

Commencement Address delivered at Loyola School's Graduation, May 29, 2009, by faculty member, Mr. Daniel Sullivan.

Good Evening - Fr. Katsouros, Mr. Lyness, Dr. Bolton, Ms. Cupillari, Members of the Loyola Faculty, Mr. Sheehy and Members of the Board of Trustees, Parents, Family, Friends of the Graduates, and Members of the Class of 2009:

When Mr. Lyness invited me to give the graduation address I was deeply honored and immediately struck with fear. What would I say? How could I make this address memorable? After all I'm not very philosophical or inspirational. What could I offer to the graduating class of 2009?

The more I thought the more I came back to my own high school graduation – 42 years ago this month I graduated from St. Raymond's Boys High School. As I traveled down memory lane I distinctly remembered how happy I was that high school was finally over – four long years and I was finally out. I was ecstatic; I'm sure many of you here tonight are ecstatic.

At the same time my euphoria was mixed with a certain sense of anxiety about the fall. College loomed very large on the horizon, while I was excited about the prospect of starting college there was a certain warm, cozy, familiar feeling about high school. I knew the surroundings, what was expected, what I could get away with and of course the old familiar faces that I had spent the last four years with.

Now I'm sure there are many here tonight on the altar who are thinking: "I hope Mr. Sullivan doesn't drone on and on, I want to get to the reception line in Wallace Hall and then enjoy graduation night with my family and friends." Well I'll try to be both inspirational and succinct at the same time, in deference to Fr. Curry.

I came by Jesuit education in September of 1976 when I was hired to teach sophomores and juniors. I have to confess that my knowledge of Jesuit education was somewhat lacking – after all I'm a "Brothers Boy," educated by the Del La Salle Christian Brothers at St. Raymond's and The Irish Christian Brothers at Iona College. What little I knew about the Society of Jesus I had learned in my religion and history classes and from my uncle, a diocesan priest, who would often punctuate a sentence by saying, "well you know those Jesuits," as he was shaking his head disapprovingly.

As an adopted son of Jesuit education, I quickly came to realize the high academic standards that characterize a Jesuit school. But I came to understand that academic excellence was not a single standard for everyone. The care and concern for the individual, that is a hallmark of Jesuit education, prevented the establishment of a

single cookie cutter mold for measuring academic excellence. Each student was expected to achieve the level of excellence that they were capable of achieving. This subjective standard for measuring excellence allowed each person to feel a sense of accomplishment within the context of fulfilling their own potential.

As a novice teacher in the Bronx I was fortunate to have as a principal Sr. Helen Mary, a Sister of Charity. Sr. Helen impressed upon me that there were more important things than the simple mastery of the historical facts. On one occasion, Sr. Helen told me that each day I should try to teach a little less history and help my students to be better people. As Sr. Helen said, if they are interested in the history they'll pick it up along the way but I shouldn't miss an opportunity to help my students grow as people of competence, conscience, and commitment.

This is the first characteristic of the graduate of a Jesuit high school – a commitment to personal excellence.

At the end of each school year Loyola faculty have a personal meeting with the headmaster to discuss their year in retrospect. In one of these end of the year discussions, early in my career, I was asked by the Headmaster, what makes a great teacher? This question really gave me pause as I reflected on the nature of the question. We all have a sense of what greatness entails – and we are all called to greatness, but did I consider myself a great teacher? As I reflected on the question and considered my answer I thought about what I had accomplished as a teacher and all the things I still needed to work on.

My reflections on greatness often turn to my background in history. I think of George Washington who is hailed as a great leader, yet Washington's record in battle tells a different tale. Washington lost many more battles than he won. Yet when the nation sought leadership Washington responded even when he would have preferred to return to Martha and his life at Mount Vernon. At John Adams' inauguration outgoing President Washington commented to newly inaugurated, President John Adams, "I am fairly out and you are fairly in. See which of us will be the happiest." The true indication of Washington's greatness is that he voluntarily gave up power in 1796 because he felt it was time for new leadership; or how about the greatness of Abraham Lincoln who brought his political rivals into his cabinet, when it would have been far easier to have excluded them. Neither one of these men tripped over their egos when it came to making decisions, they put the people they served above themselves.

My response to the question of greatness was to define greatness as being consistently good day after day – anyone could teach a great lesson on any given day but being prepared each and every day is the call to greatness. Creating the environment where

students can learn, helping them to be open to growth is the true test of any teacher's greatness. Openness to growth is the second characteristic of a graduate of a Jesuit high school. Being open to growth is not easy. Doing things the way we always get use to doing them can lead to us becoming predictable and stale. Your first year in college will be a true test of your openness to growth. Let down your guard - be open to new people and new experiences – embrace all that your chosen college has to offer. Greatness comes from being open to growth.

Throughout my teaching career I have always asked God's help to make me the best teacher I could be. I feel it's important to periodically take a moment to reflect upon where I've come from, where I am heading and what I hope to accomplish. Every morning for the past four years we have started the day with a prayer –St. Ignatius' Prayer for Generosity.

Reflect for a moment on what we pray for in St Ignatius' Prayer for Generosity:

"Lord teach me to be generous
Teach me to serve you as you deserve
To give and not to count the cost
To fight and not to heed the wounds
To toil and not to seek for rest
To labor and not to seek for any reward, save that I know
I am doing your will. Amen."

I firmly believe that what led me into teaching was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I know that I am doing God's will when I am in the classroom. I feel alive when I am teaching a class. I was not a particularly good student in high school. I'm sure that when I told Brother Kevin, the Guidance Counselor at St. Raymond's High School, that I wanted to be a teacher, he probably said to himself heaven help the school this guy ends up in! But Brother Kevin was a kind man he didn't crush my dream – maybe he saw more in me than even I saw in myself.

Pray for guidance, let the hand of God and the guidance of the Spirit, open your eyes to God's will, be what you are intended to be – whatever that happens to be. There is a lot to be said for being happy in your chosen profession. Pray that you find a life's work that makes you happy and fulfilled. This is the third characteristic of a graduate of a Jesuit high school – someone who is becoming more religious.

Twenty years ago this coming December I met Kathleen Whelan on a blind date. I was forty years old and thoughts of getting married and having a family just didn't seem to be in the cards for me. I told myself that was OK. Well, Kathy saw something in me that

I didn't see in myself. She found something in me that she loved and in return taught me how to love. Three years after we were married our daughter Johanna was born. I can truly say that when I looked upon her face I could see the handiwork of God.

St. Ignatius talked about seeing God in all things. At times seeing God in all things is not easy, but I am reminded of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus talks about the final judgment:

"... I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

When God is asked when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you?

God's reply is – "whenever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

Or perhaps the parable of the Prodigal son, or as I like to think of it the story of the loving and forgiving parent. You all know the story: the son demands his share of his inheritance and then goes off and lives it up blowing through all the money the father generously gave him. When things turn horribly bad and the son has no more money he decides to come home to his father's house. Note it is the father who when he spies the son on the road runs out to meet him and to welcome him home.

In the parable the father asks no questions he is just grateful that his child has returned unharmed – total and unqualified love- even for someone who had betrayed his father's trust. The example set by the loving father is an example for each of us to live out the fourth characteristic of the graduate of a Jesuit high school to become more loving.

In the aftermath of September 11th 2001, I heard someone say "if you want to make God laugh tell him what you are going to do tomorrow, since tomorrow is promised to no one."

We should never forget that life is a call to action and a call to service - life is intended to be a challenge. It was never intended to be easy or relaxing. Anyone who told you that it was going to be easy was misleading you. Life is intended to exhaust you; that's the joy of the job well done. The satisfaction of doing what you enjoy and doing it as well as you can. So speak up and speak out, especially when you feel strongly about something. Especially speak for those who cannot speak or will not speak for

themselves. Make a difference in the world. Be remembered as someone who cared enough to make a difference; you're the only one who can.

If you don't make a difference then who will? And never lose hope regardless of how bleak things might appear to be. This then is the fifth and final characteristic of the graduate of a Jesuit high school – a commitment to doing justice.

Well there you have it the prescription for a happy and fulfilling life: a commitment to personal excellence, openness to growth, becoming more religious, becoming more loving and a commitment to justice.

In closing, I would like to reference coach Al McGuire, the very successful basketball coach of the 1977 National Champion Marquette University Warriors. The president of Marquette University Rev. Robert A. Wild, S.J., said on the passing of Coach McGuire in 2001, Al McGuire was not just a great coach and a teller of stories in the Irish tradition. He also had a gift for seeing the wonder and goodness of God's creation, sometimes in the most unlikely places, and sharing that discovery with those around him." As coach McGuire would say himself: know what you are good at, work hard to develop it, and take time for people and the beauty. Thanks for the lesson, coach McGuire.

As I do at the end of every one of my classes, I say thank you to the students. I want to thank the class of 2009 for allowing me the opportunity to be a part of their lives for the past four years. It has been a great experience for me. As Fr. Gene Prior, S.J. would say at the end of every Mass, thanks for being here, Loyola would not have been the same place without you. And as Danielle Luszczuk says to her classmates before every test – Good Luck Everybody and God Bless the Class of 2009.

Al McGuire information Copyright 2002 Wally Bock