

Convocation Speech Delivered by Wulf Gatter at the University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia May 28th, 2003

The President and Members of the Board of Trustees of the University of Liberia

The President, Faculty and Staff of the University of Liberia

Your Excellency, the Representative of the President

Hon. Gloria Scott, Chief Justice of the Republic of Liberia

Members of the National Legislators

All members of the Cabinet present and all other Government officials present

The Deoyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps

Prelates

Heads of International Organizations

Heads of Higher Institutions of Learning

Proud Parents and Friends of the "Royal Class"

Graduating Students of the "Royal Class"

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

We have all gathered here today to celebrate a wonderful occasion, the graduation of these fine young women and men, who will be earning their degrees from the University of Liberia. To each one of you, I offer my warmest - congratulations. I am proud to be the first to greet and congratulate you - as you embark on this adventure, the beginning of a new chapter in your life. This is a moment that you will long remember.

I know that all of you have worked hard to get here, but let me start off - by also acknowledging the contributions of your parents, family members, teachers, mentors and friends who have supported you on your road to graduation. Without them, the journey here would have been more difficult, less rewarding or even impossible. In recognition of the tremendous support and encouragement you have received from these important people, let me invite you all to stand and show them your appreciation with a round of applause.

(APPLAUSE)

A university graduation ceremony is not simply an individual moment, a private celebration of a job well done, although such reflections are certainly merited. Rather, the University convokes a public gathering of students and their teachers, family and friends, as well as distinguished visitors - because the awarding of academic degrees for individual achievement also symbolizes a series of complex relationships shared together - that define a community.

The traditional ceremonial event that we present to you today, which has been the customs at universities for centuries - the academic robes and this impressive gathering - express the community's interest - in your success as new graduates - and as members and prospective leaders of the same community. Against this background, let me briefly speak on this historic commencement convocation on the theme: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES: WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?

You might think now, who is this fellow to talk about opportunities, about going out in the world, about passion. He comes from Europe, from Germany. His world is so entirely different from ours. What does he know of Liberia, of our daily needs, our worries and struggles.

Well, Graduates, when I left school, Germany was not so much different from Liberia today. The country emerged from a war - a war so destructive as history had not seen it before. At the end of this war my family found itself deprived of their home as refugees as some of you may have experienced. It had first been the British who had destroyed our house, and then the Russians who drove us out of our country, - Bohemia, where our family had lived for centuries.

Still, with hard work and dedication, and never losing hope, my parents managed to lead us out of poverty, send their children to school, and even create room for us to develop passions. Looking back, this cannot be honoured enough, since in those days passions and hobbies were considered a luxury. For me, my passion has always been the study of nature.

But of course developing passions and doing research is not without cost. I was extremely lucky, because I had understanding parents. When I told them that I needed binoculars that would enable me to study bird life, they were supportive, and with the humble means they had, they bought me a pair of very old binoculars. Today they would be a museum piece. But for me they were a treasure and enabled me to seriously dive into my research.

Not only those of you, - who come from families that have lost everything in the war, may ask yourself how your parents could ever afford to offer you binoculars. In my interest - to further ornithological research in Liberia, - I thus promise you today, that every one of you who will embark on the path of studying bird life and who consequently writes an ornithological Bachelor of Science-thesis, will receive a pair of binoculars from me. It will possibly also not be the newest and fanciest product on the market, but it will be a binocular of quality and enable its owner to seriously work - on his or her research.

Of course back in those days after the war, when I was your age, one could not earn money with observing birds. So when I had to make a choice in life what path to take, I decided to study general forestry. It was the closest thing to nature and birds and permitted me to combine a fascinating work with my passion for nature.

Some of you may have the luck, to see your dreams come true and find a job that is in line with your passions. Others will - like me - have to make a choice between their dream and something that will support a family. Should you find yourself in this position, do not despair. Life is full of surprises, and never leads straight ahead. Living your passions, may still one day allow you - to make them the focus of your lives. But no one can take the decisions for you, that now stand before you. It is you - who have to take them - but do know, that your families and friends stand firm behind you!

My profession led me in 1981 to Liberia, a fascinating country - that for the last 22 years - has taken possession of me - and shaped my interests. Here I have worked for 3 years within the German Forestry Mission. My contribution - was but a small brick - in the building of a large scale development-cooperation project between two countries.

Some 40 years ago the German Forestry Mission had started to establish

a countrywide Forest Inventory for Liberia. It was thought as a basis for an - unlimited and sustainable use of the Liberian Forests.

In Liberia already in the 1980s not much was left of FDA's once ambitious plans of a sustainable use of the countries forest resources. The simultaneous allocation of virtually the entire forest area as concessions to mostly foreign logging companies - overburdened the country's mechanism of control. Still today logging operations and subsequent farming activities are the major threat to the Liberian rainforest. This does not only have an enormous impact on the flora and fauna, but also on rural communities, whose means of subsistence come from the land and the forest. Their cultural and spiritual practices depend so closely on the forest - that, with its rapid disappearance, the survival and growth of such communities are seriously threatened.

The primary forest area - being annually lost to logging and farming activities in the 1980s amounted to half the size of Montserrado County. The highest annual figures of re-afforestation in 1982 reached in size not much more than 100-times the size of this University area here.

I do not have today's exact figures, but I know for certain - that there were almost no re-afforestation efforts during the past 20 years.

Worldwide experiences in the tropics show that on soils as here in Liberia only a careful selective logging can allow a sustainable use of natural rainforests.

A tree in natural forests produces thousands of seedlings during its life. In every single location in natural forest, far more than 100 tree species - try to give their seeds a chance, but only one of all of them will manage - to become old and tall. Natural competition will choose the winner among these trees, because each tree species has particular requirements and it demands special microclimatic conditions.

This is a little bit like having access to a University education - and finally graduating. Only a few make it. And if you, the "Royal Class," now look at each other and try to determine - what makes out your richness, you will soon discover that it is your diversity. You all shared several years in this University, but you all have maintained your uniqueness, your identity and personality.

In natural forests it is just alike. Their richness is their diversity.

Some might now say that plantation forestry offers the advantage of producing larger quantities of a more uniform product in one area. This might be so. However, a serious disadvantage and an inherent danger is the creation of forest - with a uniform and narrow genetic basis - and costly maintenance for decades. Often times, all trees of a whole plantation - genetically descent from the seeds of one single tree. In addition, the risk of rapid destruction of plantations through epidemics of pests and pathogens - adapted to the cultivated genotypes - is very high.

The future therefore lies not in plantations, but in the sustainable use of the gifts of nature, as we can only find them in natural forests in shape of natural regrowth.

And here lies the chance of well-educated foresters with a high ecological knowledge, matched with a strong sense for business management. Tropical rainforests, are an ecosystem of extreme complexity. A modern forestry administration - must thus be capable - to understand and interpret the resulting - ensemble-acting aspect of all involved factors, and then act accordingly and take the appropriate decisions for the future.

This is only possible within - interdisciplinary teams - that include foresters, biologists, hydrologists, geologists, agriculturists, and all other environmental sector specialists.

You do have all these well educated people here. They are waiting impatiently to put their knowledge at your and nature's services. Embracing their ideas could help this country - to maintain and protect the resource "Forest" for a future, where the resources of gold and diamonds might be exhausted. Use this chance and give future generations a chance.

The forests of Liberia constitute one of last remaining blocks of tropical rainforest of West Africa and one of the most threatened - biodiversity hotspots - in the world. With some 2000 flowering plants, 225 timber species, 150 kinds of mammals. Liberia is one of the most - biodiversity-rich countries in the world. With 620 different species of birds no other country in Africa has - on a comparative size of land a similarly high biodiversity as Liberia has.

Birds are much easier to record than most other groups of animals. Compared to birds, mammals are difficult to count because of their nocturnal activity. Birds are therefore worldwide used as biological indicators for changes in the environment. With each little change in the environment, some species disappear, while others become more common.

That Liberia is one of the hotspots for animal conservation becomes clear, when realizing that of some animal species - more than 90% of the world population - live in Liberia. There are also other species that apparently can only be found in Liberia and occur nowhere else in the world. Examples are the Gola Malimbe, a beautiful Forest Weaverbird and the - Liberia Greenbul, both discovered in the 1980s. Among the mammals the most famous one is the Pygmy Hippo.

For these species - that have evolved over millions of years, Liberia bears an outstanding responsibility - The responsibility - to preserve God's creation. Even in the, olden times "of planet earth, when climatic factors like drought and the cooling down of the atmosphere led to a reduction of the global forest cover, relicts of tropical rainforest managed to survive in Liberia. This did not only enable most endemic animal and plant species to survive - Liberia became with its remaining forests at that time - also a refuge for species whose natural habitats were disappearing elsewhere.

In West Africa it was from Liberia with its surviving tropical forest belt that many plant and animal species migrated north, east and west again and started their conquest - to re-populate the empty neighbouring lands.

Today, more than 120 of Liberia's 620 bird species have their home in Europe and only spent the dry season in Liberia. Even small birds like the Swallow make the journey of 4000 miles to and from Liberia twice a year to spent 5-7 months during the European winter season in the rainforest belt. The Cattle Egret, well known to all of you as "Christmas Bird" - appears around Christmas in Liberia, coming from its breeding grounds in Europe and North Africa, and disappearing again the March. The destruction of the rainforest would thus also affect the bird spectrum in Europe and would lead to a loss of many species there.

One of the most obvious changes in Liberia's bird fauna today - is the massive increase of savanna species - entering Liberia from the north. Forest fragmentation allow savanna species to enter the forest. In many regions of Liberia we can already today witness a dramatic development. Savanna species are literally replacing their relatives from the forest. Only one example for this is the common

pepper bird. Once restricted to Savannas in most northern Lofa County, it is today Liberians most common bird species, occupying all, even the smallest patches of open land, from the coast to the top of Mt. Nimba. It is replacing its 20 related species of the forest more and more.

The equilibrium of the Liberian ecosystems was known - to be near undisturbed - before the war, mainly due to the low population density. The civil war however completely disrupted this equilibrium and not only resulted in a massive destruction of the major towns of the country and the displacement of populations, but also in an uncoordinated and - unprecedented deforestation.

Much has been destroyed, but it is not too late for action. Let me advance that one way to preserve this great asset is to stop the ongoing war and organize your biodiversity in a holistic manner.

Some very important steps have been taken during recent years - for which I want to personally thank the Government, - committed conservation groups, and individual environmentalists - that are actively working towards preserving the Liberian nature for future generations.

Since the end of the civil war, the Government of Liberia has recognized the importance of protecting the environment and has signed and ratified a number of International Conventions.

Among these are: The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and also the Convention on Biological Diversity.

In this context a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with "Conservation International" to conserve Liberia's Biodiversity in creating a network of Protected Area System.

Now the difficult task for the Government lies ahead - to actively strive - for fulfilling its commitments by making it a reality by enacting laws to create those protected areas that have been proposed for national parks and reserves by the Forestry Development Authority. Some of these areas are the Grebo National Park, Cestos Senkwein, the Lofa-Mano Reserve, Mount Nimba Reserve, just to name a few.

The efforts of the Government - also resulted in the creation of the National Environment Commission of Liberia (NECOLIB) in 1999. To date, the "Environment Protection Policy", the "Environmental Protection Agency Act", and the "Environmental Management Law" have been enacted.

Further, in August 2001 a very important workshop took place in Monrovia with the title "Environmental Degradation: as a result of the civil war in Liberia". Here the manner in which all aspects of the environment were handled during the civil war, was discussed - and the progress made in conservation of the environment - in Liberia since the Earth Summit in 1992 was assessed. Today, the Government of Liberia is preoccupied in resettling Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees. It will be important this time that environmental considerations be given a priority so as to avoid ecological and health disasters in IDPs and refugee camps and nearby surroundings.

Already in the 1980s the "Society for the Conservation of Nature in Liberia" (SCNL) was founded. Mr. Alexander Peal was its President for many years. Also to him, whom I know as a courageous environmentalist since over 20 years now, and to the SCNL's fabulous work I want to extend my special thanks. This "thank you" I also want to pass on to his successor Mr. James Coleman.

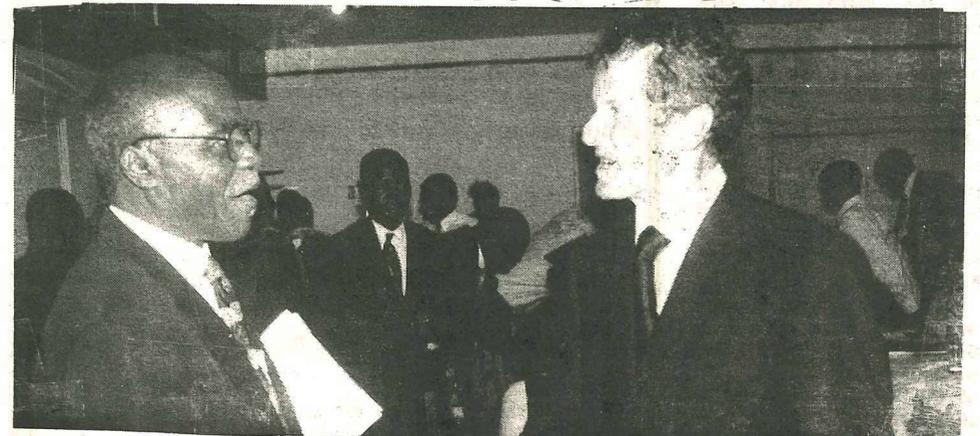
The somewhat younger "Society Against Environmental Degradation" (SAED) with its mainly University based pool of specialists is not less effective in its conservation work during the last years.

For its commitment to protect Liberia's environment, I also personally - want to thank the leadership of the University of Liberia - for the creation of an "Environmental Studies Programme". I wish to challenge the University of Liberia that a lot will be required and expected of developing the core of young men and women to carry on scientific, technical and analytical skills needed to conduct systematic environmental assessment, evaluations and research.

It shall also be an honour for me - to bring with me - my experience of environmental management and protection for this Environmental Studies Programme. I shall be glad to serve as an advocate for Liberia's environment - within this newly founded programme of the University of Liberia.



DAY 1: Arrival at the UL Autographing Prospective Graduands



Dr. Wulf Gatter greeting Rev. Walter Richards, President of the Board of Trustees, UL.

Graduates, Parents, Faculty, honoured guests - the University of Liberia - let me say this openly - is an institution you can be proud of, and this not only because it is one of the oldest on the African Continent.

Let me say it in the words of - Daniel E. Howard - President of Liberia from 1912 to 1920, himself a graduate of the University of Liberia, which then was still named "Liberia College": At the eve of World War I in 1918 he said:

"I can assure you that it is my firm belief - that with the present ambitious, studious, and patriotic President of the College; Mr. Nathaniel Cassell, and the strong support - the citizens generally, and the Government have promised him, - Liberia College will repeat - what she has done in the past for the State".

This is now nearly hundred years ago, but it holds still much truth today. Just like University President Cassell - who had the difficult task to reorganize the institution after World War I. Our dear friend, the honourable University President, - Prof. Dr. Ben Roberts, faced the tremendous task to rebuild the University from its ruins - left by the recent Civil War. But the war did not only damage its buildings, but also its learning facilities.

Moreover, it resulted in a considerable brain-drain from the country. Despite these challenges and with the unconditional help - and tireless efforts of the members of the different faculties. - University President Roberts once again raised this University to its international standards.

In this task noble women and men at his side - could hope on little outside help. But despite, or let me rather say, just because of the considerable financial constraints they suffered, their achievements are worth of all our admiration and gratitude. They have forged ahead - to provide a future for the Liberian youth, - 10,000 of whom are currently enrolled.

But I have no doubt that the Government - that recognizes the importance of learning - will aid the University whenever it can.

Also by looking at the work of the teachers and administrators of this University, we can be confident - that also in the future the University of Liberia will defend its place of excellence - and will produce many fine people - that we will be proud of. It is for this reason that I want to ask you all to rise and give them a warm applause - for the miracle - the University leadership and staff have produced before our very eyes. (APPLAUSE)

Also when looking at you, my dear Graduates of this - University's "Royal Class", I have to remember the words of President Howard from nearly a hundred years ago: - Seeing you before me on this memorable day, I do not fear for the future of Liberia, since I see women and men - that are committed to forge the future of their country - and form the backbone of Liberian society. Women and men that will shape - Culture, Science, and Politics of this, the oldest Republic on the African Continent.

Let us pay our honours to you. You are the Pride of this Nation!

Now as you leave University you will need to Make a Choice! It may help you - if you ask yourself the following questions - and thoroughly think about your answers:

- What do you want to do?
- What do you want to be?
- What do you want to have?
- What do you want to give?

"What do we want to give", you might ask yourself with surprise. Never forget, life is also defined by how much - you - improve the lives of others. Now, you must not be able to have all the answers for these questions, but you should start thinking about them.

May all of you succeed in turning information into knowledge, knowledge into understanding, and understanding into wisdom. For it is the women and men with the greatest vision who will lead their nation into the future.

In the end, let me wish you all the best of luck, and let me tell you - that it was a great honour for me - to have been invited as Convocation Speaker here today.

I thank you all for your kind attention.

May God bless you all.



Far left: Asst. Prof. Ben Karmorh who introduced the Guest Speaker (Center), wife of the Guest Speaker, Dorothea (Right), Wulf Gatter, Guest Speaker



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