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12-15-2018

December 2018 Commencement Address

Frank Bonner
Gardner-Webb University

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Recommended Citation

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Commencement
December 15, 2018
Frank Bonner, President

Graduates, this morning you and I have something in common. You and I are concluding an important phase in our lives, while anticipating the very important next phase. There are differences of course but very important similarities.

I have been where you are, so I know what it is like to reflect on the college experience—both undergraduate and graduate--and furthermore in a real sense I am accountable for the quality of your experience.

Whether or not you are planning further formal education, you are undoubtedly thinking ahead to the career phase of life. And you are thinking about how best to approach it, how best to manage it, and how to succeed in that part of life—depending on your concept of “success.”

Here is where we are both alike and different. Different in that I am concluding a phase of life that you are approaching. Alike in that we are both anticipating what fulfillment and success in that new phase of life will really mean.

As I have been reflecting on the past thirty one years at Gardner-Webb and especially the past thirteen plus, one of the things I have done is to pull out my inauguration address. I wanted to see how it's been, how I've done in relation to what I set out at the time.

In that address, I said this: “The success of any enterprise is ultimately measured by results. And while the comparison may seem crass, the university, like the commercial enterprise, is judged by its product—in our case, our graduates, our alumni.”

Our graduates. That's you, right now. Our alumni. That is who you will be and what you will do.

In that same address, I described the intellectual part of your experience. That development is not finished, any more than your entire education is completed. It continues. That is why we call this ceremony “commencement,” the beginning, not the conclusion.

As for the foundation of your intellectual development, I am confident that we have established that foundation, and I trust that you will continue to strengthen it. Here is the way I described it in my inaugural address:

“Our graduates must be people who think critically and independently; demonstrate a broad base of knowledge and skills; understand the interrelatedness of knowledge, and apply their knowledge, not just in career, but also in their personal lives and in citizenship; and, most important, understand the vital relationship of character and intellect.”

At this moment, only you can assess how well that foundation has been built, but time—the future—will tell.

So now. As valuable as reflection can be, the past is the past. You and I look to the future. How will we approach it? What will our goals be? How will we define success? How will we define meaningful living? I intend to follow my own advice, to live out the admonition I am about to share, in several ways including volunteer work. But his morning is about you, not about me. So here is my admonition.

I encourage you to follow what New York Times columnist and Yale professor, David Brooks, calls *The Road to Character*, in his book by that title—which I highly recommend. Brooks borrows from another writer the concept of Adam I and Adam II—a concept which, as he puts it, he modernizes.

“Adam I,” says Brooks, “is the external resume Adam. Adam I wants to build, create, produce, and discover things. He wants to have high status and win victories. Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities. Adam II wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong—not only to do good, but to be good. Adam II wants to live intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors creation and one’s own possibilities. While Adam I wants to conquer the world, Adam II wants to obey a calling to serve the world. While Adam I is creative and savors his own accomplishments, Adam II sometimes renounces worldly success and status for the sake of some sacred purpose.

For the sake of some sacred purpose.

Obedience to a sacred purpose, a selfless obedience, is an ongoing challenge for all of us. Brooks quotes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.”

At Gardner-Webb, you have been exposed regularly to a sacred purpose and given innumerable opportunities to express it in action, and I hope it has taken hold. That sacred purpose is found on this seal in front of you, and so that it will stay in front of you the seal is also found on your well-earned diploma.

For God and Humanity. Pro Deo et Humanitate.

Serving God by serving humanity. A sacred purpose indeed. In my inaugural address, I suggested that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 13 speak in a significant way to higher education. “After all,” I said, “he speaks of eloquence, of knowledge, of understanding, of prophecy, of faith, even of service and sacrifice.”

“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13).

I continued then, and I repeat now:

“But God intends that His love is to be shared, to be acted upon in service to humanity. . . Jesus tells us, ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’ (Matthew 25: 40).

But we must go even further. Again, in my words from back then:

“Even service is not enough. Compassion, preparation, and leadership must combine with motivation and determination—not only to serve, but to address and solve social ills and injustices which made such service needed in the first place.

‘If we fulfill the essential purpose of this University, we will send forth graduates who not only embody all the intellectual and personal qualities alluded to earlier, but who are fully prepared, motivated and inspired to make a significant difference in the lives of others, to make the world a better place than they found it, and in so doing embody the words found on Gardner-Webb’s seal and carved three times around the center of this mace, Pro Deo et Humanitate, for God and Humanity.”

It occurs to me that the mottos of many colleges and universities consist of nouns only. Some are one word, such as Harvard’s “Veritas,” truth. Others may be pairs of words, such as “Light and Liberty.” Gardner-Webb did not leave our motto at “Deo et Humanitate,” but prefixed the preposition *Pro*, “For.” *For* God and Humanity. “For” implies action or taking a position on something. To work *for* something.

Graduates, this is your real charge. This is what will define the next phase of your lives—both personal and professional—as lives of fulfillment, meaning and purpose. If Gardner-Webb has succeeded, as I am confident it has, you are prepared and ready.

Some may remember a movie of a number of years ago entitled Brian’s Song. Brian Piccolo had played football for Wake Forest and later for the Chicago Bears. Sadly he died at an early age. He had become close friends with the great Chicago Bears running back Gale Sayers. The inspiration for the movie was a book by Sayers, entitled I Am Third.

Sayers explained the origin of that title. He learned it from his college track coach: the Lord is first, my friends are second, and I am third. Sayers said that when he went to the Chicago Bears he had a medallion made with those words, and wore it around his neck throughout his pro career.

Whether or not you wear them on a medallion, carry in heart your Alma Mater and that *sacred purpose* that was instilled in you, For God and Humanity, Pro Deo et Humanitate.

Graduates, you have my congratulations, my best wishes, and always my prayers.