

The following was delivered to the Loyola School community by Ms. Susan Baber at the Academic Convocation, Friday, September 5, 2008.

Fr. Katsouros, you are not insignificant.

Mr. Lyness, Dr. Bolton, you are not insignificant.

Colleagues, companions, friends, and parents, guess what—you and I are not insignificant, either.

And students of Loyola School, **you** are not insignificant.

The issue of insignificance vs. significance has been in my mind since mid-summer and I invite you now to consider it with me. Let me start by defining my terminology. When I say that you and I are not insignificant, I am not referring to our status within the Loyola School community or within our families and other social networks, but our status as members of the global community and the world beyond our immediate environment. By insignificant I mean marginalized and excluded from participation in the world's societies and economies. There is no one sitting in this church today who is insignificant in that way. If we agree that we are not insignificant, then it would seem that we are, in fact, somehow significant to people we do not know and will never meet.

The challenge to view myself and people like me (educated, financially secure, and with a vote—and therefore a voice—in political processes) as significant was issued in a class I took this summer. During the last meeting of that class, in response to a question, Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian theologian (who is certainly a prophet and quite possibly a saint), looked around the room and asked us all realize that we are not and cannot be insignificant. In relation to the rest of the world, we have too much education, too much economic power, and too many potential options to be insignificant; even those of us who might choose to live and work among the world's poorest people cannot adopt their insignificance. In Gustavo's words "The peasant people of my country—*they* are insignificant. Not to God, but to the world. They will not be invited here as students or as teachers; it will not happen. They are insignificant; you are not." He didn't elaborate on his point, but kept moving along responding to other questions. Yet as happens in truly great classes, the discussion moved well beyond the classroom and the challenge of Gutierrez's simple statement inspired animated conversation and further reflection weeks and months later.

This notion of significance and insignificance stayed with me during my retreat the next week. I recognize that I am significant to my family and friends, and that I play a significant role in multiple communities to which I belong, but I don't wake up in the morning and look in the mirror and say "Sue, you are significant...to the entire world." I try to make decisions which are socially just and responsible, and consistent with the values of the Gospel but I wonder how different my daily small decisions would be if I stopped to think about their significance on a global level—to the farmer who grows the coffee but doesn't get paid a living wage, to the exploited immigrant worker, to the child laborer in a foreign sweatshop.

There were moments when this idea of significance challenged me enormously during this year's service trip to Belize with some of our most recent graduates. We were working in an environment of abject poverty which was, at least for me, at times overwhelming—particularly when I watched the small children of the neighborhood. While I was able to see their insignificance (as I defined it earlier), I wasn't always able to feel my own significance. My education, economic power, and political rights have little direct relation to the people living in Belize City, and the work we were doing would help only the few people living in the one house that we built. We were doing a good thing—we built a house for a family that didn't have one. That's good. A family was suffering and we helped to ease that suffering a bit. But we built one house—just one. Building one where hundreds are needed felt utterly inadequate and pretty insignificant at some points. Our choice to be in Belize, however, was significant. In addition to building that house we took the time to get to know some of the people of Belize, to appreciate their culture, to learn about their history, to understand the challenges of a young country, and to enjoy the natural beauty of the place and the joy of the people. We could have made the choice to simply donate money; instead, though, our choice was to bear witness by being present, and, in turn, to be changed because of that presence.

A week later in Camden I was inspired by an example of one man's significance. Sean Closkey was one of the speakers who came to the Romero Center while the Loyola group was there in late August. Over 20 years ago Sean took his MBA and left a lucrative career on Wall Street (where he was, as he said, "making a lot of money for people who already had a lot of money") and became one of the founders of the St. Joseph's Carpenter Society in Camden. The Carpenter Society rehabilitates abandoned buildings to create affordable housing in some of the poorest neighborhoods in a very poor city; in the midst of urban blight, a housing development which they worked on not far from the Romero Center looks (to quote a Loyola student) "like it could be in Westchester."

Has the Carpenter Society solved the housing crisis in Camden? No. It's really like a band-aid on a hemorrhage. But is the Carpenter Society vital to the Camden community. Absolutely. What the Carpenter Society provides is much more than just housing—it's hope. For some people, it's the hope that they will one day benefit directly from the housing provided; for others it's hope that their community hasn't been abandoned, forgotten and forsaken by the rest of the world. And for others, it's the hope that people really do care and really will reach out to their neighbors in love. That same kind of hope is also part of the significance of our work in Belize.

What does any of this have to do with us, here, now, at the beginning of this school year? Everything.

First—the education you are receiving in this school is an opportunity that most people your age in this world cannot even imagine; the time to study, learn, and think may not seem like anything exceptional to us, but it's a luxury and an extraordinary opportunity. Please, don't squander it. Learn everything you possibly can about the subjects you're good at or interested in, but also the subjects you're not good at or not so interested in.

Learn not only information, but keep learning how to learn, how to question, how to think, how to avoid looking for simple solutions to complex issues. The world is changing rapidly and getting more complicated; real understanding of the complexity of the world and the interconnections among ourselves and others demands the ability to analyze and interpret information—you are at an age when you can start to refine and really develop those critical thinking skills with some maturity and sophistication. Academic excellence is about a lot more than grades; it's about habits of mind and thought. Enjoy your intellectual pursuits, even the ones that challenge you the most! I sincerely hope that each of you finds joy in your learning this year.

Next—take advantage of our extracurricular programs. By being a member of a team or a club or the cast of the play or the orchestra or the chorus you not only develop your own talents—or perhaps discover new talents—but you learn how to work as a team. Sean Closkey didn't start the Carpenter Society by himself. For that matter, St. Ignatius didn't found the Jesuits by himself. Learning how to work together is a vitally important skill, but one that most of us need to practice—a lot. Take advantage of the opportunities to practice working together toward a common goal that transcends self-interest.

Use your imagination, creativity, and leadership to make Loyola better. A year ago we had no chapter of Amnesty International and no dean's counsel; 7 years ago we had no coffeehouse; 10 years ago the Service Program as we know it did not exist; 15 years ago Loyola had no Kairos retreats. The imagination of members of the community and the desire to keep growing gave birth to these and myriad other aspects of life at Loyola that we take for granted today and which make Loyola a better, more truly Ignatian community.

Also use your imagination, creativity, and talent to help us all grow in our aesthetic appreciation. Art, music, dance, and writing all tap parts of the human mind and soul in profound and often indescribable ways; when you share your talents we all become a little more human and complete.

And finally, please, be agents of hope. Don't be afraid to ask difficult questions; don't accept "that's just the way things are" as a reason for avoiding those questions. When you go to your Christian Service placements or on a service trip, give yourself generously to your work and the people you serve. The work is important—the work in a soup kitchen or thrift shop, and the houses in Camden and Belize make a difference—but they're limited. What we learn from serving others, from looking them in the eye and really hearing their stories has the potential to transform us, and in our transformation, transform the world that we touch directly as well as the parts that we touch indirectly through the choices that we make. The witness that we provide by loving and serving others authentically can provide a measure of hope, the value of which we may never know.

You, Loyola students, provide me with great hope; I have taught some you in the classroom, prayed with you on retreats, worked beside you and reflected with you on service trips, and laughed with you in the Commons. You have great minds, huge hearts,

and considerable God-given talent. You are not insignificant. By virtue of all that you've been given you cannot become insignificant. Your choice is whether you will be significant in a positive or a negative way. I'm counting on the positive.

Have a great year. Thank you.