



## COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER AND HONORARY DEGREE RECIPIENT (MORNING)

### SAM ABELL

Sam Abell, world-renowned photographer, author and educator, is a native Ohioan who learned the basics of his craft in Sylvania, his hometown.

The son of educators, Abell shot his first photos before his teens and relied on early lessons from his father, a teacher and freelance photographer. His interest in the more artistic component of photography developed during weekly visits to the Toledo Museum of Art.

After winning an award in the Kodak National High School Photo Contest while still in his teens, Abell traveled to the University of Kentucky, where he was paid \$25 per week to institute a photography program. While earning a bachelor of arts degree, he was editor of a publication he helped create, “The Kentuckian Yearbook.”

He yearned to document the world in a manner characterized by creativity and realism. Abell’s vision landed him a position with *National Geographic*, where a legendary career was born. He’s been with the magazine for nearly 40 years.

The pursuit of photographic purity took Abell across the globe, including Japan’s Imperial Palace, historical American Civil War battlefields, remote rainforests of the South Pacific and the peaks of Mount Everest. His photos, lush with color and masterful composition, have been likened to poetry on film. As his reputation grew, Abell became a sought-after lecturer and educator.

Abell remains an ardent student of his craft, detailing his experiences in a black-and-white photographic diary. In 1990, his work was the subject of a one-man exhibition at the International Center of Photography in Manhattan. A companion book, “Stay This Moment: The Photographs of Sam Abell,” was published in tandem.

In addition to gracing hundreds of *National Geographics*, Abell’s work has been featured in the following: “Australia: Journey Through a Timeless Land,” “Contemplative Gardens,” “Lewis & Clark: Voyage of Discovery,” “Sam Abell: The Photographic Life,” “Seeing Gardens,” “The

Inward Garden: Creating a Place of Beauty and Meaning,” “The Life of a Photograph” and “The Mississippi: River of History.”

In 1996, he was named photographer of the year by the Garden Writers Association of America.

Abell is a member of the board of directors of the George Eastman House, the Santa Fe Center For Photography and the University of Virginia Art Museum. He also is a contributing essayist to National Public Radio and director of the Center for Photographic Projects in Santa Fe.

### **Spring 2009 Commencement – Sam Abell’s Speech**

Graduates, parents and grandparents of Graduates, President Jacobs, Chairman Stansley, and Provost Haggett thank you. Ordinarily when I give a talk it is accompanied by slides, but I was told that there were no visuals for this morning, so I did something remarkable so for once I bought a computer and created a website titled Sam Abell the Photographic Life, and the reason I did it is I put on it the illustrated version of this lecture for you. So if you go on the website and click on lectures you’ll find today’s lecture there for you. A few years ago I was in Japan with my wife and we were watching the tea ceremony. Preparation is everything in the tea ceremony I watched the once careful step by step preparation of the tea ceremony and when I thought it was appropriate to ask a question I asked the tea maker a young man what was the most important ingredient in the tea ceremony was, and he looked at me and said heart. And I said “heart”, and he said heart. And that was the end of our conversation but not the end of me thinking about that, and so today the most important ingredient I put into my remarks is heart. And it hasn’t been hard I have a great and abiding love for this city, university and my hometown of Sylvania. I am here today because Provost Haggett found an article about me not in National Geographic where I published for 40 years, but in an obscure article in Smithsonian Magazine an interview with me. In it I mention Sylvania, OH. It’s on the basis of that where she began to investigate who I was, made contact, and brought me here. It is a great honor for me to be here today as my brother

who is here knows and as my wife who is here knows this is the kind of day where my parents, especially my mother would have loved most. I want to point out that this is a live event every year my new years resolution is the same. This year I wanted to do more live events and less television the reason that I hold live events high and encourage you to do that is because anything can happen on a live event. Professionally your life can be changed. That's what happened to me in 1960 when I was 15 years old my father took me from Sylvania to Kent State University to hear the director of photography speak, the director of photography from National Geographic he couldn't make it so instead they sent a staff photographer a man named Albert Moldvay. I can't remember what he said I can't remember the photographs he showed I simply remember that he was real he wasn't virtual he wasn't on T.V. or in print he was standing there and I think at the moment my life was lifted up and at that moment I knew I could become a National Geographic photographer. Seven years later at the age of 22 I was a summer intern at National Geographic. The first thing I did was find Albert Moldvay and thanked him for the talk he gave at Kent State. He didn't remember it he had been flown in and flown out as a replacement speaker. But he was touched, charmed really that I remembered it and he took an interest in my career and looked at my raw film. In my 40 years at National Geographic I have never seen a staff photographer look at the raw film of a summer intern but he did. The first assignment I had was to go around the world with the Coast Guard via the Arctic Circle. I believed with the Coast Guard and National Geographic told me about that trip that it was the last voyage of world significance yet unaccomplished an historic voyage. We got halfway we were stopped first by the ice then by the Russian military. The state department ordered us back to Rotterdam on the way back to Rotterdam we almost sank the two icebreakers. We were in a gale a six day gale I was profoundly sea sick, my neck was paralyzed, and I almost lost my hands

with the door of the ship with the force of the North Atlantic behind it closed where my hand had been a second earlier. When I got back to Rotterdam I called National Geographic and I told them nothing about what had happened to me, only that the trip was over. But my career was just beginning, there are a few lessons embedded there in that story. One the live event, two me thanking Albert Moldvay, three him mentoring me, and four me not telling anybody about the test I had taken in the North Atlantic and almost failed but not failed, passed barely. I knew there would be tests in this life this photographic life, you didn't have to ace them but you couldn't fail. Speaking of tests I was not taking them at the University of Kentucky. My class the class of '67 had graduated two years earlier I'd been out living the photographic life working for National Geographic working on my own, editing the yearbook I'd come back to Sylvania and friends of my Dad would say so Sammy still at the University of Kentucky and my father would say yes Sammy's still there he's packing four years into six. So in my third senior year when I was in summer school needing a D in Linguistics to pass to graduate my father sat down in the basement of our house in Sylvania and in July 13, 1969 he wrote me a letter. I have it here it's a copy the original is framed and in a museum in Virginia but it is published on the website for all of you to see

Dear Sam, Decide that you are going to pass Linguistics study hard, pull out all the stops and what followed was his 8 point plan on how to graduate from college. I won't read all the points but the first one though perhaps, look alert and in parenthesis said "don't sleep in class." Point seven is good I think too, most profs won't fail a student who in their opinion really tried to pass the course and point eight come hell or high water, pass. And then he signed it with his nickname for him the nickname I've always had for him, Daddy Boy. He did that so that I would know his affection. And then he had three more points, points 9, 10, and 11. Take notes or pretend to be

taking notes, point 10 ask to sit closer and point 11 give prof a bottle of liquor as a going away gift.

I have a guest of honor here tonight Marge Fitchen (sp) my fourth grade teacher is here. She's the guest of honor for three reasons. One she taught fourth grade to my brother and to me. She taught at Maplewood School for 40 years. In the summer they are tearing down Maplewood school. Second reason is she was a great friend to my mother and to our family. And the third reason is she was the subject of my first photographs. I stalked her in the fourth grade with my brown a hawk eye camera. I stalked her to her beauty parlor in Sylvania which had a large picture window, and I stood outside and with my camera I photographed her under the hair dryer and in curlers I thought it was a riot my friend thought it was a riot but the pictured showed it was not a riot. Marge was not amused, called my mother and my camera was confiscated but my thought was that that little episode taught me a lot about the photographic life and about life itself. When I had that camera in my hands I was a bolder and braver boy. The camera took me out into life, out of my room and out of my house, out of the school and out into life. In honor of Marge in honor of my father's 11 point plan I graduated from college. I have composed an 11 point plan of what to do after you graduation point number one be true to your school, your city and your state. The first picture of my website is a photograph of my brother and I outside of our house in Sylvania. We live right on the Michigan line we can see Michigan from my bedroom and my brother and I had our little football uniforms on and we are down in three point stances facing Michigan guarding the state line. How's that play out in adult life, this is how it plays out in adult life. On a Saturday last October, October 11<sup>th</sup> the phone rang at our house in Virginia, I picked it up and it was my brother calling from Dallas. He said what are you doing, I said I just got home what's up. He said turn your T.V. to channel 610, I said what's on? The University of

Michigan is playing the University of Toledo. I said “and?” He said and the rockets are winning. I said don’t hang up I’ll be right back I hit 610 and the Tivo button and I have on there the permanent lifetime archive the 13-10 win. If you start out as the 3 year old on a Christmas card guarding the state line and you get a call in 2009 that the rockets are winning it’s a big day in any household.

There’s another way I learned of being true to your school it was an incidental comment my brother and I both heard my mother making. The big man in my family was my uncle. He was the vice president of United States Steel in Pittsburgh. But one day my mother said in discussing him is that he is not as proud as what he should be of his college. And that a mystery to us and I said what college did he go to and she said Bowling Green. I knew right then that I would be loyal to my alma mater the University of Kentucky and my brother made the same silent vow. He is a graduate of Adrian College. We always mention our alma mater in the first sentence of our autobiographies. Here’s another story about Bowling Green it has to deal with a young man in my class in Sylvania, Oh, Ronnie Whitehouse. He succeeded in business and a few years ago he gave a one million dollar grant to Bowling Green. A couple years after that he moved a couple of miles from where I lived and I asked him why he did it. He said I had a good education at Bowling Green, but I want a better one for those of this generation. I did well because I became an entrepreneur and they weren’t teaching that. Now they can and then he added on I gave money to the golf team too. I’ve given a scholarship to the University of Kentucky, not in that amount. There’s no photography program at University of Kentucky so I made it a traveling scholarship. A scholarship for one of you if you were at that school who shows a good and deep and compelling reason why they want to travel and I’ll help them do that. My second thought is my second wish is that you would teach I grew up in a culture of teaching. I tried to teach

whenever I could my brother is a teacher our grandparents were teachers and when I taught for a year at Rogers High School it was at a party and a professor from the University of Toledo was there and he asked me what I was doing and I said I was a teacher, he said everyone is a teacher teaching all the time, some just better than others. A photographer that I know said to me after he retired from National Geographic. You know Sam I've had 20 covers of National Geographic and 40 articles no one knows my name but people will know your name if you teach. If you can't teach tutor. After my parents taught when we ate dinner a new table cloth was put on the table. My brother and I did something called silent dishes so that we wouldn't disturb my mother tutoring students in Latin and French. My parents were beloved teachers in Sylvania and Toledo and when they died I knew at their funeral the home would be thronged with students, and I was not wrong about that, but the most emotional and most meaningful encounters that I had were not with their students but with the young men and women my parents tutored. My third idea is that I hope you will take a sabbatical. It's an academic great life gift to the rest of us. Many people have said to me that I have the best job in the world but even the best job in the world can be a cycle of assignments followed by another assignment followed by another assignment. So I took a sabbatical once. I went to Ohio University in the mid 70's I drove a Volkswagen bus over the mountains loaded with film. I wanted to study that film and find out what of it was me and not National Geographic. So I spent three months doing that. No one takes three months out of their career at National Geographic, but that changed my life. I found something in that film that was me, it was the background of every picture. That meant anything of every significant picture there was the same kind of background it was a stark elemental horizontal line that line was and is the profound and powerful esthetic line of northwest Ohio. So in my photographs for the last 40 years and in the rest of my life there will be an echo in my photo and in my images of Ohio.

My fourth wish is that you would write a book, books have powerful secret lives. I did two books with the great historian Steven Ambrose. And I ask him how he got his powerful career started and he said humbly I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin and my dissertation was published. It was on General Halleck and obscure general of the civil war. Ambrose said that I considered that every book I had written was in my garage and that none had been distributed and then one day the phone rang the voice on the other end of the line said Dr. Ambrose this is Dwight Eisenhower calling from my house Gettysburg, I just read your book about General Halleck I would like to fly to Gettysburg at my expense and talk to me about collaborating on my memoirs. My own life was changed by a book of photographs by Dorothea Lange, she was dead by the time the book was published had she been alive and someone asked her how her book did she say it did great it changed Sam Abell's life. After you've written the first book write a second book. You've made mistakes on the first book learn from them that's what my high school teacher Fred Marlow taught me. Learn from your mistakes and don't talk about them. Besides you need to write a second book to dedicate it to someone other than your parents. My sixth idea is to honor your own handwriting. Especially if you're writing letters of condolence, thank you or just letters. My father, my teachers, and my mother all had good handwriting. In a virtual world a world you live in often today this will be the most valuable thing. On my website is a love letter that my father wrote to my mother when they were secretly married in 1938. Late in her life she said I've destroyed all the letters your father wrote to me. It broke my heart but she overlooked one letter. We found it in the family bible, my niece my brother's daughter found it and she's a Methodist minister in Texas. She found it gave it to me and I posted it on my website for you to see the handwriting and the expression of love. The expression of love I may say is in the handwriting. Be attentive to the future but don't worry about it. The first time I ever saw



someone texting was here in Toledo in the early 1970's it was a deaf women at a wedding reception she was overjoyed she was texting another deaf women now they could communicate and I thought isn't that great deaf people could now text each other I did not know that is was the opening salvo in a worldwide orchestration of nonstop texting. Because the future will take care of itself and sweep you into it I'm going to ask you to think about a few things. About honoring your past by doing something specific. Georgia O'Keefe's first memory is of her mother hanging clothes on the line. And I hang clothes on the line with wooden pins today to remember my mother and the other ladies on Garden park Drive. If I didn't hang clothes I wouldn't think of them. I photograph in black in white to remember my father. Someone asked why I don't photograph anything in digital photography and I said it doesn't remind me of anything. The black and white photography does. I follow the Browns, the Indians, the Buckeyes and the Rockets to honor my brother. As a boy he kept box scores of all those games and all those teams. I haven't replaced them and I hope you don't either. Find a way to connect with the deep past the ancient world of the people who proceeded you, it's not hard anytime you build a fire especially one outdoors you connect with the people of the ancient past. I've built fires and sat around them with bear hunters in Russian, tribal people in the South Pacific, and with a Danish photographer in the Amazon. The fire unites us all, all people of all time. Grow food even a little bit of food. I planted a buckeye tree in my home in Virginia, and every year our garden on Gardenpark Drive in Sylvania had this distinct character my dad gave it. He was a young man from Kentucky when he came up north and our garden had a distinct southern flare. He planted cotton, peanuts and tobacco, Kentucky wonder beans, all to remind him of his childhood and one year he planted a luxuriant crop of how should I say this "hemp". Another way to connect with the deep past is to take a walk. The greatest math problem in the history of mathematics unsolved for 300 years was

solved by a mathematician from England because he took walks. He worked on the problem for 20 years and when he couldn't work on it he walked. There's a connection between walking and thinking the connection is through the subconscious. Good things happen when you walk, I met my wife when I was walking. It wasn't actually a walk it was a hike she was with her boyfriend on the Pacific Crest trail. The Pacific Crest trail begins on the New Mexico/California border and ends on the Canada border. Its 2,700 miles long and Denise was the first woman to walk it in one season, seven months nonstop and that fact meant next to nothing to her. We meant that summer and the summer of '74 and fell in love at the southern part of the trail. We married in 1977 and years later and maybe 25 years later I asked her the question how I could have replaced her handsome and committed boyfriend and she said two words "you listened". And so my next thought is to consider the art of conversation in life. I'm who I am today because of a great river of conversation flowed throughout our household. My parents brought the school back to the house. A measure of the quality of your life will be the quality of conversation you are having. Who you are speaking with, what you're talking about. Collect short stories. I have told about a dozen short stories in this little talk. Garrison Keeler says there is only one thing wrong with our national conversation too many opinions not enough stories. The last thought I have is to travel it continues your education. In 1942 when my mother was pregnant with my brother she made a map of the United States in needlepoint its published on the website for you to see, her dream for her yet to be born boys was that we would touch everyone of those states as a family and we have. I have never stopped traveling. And if you can't travel have travel come to you. We had a pen pal my brother had a pen pal Niruco Konzaki of Japan her envelopes were little packages they would send us. They were an emblem of a far off place, a place we'd been at war with 10 years earlier, a place of rice paper and ink, a place of careful packaging, wrapping and folding.

Something that you won't get from having an email pen pal. The other way traveling came from our house was the University of Toledo exchanged student Shah Mahmood was his name and he lived with us several years off and on while he was a student here.

All of these ideas that I've given you in honor of my parents, in honor of Marge Fitchen (sp), in honor of you revolve around one thing my wish for you to be involved in life. Photography was my way. Personally speaking as a non musician I have looked with great envy on musicians. I think music and dancing are the best way to be in life. But basically my earnest desire is that you find your own way to walk out of the house, walk out of the building, and walk into life. Today is graduation day I'm struck by the close relation the word graduation has toward gratitude, so I am renaming the day call it Gratitude day. I would like you graduates to find a way to say thank you to your parents and their parents. To your teachers and especially to your peers they will continue to teach you and you them for the rest of your lives. There's a trick to saying thank you, be specific. If someone compliments something I've done and they name a particular photograph I know that they've seen it and they are sincere. So pick out something that you are sincerely grateful for and mention that when you say thank you. I'm going to give you an example of that right now. I'm going to thank the University of Toledo for being in my life. There were three great things about Toledo growing up here the art museum, a radio program that came on 10:10 every morning from WJR the great voice of the great lakes. It was a program called the Adventures of Great Music with Karl Hoss. He played the opening notes to Beethoven's Pathetique Second Movement. It stilled my ear and opened my mind. I always thought I would thank Karl Hoss and he died before I could. I deeply regret that and urge you again not to postpone your gratitude. The third great thing about Toledo was this University. Its magisterial buildings, its great stonework, what it represented. It represented the large life the big life that I

aspired to live but there's something specific. It was that graduate student, Shah Mahmood he was from Afghanistan and when he came to our house my mother told us he was coming. Here we go again my brother and I said another way our mother is trying to educate us. I know we couldn't complain or grumble out loud, but we grumbled to ourselves. He was from Afghanistan we were told and I know that we thought Afghanistan who's from Afghanistan. Well Afghanistan has been on the front cover of the New York Times every day this week and will be there next week. It hasn't been out of the news since 9/11. And everyday that I see that word and every story that I read I think about Shah Mahmood the graduate student. He's out there in Afghanistan now nation building. So who are all the other graduates of the University of Toledo, you are joining them, you. Nation building, city building, state building, career building, family building. Today I get a degree conferred on me by the University of Toledo, I am your classmate together let's go out into the world and build it. Thank you!