Processing into the hall for the ceremony at which he was installed as President of the University of Michigan, James Duderstadt said the music playing in his ears was not the traditional music actually playing in the hall but rather the fourth movement of Hector Berlioz’s “Symphony Fantastique.” That movement is entitled, “March to the Scaffold.”

I’m sure, President Bitterbaum, you have had occasion to share Duderstadt’s misgivings, because for the past 40 years public higher education has been increasingly privatized. Rising costs coupled with shrinking public support continues producing significant and sometimes unfortunate and abrasive change; the bookstore is now a clothing store with an annex for books, the fast track to tenure has shifted from grants to patents as university research parks convert intellectual property into commodities. For the past 10 years, increases in the education component of the Consumer Price Index have been significantly greater than increases in any other component, including health care.

Misgiving are found in expressions like, “If you think education is expensive, try not having one,” a clear statement that the purpose of education is higher individual income. Similarly, grants, which clearly say, “We’re giving you this because your education benefits all of us,” have been replaced by loans which clearly say, “Because you are the sole beneficiary, you have to pay it back.” So we’re converting a public good into a private one.

Thomas Jefferson, John Dewey and numerous others must be turning in their graves, sensing that the foundation of democracy – good education available to all – is crumbling, and rather than leveling the playing field, our education system exacerbates disparity. With its 39.5 billion dollar endowment, Harvard subsidizes the education of any student whose family’s annual income falls below $180,000. Yet the foundation of democracy is not in Harvard yard, it is on the floor of Alumni Arena of the Park Center at this wonderful little college, the preservation of which is one of
the greatest challenges we face. And no, Cortland College Foundation staff did not put me up to this.

A second major challenge is imposed upon those entitled to wear the gown. Our society extends that privilege to three professions only: the judge maintaining the integrity of a system of justice; the priest maintaining the integrity of faith and of the soul; the scholar maintaining the integrity of knowledge and of the intellect.

Like judges and priests, those with Master’s or Doctorate degrees are entitled to wear the gown wherever they wish, though they may feel, and surely look, a bit silly. Those with baccalaureate degrees are not so privileged; surely not a devastating blow. Lacking that privilege, however, does not absolved those with baccalaureate degrees of the responsibility to seek and speak the truth.

By seeking and speaking the truth we combat three enemies that would destroy us from within: Tragedies easily avoided by enlightened people but wrought by those whose convictions make them impervious to facts, evidence, reason, and even compassion;

The Orwellian nightmare of a language so prostituted by commercial and political speech as to destroy all meaning and thereby the ability to think;

The voluntary enslavement of those too lazy or too undisciplined to pursue the truth. Be ever mindful that a person who does not know what is true can not be free. Smugly self-satisfied, perhaps even blissful – but not free.

A third major challenge is to embrace a different understanding of success in life, success based solely on the welfare of all. There are many hopeful signs that that transition is well begun. Service learning, civic engagement, diversity, cultural sensitivity and sophistication are now watchwords on most campuses. We have international students, not foreign ones. The examined life is becoming more popular as the number of philosophy departments and majors is growing. And since, as
Einstein observed, we cannot solve our problems with the same brains that created them, and though there are no magical elixirs, it’s encouraging to note we are using more of our brainpower: SUNY-Binghamton and Stony Brook have women presidents, as do the Universities of Michigan, Iowa, and Miami, not to mention the University of Pennsylvania, Brown, Harvard, Princeton, and MIT.

The welfare of all criterion recognizes that a half-century of hyper-consumptive image chasing is over. It never lived up to its promise anyway, and it cannot be sustained. Self-interested material accumulation leads only to profligate waste, so after 232 years abusing poor Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” we should abandon the search for a moral justification for selfishness.

Therefore the purpose and meaning of our lives must be found in our contributions to the welfare of all. Tearing down the scaffold and re-building a foundation filled not with foreboding but with promise is the work and the challenge of a lifetime. As you tackle that work and challenge, may you be accompanied always by good health, good books, good friends, good laughs and good memories. And may these things sustain you through the somber times, lifting your spirits, lightening your burdens and thus lengthening your time on task.

So, go. Exude dignity and decency, keep your soul aloft, strike a blow for humanity.