

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY – HARRISBURG CAMPUS

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS – DECEMBER 20, 2014

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Chancellor Kulkarni, Trustee Cotner, Deans, School Directors, Distinguished Faculty, gathered friends and family, and, most importantly, members of the Fall 2014 commencement class: I am honored to speak to you this morning and thank the Chancellor not only for his kind introduction, but also for the opportunity to deliver this address.

As I thought about a topic for this speech, I immediately went to the most reliable source for sound advice and direction: the Internet. I'm sure it doesn't surprise you to learn that there are websites devoted to commencement addresses including typical topics, standard structure, examples of good speeches, and, most importantly for you this morning, recommendations on their length. By the way, it's 12 to 15 minutes and I will do my best to adhere to that advice.

The fourteen most frequently used topics for a commencement address are: trust yourself, don't let others define you, have big dreams, take the initiative, be persistent, learn from your mistakes, don't expect perfection, be creative, stay in the moment, be positive, take risks, embrace change, work hard, and give back. So there, in but a few moments, I've given you the wisdom of the ages and I still have over ten minutes left.

I don't mean to belittle commencement addresses that deliver one or more of these messages. They are all important life lessons. I expect you've heard many of them already, perhaps some of them over and over, from your parents and teachers. Each represents an attribute that makes for a successful life.

Today is about you, about your achievement in earning a degree, and about your future – a future of great promise. In that future you will experience triumphs and tragedies. To prepare you, in some small measure, to view both in the proper perspective, I want to talk to you not about the attributes that make for a successful life, but rather about a few concepts that make for a meaningful life: they are faith, hope, and love.

These three concepts come from our belief systems or religions. Over 4 billion of the people on this planet are part of religions that believe in one God, whether they call the supreme being God, Yahweh, Allah or Brahman. These religions also share many of the same fundamental beliefs in regards to right behaviors, our relationship with the supreme being and one another, and the promise of a new life after this one. It is my belief that regardless of the name we ascribe to the supreme being, it is the same God, and that is the word that I will use in the remainder of my remarks for supreme being. My intent today is to share with you truths that have become apparent to me during my life in hopes that they may help give meaning to yours.

To begin my discussion of faith, I want to tell you a story. It begins on January 15, 1971. It was a typical Friday night at the fraternity house, the party was getting going downstairs and I was in

my room studying. Suddenly, several of my brothers appeared at my door, urging me to come downstairs and meet one of the girls that had just arrived from Green Mountain College an hour or so away. We had to import girls for parties at RPI. Now, why did they seek me out rather than one of the other nerds? There are two factors. First, my father graduated from the University of Tennessee and my brothers heard a lot about the Volunteers from me that fall as the team went 10 and 1 and then defeated Air Force in the Sugar Bowl on January 1st, two weeks before.

Second, knowing my love of the south and, having heard the soft, sweet voice of this young lady, they took her to be a southerner and thought we should meet. Well her voice was soft and sweet, still is, but she was from Westchester County, New York – southern New York state, but not the south. Now, for me, it was love at first sight. She took a little longer – remember, she just met a nerdy engineer from RPI. We dated a few times, I visited her parent's home, but then she transferred to Texas Christian. Then, having not seen one another in nearly three years, she decided to send me a birthday card shortly after her graduation in 1974. That was all the encouragement I needed. The relationship resumed, we married within a year, and have been now for over 39 years.

What are the chances that this young lady would come from Green Mountain to RPI that night, that my fraternity brothers would seek me out to meet this young lady, and, after being apart for over three years, that she would suddenly send me a birthday card? And, in this day and age, what are the chances that we would be still be married all these years later?

Chance, or fate, has nothing to do with it. Faith has everything to do with it. Faith is recognizing that God is at work in the world. Let me repeat that, faith is recognizing that God is at work in the world. As St. Paul puts it in his Letter to the Romans, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." I have every faith that God led my fraternity brothers to my door. Look for God at work in your life. Those many little, and not so little, acts will shape your life and give it direction, and perhaps even lead to love. Have faith that He is working for your good.

Next is hope. Making a clear transition from faith to hope is nearly impossible, as the two are so often confused. The roots of both words deal with trust. However, faith is very much in the present and hope deals with the future. Faith is believing that the next thing I say in this speech will strike a chord with you. Hope is believing that I'll be done before your attention span is gone. "...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That is, because of our faith, we have hope. Let me illustrate this with another personal story.

During the summer of 2010, the enjoyment of my golf game was disrupted by a pain in my sternum. After an examination and a chest x-ray, my doctor decided that I had an inflammation of the tissues that connect the ribs to the sternum. There was little that could be done for this other than rest and anti-inflammatory medications. I followed this advice, but the pain did not go away.

This called for a CT Scan of my chest. The CT Scan saw something that the earlier x-ray did not – a golf ball sized mass in my right lung. The biopsy that followed identified the mass as a

melanoma tumor. Now, as you know, melanoma is a skin cancer. Although it can metastasize to other parts of the body, given the location of this tumor, my oncologist concluded that I had lung cancer, and told us that I probably had two years at most to live - devastating news. Was the hope that my faith sustained still a possibility?

The tissue samples from the biopsy were sent to Johns Hopkins so they also could assess the nature of the tumor. The pathologists at Johns Hopkins agreed with those at Holy Spirit that it was melanoma. A Positive Emission Tomography or PET scan followed and identified twelve tumors, the one in my lung, one in my collarbone, three in my legs, and a whole bunch in the vicinity of my sternum. Mystery solved, the source of the pain was known.

Based on the diagnosis of melanoma and the progression of the disease, my oncologist recommended that I seek treatment at Johns Hopkins. The outlook for melanoma, however, was not any rosier. I was told that the current treatment for melanoma produced responses in only 16 percent of patients and that fewer than half of those patients experienced a complete resolution of their tumors. The medical profession did not offer us much hope.

I began treatments in November of that year. After two rounds of treatment and another PET scan, I received one of the best Christmas presents ever – several of the tumors were gone and others had reduced in size. I was in the 16 percent, my body responded, hope was alive.

In January and February of 2011 there were two more rounds of treatment. As a result, only three tumors remained, one in my chest, one in my thyroid, and one in my femur. That was three too many for me. The tumors in my chest and thyroid were actually operable, but the one in the femur was inside the bone with little to be done. On Halloween of 2011, I had successful surgery to remove my thyroid and the mass from my chest. Two down, one to go.

Throughout the previous twelve months, I had *faith* each and every day that God, acting through the medicine and my body, would heal me. I had *hope* that after going through the treatment process and surgery, I would be cancer free. I had come so far, but cancer is not a disease in which 11 out of 12 is a good score. My doctor said “give it some time”. PET scans in February and May of 2012 continued to show abnormal activity in the femur.

Then in July of that year came the scan results for which we had been *hoping* for two years – there is no metastatic activity in your body. The hope was realized. As the Prophet Jeremiah wrote so many years ago “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope.”

God has a plan for you too. So, don't despair that the economic recovery is less than robust and that the stock market takes a tumble now and then. Don't become frustrated if your path may seem blocked at times by tribulation. Remember what Maria told Liesl in the Sound of Music “Reverend Mother always says when the Lord closes a door, somewhere he opens a window”. If the door closes in front of you, don't stand there looking at the door, look for that open window. Exercise your free will, but be flexible and look for the signs along the way.

Could my *hope* of being cancer free have been realized without the *faith* that moving forward with treatments and surgery was the right thing to do? I don't think so. Would I have had hope

if I had just stared at the door of my diagnosis? Absolutely not. Could I have sustained my *faith* on my own? I'm not sure and I wouldn't want to find out because my *faith* was powered by my third topic: *love*.

The love that I experienced during the time I had cancer was what the Greeks called *agape*, an unconditional and selfless love, and it was both overwhelming and humbling. This type of love comes from God directly and also is channeled through others. The direct part is simple, yet awesome. The God who created the universe loved me and healed my body of this dread disease.

The selfless, unconditional love of God that was channeled through others is the part I really want you to hear and take to heart. I'm a member of a number of families. I have my immediate family, my wife and my children. I have extended family from both my side and my wife's side, brother, sister, brothers-in-law, aunts, uncles, cousins, well, you get the picture. I also have other families. I have my church family. I have my family at Gannett Fleming, my family of colleagues at various associations, and, apropos today, I have my Penn State Harrisburg family.

As I was about to undergo treatments, I sent an email to as many people as I could. I told them about my diagnosis and plans for treatment and asked for their prayers for healing. The outpouring of support that my immediate family and I received as a result was tremendous. Cards, letters, and phone calls with words of encouragement at the start and then meals and visits as time went by. And, they prayed to God for my healing. They even engaged their families of faith in doing the same. It is my belief that these expressions of unconditional love were a major factor in my ultimate recovery.

I told you earlier that the result of my PET scan after the first rounds of treatments was one of the best Christmas presents I ever received. There was another great present that Christmas. One evening about a week before Christmas as I was at home recuperating, a bus full of my Gannett Fleming family pulled up at our house, rang the doorbell, and sang Christmas carols for well over half an hour. And while it was cold outside, I felt strangely warm, not to mention pretty teary-eyed.

You can have that same impact on others. If someone asks for a favor, do your best to oblige. If they ask for a prayer, lift one up. If they need encouragement, send them a note, give them a call, or, even better, visit them. While "random acts of kindness" is a popular phrase and I certainly encourage them, I'm suggesting that your acts of kindness not be so random, but rather that they are methodical, planned, performed on a regular basis, and done with unconditional love. To quote one of the queens of Motown, Diana Ross, "Reach out and touch somebody's hand, make this world a better place, if you can."

That young lady from southern New York, my wife, Sherry, was the one who channeled more of God's love to me than anyone. She started us on a regimen of juicing and eating organic foods, not to mention ensuring that I rested when I really wanted to return my focus to work. I think I drank more green tea that year than I did water. The treatments caused my skin to flake and I shed all over the place, creating work at a time when it just wasn't needed. She also had to

become a nurse as the ports in my chest that were used to deliver the medicine had to be cleaned daily so that they were ready when I returned for the next round of treatment. It was hard work and she did it with a smile, well, most of the time. Try waiting on someone for months at a time, it is not an easy task, even when it's your wife or husband. Besides, I can be a difficult patient. I pray that she never requires such care from me. I would not want her to suffer from such a disease or from my ineptness at caring for her.

While I pray that you never have to do this for a loved one either, I do pray that you find this kind of unconditional love in your life especially if you find it through a series of fortunate events. St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians described such love this way: Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous, love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly, it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails..." My advice to you is never miss an opportunity to channel the love of God to your spouse, your immediate family, and your many extended families. God loves us despite what He knows about us. We should do the same.

Watch for God working in your life – have faith that those happenstances that you may not understand immediately are for your ultimate good. Through that faith, have hope for a future in which you will realize the good that God has in store for you. Power your faith with the love you receive from God and your fellow man and power the faith of others with the unconditional love you give. And remember, nothing can separate you from the love of God.

In closing, I wish you and yours a very Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas, a Happy Kwanzaa, and a joyous New Year filled with faith, hope, and love. Congratulations on your achievement today and God bless you in your future endeavors.