



## 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**

Graduate





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 toni

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. T



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



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

