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2013 Valedictory Address: Travis John LaCouter '13

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2013 Valedictory Address

By Travis John LaCouter '13



Professor Fadiman, Bishop McManus, President Boroughs, Senior Vice President Vellaccio, Dean Austin, Dean Baldiga, Members of the Board of Trustees, Honored Guests, Faculty and Staff, Parents, Relatives and Friends, Members of the Jesuit Community, and Fellow Members of the Class of 2013-welcome. This is a monumentally happy day for all of us, and we graduates are honored to share it in such good company.

Well, here we are-finally! It would be tempting to sit here on this beautiful day - diplomas firmly in hand, surrounded by our loved ones, recalling all sorts of pleasant memories, and looking forward to the promising futures ahead of us - and think how perfect it all seems. We might prefer to think of our time here as idyllic, like the recent Spring Weekend when the sun was really shining and you and your friends laid claim to whatever patch of green grass you could find and just enjoyed the moment. In Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, narrator Charles Ryder describes how "it is easy, retrospectively, to endow one's youth with a false precocity or a false innocence; to tamper with the dates marking one's stature on the edge of the door." Perhaps our time here was simply one more step along a well thought-out path that will lead, invariably, to happiness and prosperity. We Holy Cross students sure do love for things to fit into neat little plans (we all crave the satisfaction of crossing off one more item from that all-important to-do list). Yet I want to impress upon you today that there are good reasons to resist this impulse towards idyllic recollection.

Any one of us could not be here today. This day has not been pre-ordained; it may not even have been the most likely of possible outcomes. It is, rather, the end result of a long, even arduous process that often involved struggle and self-doubt. It took hard work, the good grace of others, and more than a little luck to get here today. There were moments when it seemed like we had none of those things: when you had a dramatic falling out with one of your oldest friends; when you were overcome by the stresses of college life, and simply didn't know how to cope; when a loved one was fighting illness back home and you felt utterly helpless; when you - or worse yet, your parents - had to take up a second job to afford this education; when you took two years' worth of classes towards a major before realizing that you have little interest or competence in that subject; when you lost sleep over that all-important question: "what am I going to do with my life?"; or maybe that time you fell down the stairs to Dinand in front of a tour group and yes everyone saw (I admit this last one happened to me). In these moments our neat little plans went out the window. We tried in vain to make sense of our discomfort-we blamed ourselves, each other, our professors, even God. We have all found ourselves, at times, blind, confused, and lost.

So Holy Cross has not always been the sublime memory it may now seem to be. But we did not come to this College to have it easy. For as much as we Crusaders like our lists and our plans, we like a good challenge even more. We are a competitive bunch (wouldn't you have to be to brave four consecutive winters in Worcester?), and that spirit of competition has served us well-it has allowed us to fight on through those dark moments. This spirit will be more crucial still as we enter a world fraught with serious challenges.

You've all heard the litany of doom before: the economy is fragile, the world is in turmoil, our leaders are ineffective, our planet is suffering, our communities are deteriorating, injustice abounds. These all seem, by the way, to be true; our lives will be constrained in real ways by forces beyond our control. But despite these realities, we must not give in to despair when we look to the future. Or, even worse still, we must not give in to apathy! This College has not educated us for either. On the contrary, while here, we have all discovered certain passions, we have all fallen in love in one way or another; this passion and this love are what have allowed us to persevere.

Our task now is to turn outward to a world desperately in need of our very best, to really become men and women for and with others. Fair warning: In our striving to serve others, we will be disappointed, probably often. We will be embarrassed more than a few times. Things won't always go according to plan. But if Holy Cross has taught us anything, it's that some things - the best things - aren't easy. This College has done its best to prevent us from leaving here today unchallenged, which, after all, would mean leaving here unchanged.

So, classmates, friends, parents, teachers, let's not lose sight of the struggles that have brought us here today. Pretending that this was a mostly easy or always pleasant endeavor would not only be untrue, it would cheapen precisely what we're here to celebrate. We graduates are now young women and men filled with optimism, knowledge, and confidence, but that is an accomplishment only because at times in the past we weren't. Would our parents be overflowing with pride and relief for us today if they had not, at times, been seized by equally strong feelings of fear and doubt for us? Would our professors be wearing those strange smiles of satisfaction today if they had not succeeded in dragging us - sometimes kicking and screaming - out of our comfortable cocoons of ignorance and complacency?

We have all struggled to make today possible-and thank God we have! For the struggles will only get harder once we pass beyond those wrought-iron gates on College Hill later today, and we will need the fortitude, the friends, the wisdom, and the strength we have acquired here over the past four years in order to keep going.

Maybe some of you have already anticipated the obvious parallels between this message of dogged perseverance and the imagery of climbing. In which case, I know what you're thinking - not another hill metaphor at a Holy Cross graduation! - so I won't labor the point. But there's a reason why countless valedictorians and Commencement speakers before me have invoked this familiar image,

especially on this particular campus. You do have to scale the mountain to reach the summit-and it is only after the grueling climb that you can appreciate how glorious the summit really is! And it is only upon reaching the summit that you realize how the climb has changed you into who you are today. Just like Ignatius climbed his Montserrat and Dante climbed his Mt. Purgatory, we've spent four years climbing our Mt. St. James, and we're better because of it. But just as this is a moment to be mindful of what we've had to overcome, it's also a time to look forward to our next adventure. To harness the nervous energy coursing through this stadium and direct it in a constructive way towards a higher purpose. To seek our next hills to climb, ever mindful of the challenges at hand.

In a speech that the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson places in the mouth of the aging Ulysses, we hear that mythic hero's enduring sense of this same thrill as he prepares to embark on his next adventure. He says:

Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are; One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Congratulations fellow Crusaders, we did it. It was an exhilarating, enlightening, breathtaking voyage, and I couldn't have asked for a better group of people to share it with. Thank You.

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