

Providence College
Ninety-First Commencement Exercises
May 17, 2009
Commencement Address – Martin J. Doblmeier

Father Shanley, faculty, and staff of Providence College: Thank you for the warm welcome.

Distinguished guests and fellow recipients: Thank you for inspiring all of us with your story. It is truly an honor to be in your company.

Family and friends of the graduating class: My guess is, at the bottom of your heart, you always believed your son or daughter would survive these last four years. But you were far less sure YOU would survive these last four years.

And the graduating Class of 2009: If it is true that Providence College continues to get better and better with each passing year, then it stands to reason – a reasoning even Aquinas himself could not argue – that you must be the finest graduating class this school has ever produced.

And now you go out and open yourselves to all the surprises this world has to offer.

And that is what my being here today is for me...an absolute surprise. When I walked the campus years ago, I was an average student and I honestly never imagined someday I would be asked to give this address.

But I must tell you I was not the first choice as your speaker. Father Shanley is an honest man, and when he called me he confessed that the first choice was Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of the UK. But it didn't seem to be working out.

I said, "*Father, Tony Blair? I really see myself as just another guy with a camera and more nerve than common sense. Don't you want to wait a week or two and see what happens?*" He said, "No I'm offering it to you. We have a tradition of asking a PC grad to speak to the students."

And for that I am very grateful, because you see Tony Blair has been a world leader and now is doing good things with his Faith Foundation.

But Tony Blair never had that experience of walking onto the Providence College campus that first day of your freshman year and looking up at Harkins Hall and with butterflies in your stomach asking yourself, "Oh God, did I make the right decision?" Only to discover four years later you did make the right decision.

And Tony Blair never had the experience of going to a game at "The Dunk" or a match or a meet, and cheering for the Friars until your voice was so hoarse you couldn't speak the next day. Is that right? Have you done that?

No, in fact, if you ask Tony Blair what a “Friar” is, he might innocently tell you “It’s the guy who cooks my fish and chips.”

You and I are part of this community because we spent those critical years – those late teens to early 20s – on that campus. Providence College gave me, and I am sure it gave you, not only a knowledge base but a lens of faith and hope through which we can now look out at our world with very different eyes. It has served me well, as I’m sure it will serve you.

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Before coming here I had a chance to speak with two of your student leaders, Liz Wolf and Jesse DePatsy. You choose your leaders well. I do spend a good deal of time on college campuses with my films, but I wanted to understand what is going on today in the minds of PC grads.

They talked about the sense of community and the importance of community service. But the word they used most often was “anxious.” I’m anxious too. And I’m sure many of the people here in this arena are anxious as well.

As someone who is part of the generation that helped create this mess of an economy, it hurts to hear that yours may be the first generation that should not expect to achieve a quality of life equal to the past. Personally, I don’t believe that.

History moves in patterns, downturns are followed by upturns, and some of those upward signs are already on the horizon, and you are too talented and too gifted to not be part of the recovery.

If it is of comfort, yours is not the first generation to feel anxious. When I came to Providence College it was the fall of 1969. It was after a summer that saw Woodstock and America landing a man on the moon. We needed a sense of hope and possibility because so much of what we believed in was beginning to fray.

The Vietnam War deeply divided the nation. In our minds, we still carried images of how they shot Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. We were anxious.

I was 13 years old when they shot John Kennedy ... old enough to hear the fear in the voice of my parents, but too young to do anything about it. For us, that was a defining moment.

And you were in your early teens when those Twin Towers fell on 9/11. That was your defining moment ... old enough to feel the consequences, but powerless in a world temporarily gone mad. But now, power is starting to be within your reach.

For me, yours is Generation Code Orange. From your mid-teens until now you have come of age at a time when our nation is in a constant state of alert. There are real and legitimate threats to us, and we need to be vigilant. But the unique challenge may be to maintain a sense of security while remaining open to the mystery that comes with the stranger in your midst.

I do believe you are better equipped than any generation in history to inherit power and make decisions, and not just on national security but all the vexing issues that confront us in a time of rapid globalization – the economy, the growing gap between rich and poor, the environment.

You are a generation more comfortable with technology than any generation in the past. It is as if from the day you were born you were at ease with technology. As an infant, I imagine you in the crib and, as your parents stood over you trying to figure out how to work that new sound monitoring device, you reached out and said, “Here, give it to me. I’ll program it.”

But where technology has entertained you and helped you build your social networks, now it will be critical in how you transform our world in ways never imagined.

You are the generation that will demand we treat our environment with genuine reverence and respect. For you, “going green” is not some trendy corporate slogan designed to make a company appear politically correct. Green is in your very DNA, and you are eager to accept the responsibility of passing on our land, our water, and our air in better shape than you found it. I believe our earth is given to us in sacred trust, and I really do trust you to take good care of it.

And you are a generation that has seen the result of pandemic greed and the pain it causes so many. Success will be yours, but success alone is no sign of virtue.

The great prophet from New Jersey, Bruce Springsteen, who played a concert at Providence College during my senior year, says, “Poor man wants to be rich, rich man wants to be king and the king ain’t satisfied until he rules everything.”

Where does it stop?

As you go forward from here and create your own success stories, trust in those values that were reinforced at PC. Let those values guide you to treat others not just as numbers on a spreadsheet or stepping stones to your monthly quota but as living, breathing human beings.

Providence College was a great experience for me. It gave me the environment where my natural curiosity about God, religion, and spirituality could grow and develop and be put to the test in ways I had never experienced. I did not know then exactly what I would be

doing with my life – exactly what my job title would someday be – but somehow I knew while I was here at Providence College something in my nature rang true.

After, I spent two years writing for what was then *The Providence Visitor* [now The Rhode Island Catholic], went to grad school and then, still only a few years after leaving PC, I joined what became at that time one of television's success stories, *Evening* or *PM Magazine*. I started out as an unpaid intern, but with lots of overtime I was able to work my way up and became a director.

I was in my mid 20s and I thought it was a pretty cool job. The show was number one in the ratings and we were filming across America and traveling to Europe and Africa.

Primetime television then was about giving people vicarious delight, so we were doing things like “the best restaurants in California,” “the best places to shop in Europe,” “the best nightlife in the Caribbean.” Looking back, some of it wasn't a bad job, but for me, something was missing.

And I remember one night we were filming in Marrakech, Morocco. It had been arranged to film at this wonderful five-star restaurant. But on the way to the restaurant we had to walk down this alley. And the alley was filled with homeless people, broken people, and their faces haunted me. I can't remember the restaurant as clearly as I remember their faces.

And for the rest of the trip I kept thinking. “Maybe it is in my nature to be in film and television but not to tell these stories.” And within a number of weeks after our return home I came up with the idea for a television series that became known as *Real to Reel*, a show about spirituality and social issues.

And before any funding was in place, I left the security of my job and devoted myself full time to making that dream happen. Some people really thought I was absolutely out of my mind. But I made that first choice nearly thirty years ago and since then it has opened up for me so many wonderful possibilities and honestly, from that first decision, I never looked back.

As you go forth from this place and look for your ideal job or pursue graduate studies that will lead to that ideal job, I can only offer a small suggestion – that you listen to that voice that speaks to you from deep inside. Sometimes all the noise and madness of our lives can drown it out; sometimes you need a little quiet to hear the whisper of your soul speaking truth. But most likely, you will not regret having the wisdom to listen and the courage to act.

It is possible, too, that voice did not begin speaking to you at Providence College but much earlier when you were 7, 8, 9 years old ... when someone hurt themselves on the schoolyard and you were the first to help, or when you showed your third-grade teacher

how to make better use of the classroom space, or when your rocket just always seemed to fly higher than everybody else's.

As for me, it was my mother who showed me how to have a relationship with God and my father who made us the first family on the block with a home film camera and every holiday became this Kodak moment. I think it has a lot to do with why I am here today. My father is here today. He is 85, and Dad, I've said it before, but again, I have to say ... thank you.

I spoke about when we started the series *Real to Reel* and I will share one story. I talk about it because this was all happening to me at an age not all that different than your own.

I was trying to raise a lot of money to start this series and it took more than a year to get the commitment, but once the commitment came, but before the money was actually in hand, I went to New York because I knew one of the first stories I wanted to do was on Mother Teresa, who had just won the Nobel Prize for Peace.

She, of course, was most often in India, but I went to visit one of her convents in the South Bronx and spend time with her Missionary of Charity sisters there. And I befriended the Provincial, Sister Priscilla Lewis, one of the gentlest souls I have ever met. I explained to her I was starting a television series, starting production in a few months, and I wanted to do a story on Mother Teresa and could she help make that happen.

She was kind but left herself an out: "If it's God's will," she said. So I went home to Alexandria, Virginia, and about two weeks later it is 10 o'clock at night. I'm in the shower and the phone rings and nobody is answering it. I hate that. I normally wouldn't answer but for some reason I jumped out of the shower dripping wet and answered the phone. On the other end I hear this sweet, sweet voice: "Martin, this is Sister Priscilla Lewis."

Talking on the phone to a nun when you're naked just brings out all that Catholic guilt. And she said, "Mother Teresa is now in New York and she has granted your request and you will be the only person to interview her. But you must be in New York the day after tomorrow." I said, "Sister, I have no equipment, no staff, no crew." She said, "If it's God's will ... you'll be here." And she hung up.

I called everyone I knew, I borrowed lights from one friend, a camera from another, and two days later I was in New York with a team, and I had the chance to spend several extraordinary days with Mother Teresa.

She said two things I share with you. "Most of us," she said, "think we are called to do great things, but really what we are called to do are little things, but little things with love."

When you are in your 20s, especially, you have grand visions for what you want to accomplish. I was guilty of thinking that way then. I can be guilty of it now, and it sometimes can be a source of great frustration. I have always found comfort in those words: “little things with love.”

And then I asked her, “You didn’t broker a peace treaty or stop a conflict. Instead, you have spent your life caring for the hungry and dying, and for that you won a Nobel Prize for Peace?” “It is because,” she said, “works of love are works of peace.”

I know many of you here at Providence College give of yourselves in community service projects – helping out with Habitat for Humanity, Special Olympics, feeding the hungry, caring for the elderly. As you have been doing those seemingly small acts, you have been peace builders. To paraphrase Gandhi, “You have actually been living out the change you hope to see in our world.”

And we need change in our world – change was the most important word in the most important election we’ve seen in years. Change, or as they like to say at PC, transformation; the transformation of students, who in turn transform our world. And here, maybe that idea of community is key.

In France, there is a brilliant man, Jean Vanier, who was the subject of the very first full-length documentary I did. He is a writer, philosopher, who a generation ago began a worldwide community for the mentally handicapped based on the Beatitudes – Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, Blessed are the Peacemakers, the Merciful.

He called the homes *L’Arche*. Maybe *L’Arche* is known to some of you because the great Henri Nouwen spent a number of years at *L’Arche* because he thought Jean Vanier was really onto something.

Jean Vanier has lived most of his adult life in community and when you live in community, he says, “a community of people you trust,” they tend to keep you in balance. They can challenge your ideas where, on our own, we tend to think all our ideas are nothing short of pure genius. As you go forward from here and remember the communities of friends and associates you built over these last four years at Providence College, keep some form of that idea of community alive just for your own sanity.

And Vanier also said in the world, and even in community, there are those who will push you down in order to raise themselves up. You see it everyday in the work world – the boss who can’t give credit where it is due because he thinks the way to keep employees on task is to verbally abuse them, to push them down. Be careful of those who refuse to admit you did a good job when you know you did a good job, because they may find a way to bring you down, thinking it’s for their own survival.

In the end, it really all comes down to how you see the world – that lens through which you observe everything and every person around you. “Is the glass half empty or half full” is one way of expressing it. I prefer another.

If ten people are gathered and each has an equal share of the pie, eventually one person or perhaps even more than one will want more than their share and likely they will do whatever it takes to get it.

But there is always that other side. In that same room, where one person takes more than their fair share, there is usually one person – and hopefully more than one – who says: “I don’t have a lot, and like you I’ve been hurt, but from what I have I will share it with you.”

That is looking at life, as I see it, through a lens of faith and hope. As you leave here, think about how you are now beginning to see the world. Think about the story you are now beginning to write.

The Danish writer Soren Kierkegaard said, “However much one generation learns from another, it can never learn from its predecessor the genuinely human factor.” In this way, every generation begins afresh. And that authentically human factor is passion. No generation can learn from another how to love and no generation can begin other than at its own beginning.

Now it is your beginning. Now is the moment to bring all the passion and sheer force you have in doing those things you love. And I know you leave here not only with the knowledge to excel in your chosen fields but the heart and the courage it takes to begin to transform others.

There will be days ahead when everything you believe in will be challenged. But I believe you will not only survive, you will thrive.

There will be people who will look you in the eye and with a smile on their face they will lie to you. But you can’t stop believing in people because if you do, it means the liars won. And that can’t happen. And you can’t stop believing in people because if you do, you will miss a thousand truths that will enrich your life beyond words.

There will be people who will betray your trust and make you look like a fool. But you can’t stop trusting in people because if you do, it means the betrayers won. And that can’t happen. And you can’t stop trusting in people because if you do, you will miss a thousand moments when you were weak and vulnerable, but someone you least expect proves themselves more than worthy of your trust.

And there will be people who will break your heart, but you can’t stop loving because it means the heartbreakers won. And that can’t happen. And you can’t stop loving because in loving with all your heart – without fear of being hurt – you will discover in the truest sense what it means to be alive and fully human. And you can’t miss out on that.

My hope for you is that after your time at Providence College, you will lead full and rich and rewarding lives and be part of the new transformation of our world. And with your own gifts, and in your own ways, whether great or small, you will begin to reshape this world into the kind of place we still dream about. And if you can do that, if you can do that, maybe someday I will have the honor, the privilege, of making a film about you.

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