



Dare Mighty Things
Commencement Address
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As a university president I do my share of commencement addresses.

I have spoken at many high school commencements, and I have spoken at a fair number of colleges. But this is only the second opportunity I have had to speak at a graduate school to honor those receiving advanced degrees.

A couple of years ago, I spoke at the commencement for the University of Louisville School of Law. I told them that, as far as I know, I am the only UofL Law School graduate who personally provided a lawyer joke for Jay Leno.

Leno said: "There is good news, and there is bad news. The good news is that this American woman just became the first woman and the first American to row a boat solo and unassisted across the Atlantic Ocean. The bad news is we could have had one less lawyer."

I am a rower, so I tend to do things backwards. I can prove I do things backwards because I went to divinity school first and then I went to law school. Most people do it the other way around to atone for their sins.

I have learned that divinity degrees and law degrees provide a useful combination. First, I can provide twice the advice for half the price.

Second, half the world will do something because it is the right thing to do ... the other half you can threaten with a lawsuit.

I am sorry to say that I did not graduate from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. This is a Harvard gown.

I was a student at the Harvard Divinity School in the late 1980s. In those days it was said that the "Harvard" cancelled the "Divinity" and the "Divinity" cancelled the "Harvard" and students ended up in an existential void.

Why are you laughing? That's not funny.

There were 60 people in my entering MDiv cohort. When we graduated, only two of us still planned to be ordained. I hope that the graduates today are not lost in the existential void. If you are, see me afterwards. I will loan you my compass.

I myself chose not to become ordained. This puzzled me for many years. I was raised Presbyterian, and now I am leading a historically Catholic school. Archbishop Kurtz has been very kind and patient with me, but I doubt he would have allowed an ordained Presbyterian minister to become the president of Spalding University.

I do not regret my education, nor do I regret the choices I have made.

Helaire Belloc wrote, "Nothing is worth the wear of winning but laughter and the love of friends. The more I win, the more I understand that nothing is worth the wear of winning but laughter and the love of friends."

Shortly you will move another tassel from the right to the left, and you will leave this place. Those who helped you through the doors of the seminary will cheer ... some will cheer quite loudly. It is not that they don't love you. They do. But they need no longer worry about whether you will pass your last exam.

No more listening to you whine about your assignments.

No more patiently enduring your discourses on the esoteric nuances of your latest research paper.

No more pretending to be interested in your esoteric wanderings along the existential plains of academic syllabi.

This day belongs not just to you, but to all those who helped you reach this goal, particularly parents, spouses and teenage children. Their gentle smiles hide deeper emotions. For some, the sense of relief must border on hysteria. This hysteria will exhibit itself in the flash of cameras and in bringing about your accomplishments in unnaturally loud voices.

You may have endured the waves and storms of this seminary, but no matter how independent you are, you will never convince me you did it by yourself. There were many who prepared you for the journey, some who coached you along the way, and any number of people out there praying for you.

Share the joy of this day with them. This is their day as much as it is yours.

I believe that there are three ways of interacting with the world.

There are those who WATCH adventures. These are the electronic surfers of a spectator society. While I think this is superior to pulling the wings off flies, I am not entirely sure.

There are those who HAVE adventures. I place myself in this category.

But there is a third category to which I aspire. Those who ARE adventures.

(I believe President Jenkins is one of these people.)

One of the first women to climb Mont Blanc was a woman named Henrietta de Angeville. She climbed Mont Blanc in 1826, and I know she was an adventure because she climbed Mont Blanc wearing a feather boa!

I have enjoyed the privilege of striking up a friendship with the historian of religion, Karen Armstrong. She has written more than 22 books on the theory of religion. One evening, she was giving me grief for the audacity of my having rowed a boat alone across an ocean. I said, "Karen ... you wrote a history of God! You do not get to pick on me for my audacity!"

Karen Armstrong is an adventure in the very best sense of the word.

One of the greatest tests in life is to make the most of our gifts. For those of us who believe the source of those gifts is some higher power, how we use our gifts is an act of faith.

The paths you have chosen are not likely to make you monetarily wealthy, but you understand better than most that there is more to life than what one owns and what one earns. You will not take jobs you do not enjoy so that you may purchase things you do not need to impress people you do not like. You are not demented.

May your lives prove that it is better to be a person with meaning than it is to be a person of means. And what you have in life is not nearly as important as who you have in your life.

Some may advise you to fight battles that you know you can win. I call this nonsense. It is a path fit only for cowards and feeble of heart. We must fight battles that need fighting. It was Theodore Roosevelt who once said:

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.

If while fighting your battles, you stumble and fall, don't worry about it. I don't know any perfect people, and few are more tedious than the ones who think they are perfect. I have often bragged that the best thing about my faults is the joy they bring to others.

Vaklav Havel once said, "Keep the company of and seek the company of those who are seeking after truth and run away from those who are sure they've found it."

None of us is perfect. Each person is a blend of dust and divinity. Each is mortal, and each heroic. It is up to us ... it is up to you ... to close the gap between the promise of humanity and the performance of human beings. I firmly believe that human beings are capable of traversing the distance between possibility and fact.

We must keep our glasses clean.

We all face obstacles, each and every one of us. We all have mountains to climb and oceans to traverse. We all tangle with storms. We all face waves. We take on the challenges before us one step at a time or one stroke at a time.

Step after step we traverse the distance between possibility and fact. As Goethe said, "Whatever you can do or dream, you can begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

My boat was called the *American Pearl*. I named it that because a dream is like a grain of sand that works its way into an oyster. If you work at it, it may become a pearl.

To this day, I think of the people who helped me as "the pearls." Each pearl is an adventure. No doubt some of your faculty and classmates will become pearls in your lives.

I commend you for reaching this milestone in life. I commend you for your achievements and for the achievements you are yet to make. Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary has prepared you well.

As scholars, you are creative individuals. You possess clarity of mind and energy of will. I have no doubt you shall meet the challenge of the coming years. You have warmed yourselves by the fires of your family and those who raised you. At Louisville Presbyterian you gathered the tinder of knowledge.

The time has come for you to set out anew and light your own fires. The world cried out for educated voices. It does not take an education to see pain. It takes an education to do something about it.

As I wind this up, it is my job to fill your head with platitudes one or two of which you might actually remember. Socrates said, "All I know is that I know nothing." I will freely admit I don't know anything for sure, but I will end with 10 things that I think I know:

- 1.) Silence is golden, and if silence should fail you, duct tape is silver.
- 2.) Road blocks only block the road ... they do not block the grass, the path, the water or the way less travelled ... road blocks just block the road.
- 3.) Do not treat others in a way that makes them feel small. If making others feel small becomes a habit, it will make you smaller.
- 4.) It is never too late to have a happy childhood. I have had several. I have many more planned.
- 5.) Do not wait until you get old to become an eccentric. John Stewart Mill wrote, "That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time." And he wrote that a very long time ago.
- 6.) If you have to keep something that you are doing a secret, then perhaps you should not be doing it.
- 7.) Don't take yourself too seriously. No one else does.
- 8.) Be yourself. As Oscar Wilde pointed out, everyone else is already taken.
- 9.) Do not believe everything you think. Remember Socrates. "All I know is that I know nothing."
- 10.) Eat chocolate. Wear sunscreen. Learn new things whenever possible.

I commend you for being here, for your achievements and for the achievements you are yet to make.

I have tremendous confidence that when you leave this seminary, you will

Teach.
Heal.
Feed.
Build.

You will

Inform.
Advocate.
Comfort.
Guide.

You will

Criticize.
Organize.
Contribute.

And for that, I commend you.

When this service ends, let your service to the world begin anew. Go out and make your friends, your family and the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary proud.