

CHANGE AGENTS

Good morning distinguished guests, family and friends, and members of the Masters of Arts in Teaching 2015 graduating class of St. Mary's College. It is an honor to be here today to make remarks on this auspicious occasion.

Quote, "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches." This famous line was taken from George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* published in 1903. It was twisted by Woody Allen in the *Annie Hall* screenplay when he said "those who can't, teach. Those who can't teach, teach gym." Funny to some, but not to me. When disparaging literary remarks enter the popular culture, we usually head down a negative path. In my view this utterance initiated the current era of disrespect of the value and importance K-12 teachers play in shaping our society.

Teaching was considered a noble profession. In a July 4 speech in 1924, Calvin Coolidge said precisely that and I quote, "Teaching is one of the noblest of professions. It requires an adequate preparation and training, patience, devotion, and a deep sense of responsibility. Those who mold the human mind have wrought not for time, but for eternity."

How has it come to be that the teaching profession has become so devalued in our society? I could blame it all on Woody Allen but I can't in good faith do that. However, I do know a few things. First, I know that it says something about our nation when teachers, who are charged with preparing our children for being productive and responsible members of the community, are some of the lowest compensated professionals in our society. There is something wrong with our values. Second, I know that when policymakers pass legislation affecting our students in the classroom without adequate consultation with our teachers and educators, the best we can hope for

is for *nothing* to happen. A waste of taxpayer money, I know, but at least a generation of students won't be lost. Third, I know that when we elect to take the **quick**-solution approach to complex problems that require a long and measured approach, we usually exacerbate the original problem and create more problems that perpetuate the widening achievement gap that sends our citizenry into despair, discontent, disengagement, and dysfunctionality.

Let's talk about two instances of attempted education reform.

Children are born curious. If you walk into virtually any pre-K or kindergarten class, you will observe children engaged in creative play, asking questions, taking things apart to learn how they work, and using items in ways in which they were never intended just to see "what would happen if...". Somehow our educational system manages to beat the curiosity out of students so much so that by the time they get to high school, many of them are just going through the motions trying to get through it. The decreased curiosity has been perpetuated by the teach-to-the-test mentality borne out of the Bush-era mandate known as No Child Left Behind. The No Child Left Behind Act was touted as leveling the playing field and holding teachers accountable for student learning. The result of this legislation has been the numbing of the minds of an entire generation of students.

There is a "renowned" program that places young, social-conscious college graduates into classrooms where students have the greatest needs and challenges. The young graduates are taken through a boot camp to prepare them for "teaching" and then sent into battle in inner-city classrooms. The intentions are good and focused on a specific problem. It puts young, inspiring and energetic teachers into classrooms. Unfortunately, the approach is flawed. The result? The new teachers, not having adequate skills, mentoring, and guidance are eaten alive, become disenchanting, and leave the profession as soon as

they can. Who is the ultimate sacrifice in this chapter of education reform? The student in the classroom who interacts on an almost daily basis with a well-intentioned novice teacher who has the intellect but neither the skills to manage that classroom nor the expertise to affect a positive learning environment that mitigates, at least for a few hours each day, all of the other “life matters” that that student deals with constantly; issues and circumstances that affect how well she is able to focus on the information the teacher is trying to convey and engage her.

So, I say to you today that it is time for a change. You, Class of 2015, represent the *change agents*. And, change the dynamic of K-12 education you will. You must. It is part of your social DNA, known around here as the St. Mary’s Way.

Most of the issues of social *injustice* we all experience today are rooted in deep-seated ignorance and fear; fear of the unknown, fear of that which is unfamiliar. How can this fear and ignorance be addressed? How can we begin to close the widening socioeconomic gap? **Education** is the key. Plato wrote in *The Republic*, “The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future in life.”

Who is more receptive to learning? Who are the most malleable souls in our society? Our children. Who, besides the parent, has the greatest responsibility and role in shaping young lives into the productive and responsible citizens we need? The teacher. You.

In Coolidge’s speech from 1924 he said, “Education should be the handmaid of citizenship.” Education *is* the key to mitigating many of our societal ills. Education, in its most excellent form in the K-12 sector, will propel this country to where it needs to be if we are to have any chance of overcoming all of the “-isms” that lead to and perpetuate man’s inhumanity to man.

I had the great honor and pleasure of receiving a first-hand look at some of the work members of the Class of 2015 are doing in some of the most impoverished schools in this county. The conventional view of those learning environments is that one should expect disengaged students, lackluster lessons, and uninspired teachers. I saw just the opposite. The students were engaged, thinking, creating, and learning. Information was presented systematically yet flexibly to facilitate inclusivity. Teachers were inspired, energetic, enthusiastically consulting with their peers and mentors, and contributing in very meaningful ways to long-range curricular planning goals.

One could be skeptical and say that what I observed of you, the student-teachers, could be attributed to youthful bliss, lack of touch with reality, or naïveté. Although I have become quite cynical in my middle age, I know that none of these descriptors represents an accurate assessment of the situation. The individuals from your cohort that I met were not individuals who were teaching because they cannot *do* anything else. No, the young educators I observed are excellent scholars in their own right, young scholars who have deliberately and with forethought decided to pursue this noble profession and to engage in the art and science of teaching. The individuals I met have emerged as *change agents*: young educators who will constantly assess and evolve their methods of content delivery to ensure that they are able to sustainably inspire and engage our children in the process of life-long learning since, as Einstein is reported to have said, “Education is what remains after we have forgotten everything we learned in school.”

These young change agents will consult with and guide our policymakers in establishing new, or re-vitalizing old policies that allow professionals to teach and educate our students and give our students the opportunity to learn, the opportunity to explore, and the

opportunity to dream. Our country will not survive if we do not allow our students to dream. In so doing, they will have the wherewithal to build upon their dreams to solve the challenges of tomorrow and to create lasting beauty in all its forms.

Class of 2015, it might appear that I have presented you with a heavy burden but those of us who have lived for a while know a few things about challenges. First, unto whom much is given, much is expected. All of you will have an impact on society. I know that you have had an excellent MAT education and that you are adequately prepared to be excellent, modern-day educators. To quote Frank Herbert from *Heretics of Dune*, “We never escape the teachers of our childhood nor the patterns that formed us.” Those of you who have been called to pursue this noble profession will positively impact our society in ways not yet imagined. You will develop into model educators and will experience many years of success, joy, and fulfillment.

More than 180 years ago, a white slave owner hired a woman to come to his plantation, a place known as Sotterley, to educate local females so that they could be productive citizens in the community. That was the first chapter in the genesis of an institution known as St. Mary’s College, an institution celebrating 175 years of preparing its students to be forward thinking leaders and good citizens. There are stark contrasts between now and then. Nonetheless, a consistent theme is that this College prepares its students for global success. I have no doubt that you will be successful and neither should you. Go forth and be the change agents we need you to be, guided by our ethos, the St. Mary’s Way. As Yoda said in *The Empire Strikes Back*, “Do or do not. There is no try.” The world will be a better place when you do.

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