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Commencement Address

Regis University, May 5-6, 2018

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In his acclaimed novel *In the Beginning*, the Jewish author Chaim Potok relates the conversation of a mentor to his young protégé, in which he speaks to him about the importance of passion: “Do you know what a passion is, David? Something to which you give your heart and soul, all your thoughts.”

Thank you, Father Fitzgibbons, for the invitation to speak today. Thank you, Class of 2018, for the honor of addressing you this morning. It is a privilege to share this time of completion, accomplishment, and new beginnings with you.

And yet, I confess that speaking with you is also a little daunting. The “commencement address” is a rather strange event: a complete stranger comes in to speak a few words that you are to politely receive before getting on to the “main event” and the reason why you’re really here. And, as I thought over the many such addresses that I have listened to over the years, and realized how few were memorable—including that of my own graduation from Marquette University many years ago—I almost despaired of the task.

Indeed, I had reached a roadblock, or better, a “writer’s block.” Because I was trying to be what all the websites said I should be when you google “graduation speech”: profound, wise, humorous—and brief! Then, I checked myself. I found myself remembering advice I gave to a young mentee, who I’ll call “Paul.” Paul was in the process of applying for graduate programs in global human development, yet just couldn’t write his admissions essay for the applications. He managed a few half-hearted drafts, which I read and said, based on years of being on admissions and search committees, “They’re boring.” That almost pushed him over the edge. So then I told Paul: “From the day I met you, I knew that you were passionate about Africa. So, tell them about your passion. Tell them why *you* are passionate about human development, and the education of

young women, especially in Africa. Write about what instilled this drive within you. Tell the committee how their program will help you achieve your passions and dreams. Tell them about the fire and energy that motivates you. Convey to them how you are so passionate about educational development in Africa that you’re going to do this with or without them whether they admit you or not. Don’t worry about how it sounds. We can edit later. But you’ve got to put *you* into the essay. Tell them about your *passion*.”

This leads to my first “life lesson,” Class of 2018: “Be careful of the advice you give to others.” I said to myself, “Bryan, are you listening to yourself?” So, I want to speak to you about passion, of that “something to which you give your heart and soul, all your thoughts.” And share with you my passion, in hope that it might have something to say to you.

To do that, I need to take the focus off of you, the graduates, for just a moment. I’m going to ask you to share the spotlight with another group who is here: your grandparents. If there are any grandparents present, would you please stand? I know this is atypical for a commencement address. Yet, as I thought about the importance of passion, and my passion in particular, my mind turned to my college graduation and to my grandmother’s presence on that special day.

I was the first person in my family to ever attend college. I was what we now call a first-generation student, but we didn’t have that term then. And my grandmother was so proud! She just had to be there, in her best Sunday dress, to witness this historic family achievement. I regret to say that she was thoroughly shocked by our behavior during the graduation. She believed that college students were supposed to be beyond childhood pranks and silliness. Yet she glowed with pride after the ceremony as I showed her my degree.

While I don't remember what the commencement speaker had to say—which sort of keeps me humble—to this day, I remember *her* words. She took my degree in her hands, stared at it with a little awe, and said: “Look at that! This sure is something!” Then turning to me, with love and pride and affection and wisdom, she asked: “Now, who are you going to help with it? Who are you going to use it for?”

My grandmother was a poor woman and could not afford to give me a material gift; yet her words were precious beyond measure. My family rejoiced in my accomplishment, which was also a family dream. Everyone was genuinely happy that my degree would open doors of opportunity for me that none of them could ever enjoy. Of course, my grandmother shared their wishes and hopes for me.

Yet, she was a wise woman. She knew that the comforts of privilege and opportunity can be seductive—and even corrosive—if pursued as ends in themselves. My grandmother was also a woman of faith who took her Bible seriously, especially that line, “To whom much is given, much will be required.” So, her questions were a haunting challenge, and yet the most loving gift she could give: How would I use the privileges and opportunities that my education opens for me? Whom do I use them for?

“Who are you going to help with it? Who are you going to use it for?” My grandmother's formal education stopped at the eighth grade. She never heard of the Jesuits, nor of their founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola. Yet her questions captured the essence of what makes Jesuit Ignatian education distinctive, namely, the aspiration to form men and women—people—for and with others. Graduates who are not only intellectually aware and professionally competent, but people who also are infused with a deep compassion for the needs, the hurts, and the cries of others.

“Who are you going to help with it? Who are you going to use it for?” My grandmother's words have been the inspiration and challenge that have guided my life, leading me into paths, places, and persons I never could have imagined. They have spurred me to minister to those dying from HIV/AIDS, during the darkest days of that

horrible epidemic, when fear and stigma led many to consign the afflicted to die in lonely isolation. They led me to testify before Congress on behalf of non-discrimination legislation for gay and lesbian citizens, despite the suspicions and misgivings of bishops and other church leaders. They impelled me to march in solidarity with fast food workers seeking a living wage for their families; with protesters advocating for more just criminal sentencing; and with those who work for reasonable gun safety. My grandmother's questions stirred me to work for a greater understanding of our transgender sisters and brothers. They have compelled me to speak and write about some of the most controversial and divisive issues that face our nation, including justice for immigrants and the defense of Black lives. I don't think my grandmother knew the power of her words nor the places to which they would call me.

Yes, there have been recognitions for following this passion, of using my education and the privilege it affords on behalf of others. Honorary degrees and awards—such as the one with which you honor me today—have followed.

But what my grandmother did not share with me was the price of following one's passion. Neither she nor I knew then the price her words would exact. As so, graduates, I'm going to read the “small print” for you: There is always a cost for acting out of your truest, deepest self.

There has been a cost for standing with and for others, especially those who are “other-ed” because of ignorance, fear, indifference, greed, or hostility. When I heard my grandmother's summons, I never imagined that because of her questions I would be viewed with suspicion, seen as controversial, or denounced as heretical. If you have any doubt, just google me later. Because I followed my passion, inspired by my grandmother's questions, I have an email folder labeled, “hostile letters/blogger's complaints.” Because of my grandmother's questions, I have often wondered that if Jesus returned, whether he would re-write the sacred text of the Beatitudes so as to read: “Blessed are you when they insult you, and persecute you, and blog against you, all for my sake.”

And there is a kind of loneliness. That, too, is the cost of following your passion, especially a passion to be a person for and with others. For the world, I have discovered, does not always reward stepping up, stepping out, and being a person of conviction.

All this is to say, up front and honestly, that using your education to help others, being a man or woman for others, following the deepest and truest desires of your heart and spirit, will at times entail a cost. Living a life of passion, and especially acting out of a passionate concern for others, is not always easy. It is not risk-free.

So why do it? There are other ways to live. It is entirely possible to live a less passionate life. We can use our degrees, and the privileges, benefits, and doors they open, to serve only our selves and make our lives easier. Why not follow that path?

For three reasons. First, if everyone thought that way, none of us would be here. You wouldn't be here graduating. None of us are self-made men or women. All of us are where we are, and who we are, because of someone else. Many someone elses. We are here because others made us their passion. Now it's our turn to return the favor.

Second, because using our gifts on behalf others is desperately needed to make our world more livable and humane. One of the reasons we are where we are as a nation is because too many people in high places seek primarily, or even only, their own good. With tragic consequences that are unfolding around us.

Third, because my grandmother's summons resonated with something deep within. She tapped into something. And over the years, I realized that when I honor that "something" deep within, I live with greater peace and integrity than when I ignored or acted against it. That something that lies in the realm of the "spirit," or "soul," or whatever other name we give the intangible yet real. And Jesuit education gives us the space and the permission to speak of this intangibly real plane of reality, whether it leads us to speak of a being called God, or a reality called the divine, the sacred, the holy, a Higher Power, or simply our truest self. Regardless of the name, acting in accord with it is the lure and reward that makes

the cost worthwhile.

So graduates, I urge you: Go for it! Follow the impulses of your deepest, truest, self. Do not follow the path that is expected, safe, secure, and approved. Yes, there will be those who won't understand. Some won't get it. And some of those who don't get it will be people who care about you, and perhaps even love you. But if it is a genuine passion, it is something you cannot *not* do. And I have discovered, to my continuous surprise, that there will be those who will be there. Who do get it. Who will care. Who will support. Who understand. And who will love you on the journey.

"Who are you going to help with it? Who are you going to use it for?" These were the strong, loving, and wise questions from my grandmother, who tapped into my passion. My passion may or may not be yours. That's fine. No, it's better than fine. As my nephews say, "You do you." My prayer is that there may be wise and loving people who will help you identify, pursue, and stay true to the yearnings of your deepest and truest self. Class of 2018, we need your passions and the fires of your heart. Godspeed on your journey! Now, in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola, "Go forth, and set the world on fire!" 