger to shop in India today. Your finger registers your purchases on a scanner and automatically deducts them from your bank account or

your government support. No cash, no card just your index finger. This technology doesn't replace banking it improves it.

These are truly disruptive times. Everywhere technology, the internet, cheap and plentiful energy make it possible to turn old established businesses on their head. But be wary of disruption for disruption's sake. Today many Americans get their news from individualized feeds on their cell phones and fewer and fewer pay attention to broadcast news. Services such as Twitter and Facebook allow us to tailor our feeds to our interests. Highly sophisticated algorithms sort through news stories and deliver only those stories the machine decides are most likely to interest the viewer. We no longer have to listen to the other side of a political point of view or think about what to buy. Alexa, Amazon's digital assistant or her kin in Google and Samsung can now suggest what groceries you need to buy. Will technology eliminate our need to think?

Great speech Mr. Treasurer. The world is a mess, machines are lobotomizing us, the world is full of idiots, and so your hopeful message is what? It is this: throughout our history, we have been challenged as a species. Today our world is being reimagined, rearranged, reordered, and remade on a daily basis. The changes we are likely to see over the next few years are as revolutionary as any time in history. They are certainly as momentous as the changes of the late 1800's when Wyoming became a state. Then within a few years, women were given the right to vote, Germany lost its Kaiser, Russia its Tsar, the United States its innocence. Before the turn of that century, ships could only communicate with flags and after it by radio. Horses gave way to cars, trains to planes, outhouses gave way to indoor plumbing, washboards to washing machines, and telegraphs to telephones. Within 100 years, the whole world had changed. And today we think nothing of those momentous changes.

We sit at a similar crossroads today. Not so long ago, I bought my first cell phone. It was a quaint little number that fit neatly in a bag of say 6 inches by 12 inches. In a couple of places around Kaycee, I might even get a signal if I was on top of the right hill. Today I pack two cell phones: one for the ranch on which all of our cow records reside (well there and in the cloud) and another for the State through which I can model economic trends and communicate globally with Wyoming's investment managers. My wife moves cows with a drone, and in a few years, maybe an autonomous vehicle will help me manage the 4 1/2 hour drive from Cheyenne to Buffalo more comfortably.

This a world, though, where idiotic things can happen and when they do they happen for idiotic reasons all too often. Having a bit of perspective, common sense, and a solid spiritual compass is an amazing antidote to all the confusion that sometimes reins. "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex... It takes a touch of genius - and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction." Is the way British Economist and former head of the UK Coal Board, E.F. Schumacher put it.

I am encouraged by your generation and optimistic. Yours is a generation that is more interested in solving problems than in forming battle lines as evidenced by the fact that 70% of millennials are more interested in solutions and teamwork than conflict. And a whopping 90% of you give or volunteer something to charity. With that attitude and the new tools we have at our

disposal, driven with commitment, imagination and most importantly perspective, our best days lay before us. Just keep it in perspective.

Maybe you heard about the two hunters who came across a set of tracks. They both immediately went to googling to see if they were elk or bear tracks. Unfortunately, a freight train ran them over before they had it settled. That's a joke, but what wasn't was the Korean couples child who died from neglect because the couple was so immersed in a video game about taking care of kids.

Be present!

There is a wonderful picture making the rounds of the internet of an older woman who stands immersed in the magic of being in the presence of Pope Frances. What is remarkable about the photograph is that everyone else in the picture is trying to take a selfie. Only she is in the moment. Don't miss the magic of a moment to capture it for the cloud. Life is to be experienced not recorded.

We truly live in an amazing world at an amazing time in our history but it is not an era where being a passenger will suffice. It is a time when engagement and perspective are particularly important. Stay hungry. Stay focused. Remember to listen a lot and hear as many voices as you can. Drink deeply and participate fully in life. Have faith and hold your core beliefs close; but don't ever be afraid of learning something new. There are very few idiots in this world, but crazy things happen. When they do, be respectful but question the sense of things that don't make any. And remember, the best is yet to come.

Thank you Graduating Class of Northern Wyoming Community College Class of 2017 and congratulations!