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## PROLOGUE

# Commencement as we know it is due a second look

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**F**or one reason or another, I must have attended 20 or 30 commencement exercises since the last time I starred in one. Except for those involving family members, most of the other occasions I have tried to pass off as business related. Now, however, the truth can be told. I am probably the only person I know who likes commencements.

Yes, the ceremonies are long and often boring, and you usually can find a better way to spend a Saturday afternoon. Events held outside in spring-time Oklahoma run the risk of rain, wind or sunburn. Inside, count on a crowded, noisy arena and an audience that is often inattentive, even rude. For sheer human interest, however, nothing compares.

Capturing the full flavor of the occasion requires a morning stroll around the main campus, weather permitting, as the various college convocations and receptions assemble and dismiss. Backslapping, hugs and handshakes abound. For a few hours at least, brave words successfully mask job anxiety.

International couples, most with small children, snap the photos that will need no translation at home. Multigenerational families, dressed to the nines, wander from building to building, expertly guided by the black-gowned object of their pride. Perhaps this young man or woman is the first family member to earn a college degree. If the past four or five or six years have been full of worry and sacrifice, you can't tell by their smiles.

At the sorority and fraternity houses, it is a time for good-byes. For a moment the departing members forget how tired of school they are, how ready for the real world. Suddenly they realize that the beginning of their new lives is also the end of good times with good friends.

Today not all the degree candidates zip through in four years to finish in their early 20s, and commencement reflects this era of the non-traditional student. A not-uncommon sight is a middle-aged man and his teenage children searching the lines of entering graduates for the mother whose years of night classes and missed suppers are culminating in a hard-won degree. Nearby a single parent searches for seats for the two children he has supported on a graduate assistant's stipend.

Unfortunately, for all the nostalgic elements in place, Commencement 1993 was not the slickest graduation ceremony ever staged by the University of Oklahoma. Commencement outgrew Lloyd Noble Center long ago, but torrential rains washed out an attempt to repeat last year's successful move to Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. The valiant effort to accommodate on a few hours' notice all who wanted to crowd into the arena resulted in minor chaos, satisfying no one.

Even those of us who cling to the idea of the traditional all-University ceremony must admit that the whole issue of commencement is due for review. Staging more than one event, whether by college or by semester, is a possibility, as is limiting the number of guests each graduate may invite—which, of course, would exclude any unaffiliated commencement junkies. No doubt the question of having a commencement speaker will be addressed again, as well as the role of the honorary degree recipients.

There is no perfect solution. Let's hope, however, that deliberations will focus on all those graduates and their families for whom one day in May is a high point in life that cannot be duplicated.

—CJB