

Delivered to the Loyola School community at Morning Assembly, Tuesday, November 17, 2009,

by History Department Chairperson Mr. Daniel Sullivan

For me, being open to growth is one of the most challenging of the characteristics of the graduate of a Jesuit high school. It means being willing to accept the new challenges that life brings your way. It means going outside your comfort zone. It means operating without a net. It means taking risks. I grew up in a household where education was of paramount importance. Both my mom and dad were determined that their three children would get the best education they could provide for us. That meant going to college, something that neither one of them had had the opportunity to do.

Now, going to college seemed to be stretch for me. I was not a particularly good student in school. Let's be honest I was certainly closer to the bottom of my class, graduating from high school, than the top of the class. However, my mom never lost faith in me or the power of prayer. She prayed every day to St. Jude for me. It only seemed right that when I was confirmed I should take Jude as my Confirmation name. I can still remember the Bishop on Confirmation day commenting, with a smile, on my choice of names.

Despite my academic difficulties I always have wanted to be a teacher. History was the one subject that always piqued my curiosity. My mom's sister lived with us when I was growing up and she was a fifth grade teacher, in fact she taught fifth grade for over thirty years. My aunt never married yet she helped to raise two families – ours and hers. In old fashion Irish Catholic families, people never talked about their personal difficulties. They were stoic people who kept their personal “business” to themselves.

Later in my life, I found out that my mom's parents died when their four children were teenagers. My aunt Margaret, all of about eighteen years old, stepped in to play the role of both mom and dad for her brothers and sister. She made sure that the younger children finished high school, found jobs, and went to work every day. My ninety year old uncle tells the story that when he came home from his first day of work he told my aunt that he didn't like the job and he was not going back the next day. My aunt informed her brother that he was going back the next day and every day after that. My uncle eventually retired from that job over forty years later. My aunt was also a cancer survivor. She was also one of the happiest and in love with life people I have ever met. When I think of openness to growth I see my aunt managing a family of her siblings when this was not what she envisioned her life to be at age eighteen.

My love of history comes from my aunt; she took me with her on vacation to places like Washington, D.C. and Gettysburg. I'm sure that when I told the guidance counselor in high school that I wanted to be a teacher he said to himself heaven help the school this guy ends up teaching at.

I firmly believe that what led me into teaching was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Al McGuire, the coach of the 1977 National Champion Marquette University men's basketball team

would say: “know what you are good at, work hard to develop it, and take time for people and beauty.”

For me, my love is teaching. I know I am doing God’s will when I am in the classroom. I feel alive when I am teaching a class. Throughout my teaching career I have always asked God to help me to be the best teacher I can be. This has not always been easy since at age 60, I come from a generation before computers, DVD’s or smart boards. When I started teaching I was your basic eight-track tape, typewriter, blackboard and chalk kind of guy.

It wasn’t until 1980 that I sat down for the first time in front of a computer in the “newly renovated” Loyola computer center located in the old room 403 on the fourth floor. The computer was a Radio Shack TRS 80, which didn’t even have a hard drive. It was a basic word processing program, known as Scribes. I can’t tell you how scared I was. If this was the future of teaching would I be able to continue to do what I loved to do? I was open to growth but there were times when I wondered am I reaching the limit of my openness?

At the close of my second year at Loyola, I was sitting at my end of the year conference with the Headmaster, Mr. Guerra, the man who had hired me two years earlier. He asked me, what I thought was a strange question. Was I a great teacher? Now I really began to sweat – how do you answer such a question without seeming to be bragging or self-denigrating? My answer was to define greatness in a highly individual way. Greatness, to me, was being consistently good every day. Anyone could teach a great lesson on any given day but being consistently prepared each and every day was 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. Being open to growth is not easy, it means fighting the complacency that often comes with doing something over and over again. I am certainly no computer whiz. as anyone who has sat in my classroom can attest, but I feel competent in using technology to make my teaching better for the students I teach.

In closing, I want share one more story. The best advice I ever received as a teacher was from the first principal I worked for, Sr. Helen Mary. I was teaching seventh grade U.S. history, at St Raymond’s Elementary School in the Bronx. Sr. Helen had come to observe one of my classes. At the end of the class Sr. Helen said to me that the class was fine. And then she dropped a bomb shell, she told me that every day I should teach a little less history and make sure I help my students to be better people; after all as Sr. Helen said, they’ll pick up the history along the way, if they’re interested, but you may never again get the opportunity to help your students to become better people. The students in your class don’t really care how much you know until they know how much you care.