

## **A simple question to the graduates**

University Center, Maui Community College

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I can't tell you how truly honored and thrilled I am to have been invited to speak with you this evening. Even though I teach on the Manoa campus--maybe BECAUSE I teach on the Manoa Campus--Maui has long had a very special place in my heart. I am especially pleased to have been asked to address you graduates of the UH Maui University Center because I feel you represent the future far, far better than the graduates who will troop into and out of the Stan Sheriff Center on the Manoa campus this weekend.

As some of you may know, for many years, I have argued that big brick and mortar "flagship" campuses like Manoa are not flagships at all. They are instead more like Titanic's: Huge, slow, bureaucratic, haughty remnants of the past, fretting about the location of their deck chairs while the crew whistles Dixie and the icebergs of technology and economics grind into the rotting hull.

Primarily because of the rapid and future development of online delivery systems, I feel that decentralized, personalized, just-in-time locations like the Maui Center represent the future far, far better than does Manoa.

You are pioneers of the new, still caught in the knotted ways of the old. I suspect getting your degree while staying here in Maui was pretty frustrating and unpleasant at times. But you were feeling what all true pioneers feel when the dead hand of the past still weighs too heavily on the blithe spirits of the future.

So, as time goes by, and you see more and more education that people want being delivered to people where they want it and when they want it, you can be proud that you helped lead the way, though that way was strewn with rocks, brambles, and, often, mocking voices.

I am very proud of you, and proud to be here with you.

One of my earliest opportunities to get to know the Maui community occurred in 1970--a LONG time ago. The very first Earth Day happened that year, and I was invited to MCC to talk to folks here about what we humans were so thoughtlessly doing to our beloved Mother Earth. As I recall, there was a rather large audience in attendance.

At that time, concern about the environment was new, and people could be activated to do something about pollution and wanton environmental modification. Now, of course, we don't seem to give any of that stuff a second thought.

Just go, go, go and grow, grow grow. That seems to be the wave of the present most of us are surfing selfishly into the future.

Indeed, recently, the unelected president of the United States, George W. Bush, thumbed his nose at the global community's concern about global warming and sea-level rise, and declared that the US was going to have no part of any international pact to limit greenhouse emissions, or do anything at all that might slow down the economy--an economy apparently bent on eating up Mother Earth and spitting out the remains just as fast as it possibly can.

One of the people in the audience here at Maui that first Earth Day in 1970 was Tom Sine. Tom was Dean of Students at Maui Community College in the late 1960s and early 70s. According to what he told me some years later, Tom was so moved by what he learned about the futures that he quit his job here, went to a theological seminary, got a doctor of divinity degree, and wrote several very important books about the futures of religion and especially about the responsibilities of religious people to the futures of this planet. His first book was called *Wild Hope: Living with confidence in the face of future shock*. A more recent volume is titled *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld: Reinventing life and faith in the future*. Tom has tirelessly traveled around the world trying to convince various religious organizations that they ought to be more concerned about what they are doing to the future of the planet, and spend less time and effort on the comparatively trivial matters of personal morality which consume the attention of most religious people now.

Maui was a very different place when I first came here in 1970. Whether you think it is better now, or worse now, or just different, I don't know. For many of you, I suppose it just IS, without any thought of how it used to be or what it might become.

Karen Muraoka reminded me that according to the 2000 Census, Maui County experienced the largest population growth in the State last. Resident population is now about 130,000. That is 8,000 higher than anticipated. And, it does not include the approximately 40,000 people who are visiting Maui at any one time. Nor does it include the long-term folks who summer elsewhere, but use Maui's resources in the winter.

These statistics are of course in stark contrast to Oahu where we have been blessed with a decade of economic stagnation. Yes, I consider it a blessing, but a blessing we have failed to take advantage of.

During the 1980s, Oahu was growing even faster than Maui has recently. Vast tracts of land were cleared of their buildings and plans drawn up for newer and taller ones. And then the economic bubble burst, and the planners went bankrupt.

How wonderful that was! There are acres and acres of open land all over Oahu, including vast city blocks downtown, that have been open fields for over a decade.

Of course, that won't last. As long as global population continues to grow--and it is--and as long as continued growth is the underlying logic of our economic and moral system--as it is--humanity here and everywhere on Earth will continue to grow and grow and build and build until all of nature is destroyed and all the world made artificial.

This is what humans do. This is what humans always do and do everywhere. The ancient Hawaiians were by no means careful stewards of naturally-sustainable economies, as much as we might romantically wish that were the case. To the contrary, the evidence is clear that in the centuries before the arrival of Captain Cook, the population on all of these islands grew and reached very high levels, requiring extensive systems of land modification, fish farming, and well-organized human labor. It is possible that, if Western ways had not brutally intervened, and if the population rise and intensive land management system had continued, Hawaii might well have suffered the same fate that Rapa Nui, and many other Pacific Islands did--overpopulation, starvation, warfare, and social collapse.

To repeat, this is what humans do. We over-shoot the carrying capacity of our environment, and either move on to new environments, or we create new technologies to cope and thrive, or we die out. Very often, human communities do die out. Perhaps as often, we create new technologies that solve the crisis for the present, but pass it on to future generations.

That is what we are doing now--hoping that new technologies will come to the rescue in time to allow our bloated population to survive through the 21st Century and beyond.

Face it: we humans are planet eaters. As the other animals say when humans show up for the first time: "There goes the neighborhood."

Years ago, William Shakespeare asked, "What a piece of \*\*\*\* is a man."

What do you think are the four letters that should go in there?

Shakespeare had Hamlet say:

What a piece of work is a man!  
 How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!  
 In form and moving, how express and admirable!  
 In action, how like an angel!  
 In apprehension how like a god!  
 The beauty of the world!  
 The paragon of animals!  
 And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

You'll notice there is a bit of ambiguity there. Shakespeare starts out very confident about humans, we are a splendid piece of work. But he ends up

concluding we are no more than a haughty animal or an insignificant speck of dust.

Indeed, there is good evidence that instead of humans being a piece of work, we are instead, each and everyone of us, when looked at fairly and critically, a piece of shit.

As we continue to grow mindlessly, and transform this planet, and this blessed isle, into solid concrete layered over with as many humans as possible, this question about the fundamental character and purpose of humans on the planet and in the universe will continue to be asked by more and more people.

Each of you needs to answer it now. Indeed, I hope that this question has been at the basis of everything you have learned and studied as you have moved towards this day of graduation.

What are we humans? What is our purpose on this Earth? What is our destiny? And what role should YOU play in it?

The people who organized the first and all subsequent Earth Day, continue to warn us about the fundamentally dangerous and predatory nature of humans.

Those who blindly urge us to keep the economy growing without giving the future a single thought simply ignore the question and keep on keeping on.

I have come to my conclusion as well. It might surprise you from what I have said so far.

I do not adhere to the view of the Earth lovers and tree-huggers.--not because I don't love the Earth and its trees, but because it is just too late for that.

More than a decade ago, Walter Truett Anderson wrote a book whose title tells it all *To Govern Evolution*. He argues, and I completely agree, that nature, in the sense of places and processes uninfluenced by human activities, does not exist anywhere on the Earth, and what few semi-natural places there might be left will soon be turned into gardens or concrete--in either case, into something humans must plan and tend, forever.

The point is, from now on, if there is to be any kind of life on this planet, it will be up to us humans to create it and take care of it. Life as we want it won't be able to exist without our perpetual attention. We must govern evolution--every blade of grass, every molecule of oxygen, every ounce of warm and rising sea.

That is a mighty tough task, and I can only hope your education has equipped you for it: equipped you intellectually with the knowledge you need to govern evolution, but as importantly equipped you ethically and spiritually. That is, I hope you know you have the obligation to govern evolution: I hope that you also

have the courage to assume that responsibility, and I hope that you have the wisdom to succeed in governing evolution.

Good luck.

The future is very literally in your hands.

Don't screw it up.

I intend to come back in about thirty years and see how you are doing.