

Commencement Address, Ursinus College, May 17, 2008

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President Strassburger; (Class of 2008) President (Terrence Patrick) Kelley (Jr.); honored guests; deans and faculty members; family and supporters; and above all members of the Ursinus College Class of 2008 – *congratulations*. You've all worked, waited, and, in your different ways, sacrificed to make this day a reality. Speaking as the parent of two recent college graduates, I ask members of the Class please to turn and wave your recognition, your love and your thanks to the parents and other supporters who have stood behind you and are feeling boundless pride, and bittersweetness at seeing the adults you've become, and relief of several kinds at the step you're taking now.

I've just done the first part of my job, in helping you notice this wonderful sunny day. I'm about to do the second part, which is to be brief. Two days ago, I was in China, where I've lived for two years and was involved in news of the disastrous earthquake. Two days from now, I'll be on my way back to Beijing. The reason I'm here right now today is a connection between your college and my family that stretches back 65 years. I'd like to tell that story briefly, and then say why I think it matters for you who are graduating today.

In the summer of 1943, 65 years ago, James A. Fallows, my father, had just graduated from Jenkintown High School, not far from here, outside Philadelphia. He was 18 years old – in fact, tomorrow will be his 83rd birthday, and I'll join him in

California to tell him about this event – and his country was at war. His older brother Bob was already in the Army. And my beloved Uncle Bob is here today, I'm delighted to say. My dad's main choices were to become a military pilot or a military doctor. The placement tests said Doctor, and so he came to Collegeville as an Ursinus pre-med student and Navy cadet, under the V-12 program.

His time here was rich, as yours probably has been. He was on the football and wrestling teams. And your president has given me permission to disclose that the football team in those days actually cheated, in a simple, pre-video taping era. What they did, my dad was a lineman, playing both offense and defense, and he would wear a blue stocking on one leg, and red on the other – and the people on either side of him on the line would do the opposite. The result was that linemen on the opposing team would look down and be puzzled, seeing a pair of blue or red legs that seemed to belong to two different people. When the ball was snapped, torsos and legs seemed to move in confusing directions. It helped Ursinus win, especially against academically less gifted teams.

In addition to sports and his shady reputation, my dad acted in plays. He sang in *the Messiah* chorus –which is impressive to me, since he can't sing – and went to crack-of-dawn military drills when the bugle played Reveille on the campus. It was a different time. But he liked it here.

But my dad's time here, if rich, was brief. After two years at Ursinus, he had finished enough pre-med courses to qualify, by competitive exam, for Harvard Medical School, where he enrolled at age 20. He went from there to be a Navy doctor, then a small town doctor, husband for more than 55 years to his childhood sweetheart from

Jenkintown, my beloved mother Jean, father to four children, pillar of the small community in California where he raised his family. The finest man I know, no offense to my Uncle Bob.

But because of his rushed wartime schedule, unlike today's members of the Class of '08, my father never graduated from Ursinus – until three years ago when the college, under President Strassburger, in a gesture that meant a tremendous amount to people like my dad in their 80s, awarded its V-12 students their diplomas. I had hoped that my dad could join me here today – he is not well enough to do that – but I know that as you get your diplomas, he'll be looking at his, which is mounted on his living room wall.

I tell you this because I'm a proud son, as sons and daughters should be, but also because his time in Collegeville, compared with yours, helps me introduce three ideas I'd like to just mention briefly. They have to do with the times you'll live in and the traits you'll show, and I think of them as: challenge; curiosity; and character.

We hear almost too often about the challenges that shaped my father's generation – the grandparents of today's graduates. They grew up during the Depression, and then they fought a long world war and cold war. As if that weren't enough, then they had to raise the Baby Boomers, my own hated generation. Their times were tough – for example, the life expectancy for an American man born in 1925, like my father, was only into his mid 50s—more than twenty years less than for someone born in 1986, like most of you.

Because of the way this “greatest generation” – your grandparents, my parents – met its challenges, we honor them, but I think we sometimes misunderstand what

challenge means. We're tempted to think that it takes extreme challenge to bring out the greatness in people – Pearl Harbor, 9/11 - and, correspondingly, that when times do really get tough people will automatically rise to their best. I'm not sure about either assumption. Sometimes people and societies don't in fact rise to their biggest tests – I fear that our nation's overall response to the challenges of 9/11 will be seen, historically, in that light– and sometimes the real test of greatness in people and generations is coping with challenges that don't take the obvious Pearl Harbor form.

This, I think is your generation's chance for greatness. You already know some of the huge array of problems which, if they're going to be solved at all, will require your minds and your commitment and your talent and your self-sacrifice. Perhaps number one is preserving the global environment, its range of species, and its climate system – every day in China I see reasons why that's crucial and difficult. Every day in China I also see a billion-plus people struggling to condense a century of economic development into a few years. I don't think they're struggling to “take your jobs” or “threaten America's place in the world” – they have too many problems of their own, as we've been reminded by the devastation this week. But they are changing your world.

I'm actually optimistic about your America's prospects in dealing with China– or India, or the Middle East, or questions of global harmony and domestic equality –as long as we newly re-embrace, rather than stifle the traditional American virtues of openness, and equality, and innovation, and opportunity. And as long as you, the Class of '08, recognize your challenge to serve – not in the V-12 but in your era's ways. Perhaps in the military, as a teacher, as a parent, an entrepreneur, a volunteer. Sixty-

five years from now, many of you will be back here – life expectancies will have gone on that far – and you'll want to hear that you were a greatest generation too.

Second, curiosity. My dad always knew that he had been pulled out of Ursinus too soon. And that was a huge advantage to him. Having missed half of his normal college education, he gave himself ten educations in the ensuing years. He taught himself Greek, and then Hebrew, and polished up his Latin – and there were many more. He became a painter, and sculptor, with his work in shows. He taught himself to sail, and to play the piano, and to become a cowboy and to become head of the local mounted police. He took up computers in his 50s and became a local webmaster. Now, at age 83, he's considering whether to switch to the Mac.

He went overboard, because that's who he is – but his is an extreme example of what a great college education should do for everyone. You've had a vastly better education than my dad had here, because you've had it in full and because Ursinus itself is now so justly celebrated for the excellence of its life-changing undergraduate approach. You've shared an intellectual bond from Gilgamesh onward. But these years will have been wasted, Gilgamesh and all, if they're not the beginning of a process of curiosity-driven, self education that lasts the rest of your lives.

You can use your upcoming reunions as a handy benchmark. At each five year interval – your 5th reunion, your 50th – please tell your classmates about the new thing you've learned: guitar, Arabic, the tango, whatever. Here's another benchmark: by the time of your 10th reunion, please spend at least one year living overseas. There is no better way to learn about your own country than to see it from afar.

Third, character: Your parents know what I have learned from seeing my own children grow: that a lot of what we are as people, we are from the start. But we're pushed to be the best versions of our selves, of our inborn possibilities, by parents in the beginning, and then by teachers and mentors, and in the long run by ourselves.

Probably because he was so *busy* rushing through Ursinus, my dad – like another practical-minded Philadelphian, Benjamin Franklin – always emphasized that our character is the accumulation of things we actually do each day. In the end, we are our habits, so take time developing good ones.

Some of these are obvious. No joke, don't smoke! Also, don't type IMs while you drive. Get in the habit of sports and exercise – by your tenth reunion, you'll know who has and hasn't, and you'll know even more each subsequent one. Get in the habit of being happy. We all have problems, which we can't control; what we can control is how we look at them. Get in the habit of being excited. It's a great big world, with no excuse for being bored. It's fun to have feuds and enemies – I've had my share– but break the habit of nursing grudges. Here's one tip: always write angry letters to your enemies, but never mail them. Remember that anything hostile you say about people will get back to them. Especially if it's in e-mail.

About money: you're going to have enough of it. Use the privilege of this education to know that you're not going to starve, so you might as well spend your life doing something you love and are proud of. By your 20th reunion, and even more your 50th, you will see that satisfaction in work and family is scarcer – and far more rewarding – than the money race can ever be. Some people will always be better off than you, so

don't waste time envying them. Instead think of those you admire – and construct your own personal Mt. Rushmore, seeing what traits you can emulate.

Take every chance to tell your spouse, when you have one, and your children that you love them. When in doubt, phone your mom.

One final habit: Whenever you have the chance to deliver a sincere compliment to someone, be sure to do it. My father is proud to be from Ursinus; I am proud of you; and we are all are proud of you new graduates. Those are sincere compliments, every one. Make the most of this wonderful day.

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