

Commencement Address

2017 Class of the Trinity School at Meadow View

June 10, 2017

By Thomas J. Scanlon

Dr. Yohe, distinguished members of the Trinity School faculty, proud parents, welcome guests and members of the 2017 graduating class of the Trinity School at Meadow View.

Graduating seniors, I am so pleased to be with you today and to have been chosen by you to be your commencement speaker. I appreciate your interest in my early experience and service in the Peace Corps, and I hope my words will do justice to the accomplishments you have made so far in your lives as well as the your hopes for the future.

Preparing remarks for this occasion has educated me. I had no previous knowledge of the People of Praise community or of the Trinity schools movement. It made me proud to learn that individuals associated with Notre Dame, my alma mater, were instrumental in creating an ecumenical movement responsible for so many material and spiritual good works around the world. I have been edified and inspired to learn about the Trinity Schools, especially the Trinity School at Meadow View.

I enjoyed a vicarious year at Trinity School. I read last year's yearbook. After reviewing your pictures (even though you were in your eleventh year then), I feel like I know you all personally. I came away from that reading in awe of this school – its commitment to a classic education, to the values of Christian humanism, to a life of prayer and to a love of truth and beauty. Most of all, I came away in awe of all of you.

The first thing I want to say to you is this: if you maintain the ideals and values that you have learned at Trinity School – including the practice of morning prayers, healthy physical activity, and a lifelong search for beauty and truth, you will have a happy and meaningful life.

And I am in awe of your parents as well! Many believe – and I am among them -that the choice of a high school can be more important than the choice of a college. An excellent high school education provides the basis for success at a university and, even more importantly, shapes values that you will carry throughout your lives. I congratulate your parents for the wise choice they made in helping you choose the Trinity School and for the sacrifices they made so that you could benefit from the values-rich experience of a Trinity School education.

I should add, however, that in some ways it seems your class has already been in college. I certainly never read the Brothers Karamazov until late in my college career!!

When I visited your school a few weeks ago, I mentioned to Dr. Yohe that I still remember one line of the commencement address given at my graduation from high school some sixty one years ago. A wise old Jesuit told us to “keep our eyes on the stars and our feet on the ground.” Kind of trite, I know; but at least I remember it. So I want to warn you that I will be back in touch with each of you in sixty one years to see if you remember anything I said here today!

One of my fellow high school graduates, Tom Granahan, and his wife, Joann, are here with us today. He is the one who recommended me for this honor and informed me that you requested I give your commencement address. I have to admit I panicked a bit when Tom called me. What could I possibly say that would be meaningful to you? I was tempted to Google graduation speeches by persons who are a lot smarter, wittier and more important than I for some good ideas. Well, I didn't do that. I decided to share the lessons of my own life experiences with you. There were six that came to mind. So here they are.

First of all, "Let things happen to you."

Throughout your Trinity School education, you have been advised to look for beauty and truth in unexpected places. I want to take that advice one step further and encourage you to allow your lives and careers to be open to unexpected opportunities and meaning. Of course you need direction and an excellent preparation for your careers, but keep yourselves open to surprises.

A few years ago, my Peace Corps group, which was one of the first in history, had a reunion at Notre Dame. We sat around a table very similar to those you have sat around during your years at Trinity and talked about what we were doing before volunteering for the Peace Corps. Each of us was set on a completely different path, yet we seized an opportunity that we could never have predicted or imagined. That experience changed the lives of every one of us forever and allowed us to be on the ground floor of – and help define and create – a new form of national service, one that 225,000 Americans have since provided in 141 countries.

Another example:

My roommate at Notre Dame was the son of Red Smith, a sportswriter who is generally recognized as one of the greatest Sportswriters of the 20th century. Through his son, I had the chance to know Red. One day he told me an amazing fact. He had never planned to be a sportswriter! He was working at the Philadelphia Inquirer, and one day the man who covered sports for the newspaper called in sick. Red was sent to cover a baseball game. The rest is journalistic history.

Second lesson: Handling challenging ethical situations.

In the course of your lifetimes, you will undoubtedly be presented with ethical challenges. You may be asked, even pressured, to take an action that just doesn't feel right to you. It could be in your job, your profession, your community, or even in your family. I have a rather simple approach to handling unfortunate and challenging situations like these – and it is a practice that I have followed and urged my daughter and son to follow. Whenever you are encouraged to be part of a process that is unfair to another individual, that would provide you with an unfair advantage or be downright immoral, "just do the right thing and let the chips fall where they may."

My third lesson: Don't expect perfection of yourself or of others.

We have a saying in my office, "the perfect is the enemy of the good." This is true of the pressures you place upon yourselves as well as your expectations of others. I know that you all read Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" while you were at Trinity. There is another Wilder play that I want to bring to your attention today – the "Matchmaker" which, by the way, inspired the smash Broadway hit "Hello Dolly". In the play, the lead character, Dolly Gallagher Levi, famously said: "there comes a moment in everybody's life when he must decide whether he'll live among human beings or not, a fool among fools or a fool alone. I decided to live among them."

So recognize your own shortcomings – your own foolishness - and be tolerant of others. Remember, as the great German Philosopher, Immanuel Kant, once wrote: "out of the crooked timber of humanity, nothing straight has ever been made."

Next Lesson: Be Prepared to "Walk on the Leaves."

Let me go back again to the early days of the Peace Corps. It took a great deal of courage on the part of President John Kennedy and his brother-in-law Sargent Shriver to create the Peace Corps. Former President Dwight Eisenhower had called the idea a "Children's Crusade." Others referred to it as a publicity stunt. Kennedy and Shriver pressed forward.

One day an aide to Shriver asked him a few questions: “do we really know what we are doing here? We are sending young Americans, especially young women, to remote and dangerous areas with entirely different cultures and languages. We still don’t know if this idea will work –whether the volunteers will be accepted. Aren’t we going out on a limb??” “Out on a limb, nothing”, Shriver replied. “We are out there, walking on the leaves!” Well, it all turned out well. Today the Peace Corps is seen as one of President Kennedy’s most important legacies, but to make it happen he had to “walk on the leaves.” I hope you will have the courage to take the necessary risks to achieve whatever is especially fulfilling or meaningful in your lives.

Lesson number five: “Fulfill Yourself through Service to Others.”

One of my philanthropic heroes was Eugene Lang who died this spring at the age of 98. Mr. Lang was an extremely wealthy man who, while giving a speech to a sixth grade graduating class in East Harlem in the mid-eighties, pledged to the class that, if the sixth-graders persevered in their studies and gained admission to a college, he would pay their tuitions.

(Now please don’t you or your parents get any idea of where this is going)!

Well, Mr. Lang did that and he created a foundation called the “I Have a Dream” Foundation named after Martin Luther King’s memorable address. That foundation has now enabled over 16,000 low-income children obtain college degrees. I had the opportunity to cooperate with his foundation several years ago, and there is one thing he said about service that has always stayed with me. “Giving,” he said, “is not a matter of giving back. It is self-fulfillment.” Eugene Lang’s words illustrate that critical paradox of all human life – that the best way to fulfill yourself is to be of service to others.

Finally; “Be a Citizen of the World.”

I urge you to become global citizens, as well as great citizens of your wonderful country. I am not here to recruit you for the Peace Corps, though international service is an option that I would recommend to almost anyone, not just for what you might do for others but for what the experience of learning another language and living in another culture could do for you.

Nothing illustrates better for me the incalculable, positive impact that international service can have than a story I heard early in my Peace Corps days. A little girl in Africa wrote adoringly to her Peace Corps teacher, “You are a blot on my life that I will never erase.”

But not all of you will be called to international service. You can become global citizens in your own community and in your own station in life. It is often said that the most important impact of the Peace Corps may not be what volunteers do overseas but what they bring home – a respect for and an understanding of persons from different cultures and ways of life. Does anyone doubt that this is one of the foremost challenges facing our country today?

As one of the largest language training facilities in the world, the Peace Corps has learned that in many languages, the word for “stranger” is the same as the word for “enemy.” Contrast that with what William Butler Yeats is reported to have said, “There are no strangers, only friends you have not yet met.” The Peace Corps’ job is to prove that this is the case. It is yours as well.

And so this is my final hope for all of you, dear Trinity Class of 2017. Make a friend of many strangers. Leave a “blot that can never be erased”, not only on the lives of many Americans but on those of persons from many other places in the world as well.

God Bless You, thank you very much, and please accept my most sincere and fervent congratulations to each and every one of you.