Hope College Commencement Address

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Sunday, May 5, 2013
Ray and Sue Smith Stadium
Holland, Mich.

Thankfulness

Thank you, Hope College class of 2013, for inviting me to join you in this celebration and the absolute honor to serve as your commencement speaker. I am truly honored. And, thank you Hope College Board of Trustees, President Bultman, Provost Ray, my faculty and staff colleagues, as well as parents, family, and friends of our graduates, for letting me share what I hope are a few words of encouragement.

Introduction

About two-thirds of the way through my college education, my health faltered and it was largely my fault. I withdrew from college and I was admitted to the hospital, and the attending physician told me, “You could have avoided this. It seems that you have rheumatic fever and we have to explore whether there have been heart complications. I wish, Stacy Jackson, you had been more responsible.” It’s a good day. He and I both knew that I had let a strep infection go way too long, and that I had lived rather irresponsibly. And as he left the room that evening and I was left alone in the hospital, I did not know what the next season would hold.

At that time, I knew very little about (and am still learning) what it means to value anything with sustainability and right priorities (that included a young woman that I was dating at that time—who now is my wife). I had little hope that anything was going to change…but it
did. In fact, the damage was not what the doctor expected, and I entered a brand new season.

What I’d like to do is share with you three things that I have learned that have been helpful for me from then to now that I think might prove helpful to you as you enter a new season as well. Number one, make proactive decisions about what you value and dedicate all the resources you can to make them a reality. Number two, engage your values in community with other people no matter how difficult that may prove. And number three, hope.

**Values in a New Season**

I’ll start with number one.

Everyone says that values matter, and they do. The challenge is that we have so many of them. We have to choose which values we will make a priority and commit to them. Here at Hope College, even in your classes, you may have found that you now values things you never would have valued before. Some of you value research, value communication, value creativity. Maybe you value competition, teamwork, community, friendship, in ways that you never knew you could value before. If you were really brave, you may have even tried to understand what other people value. Or, even more courageous, you may have sought to understand what scripture, and prayer, and Christian tradition might teach you about what God would have us value. Whatever it is that you learned about your values while here, my hope is they become part of the fabric of your life, the specifics of your calendar. Because, as some of you may have heard me say before, you cannot “plow a field by turning it over in your mind.” If you value it, it has to show up in your calendar. Otherwise it’s not values, it’s just vanity.

Now, you’ve been here before. Not that long ago, you traveled either across state, or across the country, or across the world to come to Hope College. And when you came, you left
behind whatever calendar you had. I don’t know if you recall the first day that you came on campus, but one of the gifts that you had was a lot of time: time to make choices about what you’d get involved in. For some of you, you got involved in the Pull or Nykerk, in sports, maybe you were involved in volunteering for CASA, maybe you identified yourself because you never got involved in Pull or Nykerk or sports. However, you filled your calendar with things that either you valued or that your friends valued.

The question before you now, as your Hope commitments as a student end, is what you fill your calendar with in the new season? I’m going to give you a really short list for you to think about the priority of what you might commit to. So imagine just for a moment that you’ve got to select only one or two of these. So here’s the list. In the next six months, which will you value most: friendships, productivity at work, physical fitness, teamwork, spiritual growth, solitude, creativity, or your family? Now, many of you may say, “I’m going to value all of these,” but the challenge of being finite is that you can’t value everything and commit to the excellence you want to achieve in any one thing. Only by choosing do you get the freedom to actually explore and understand what excellence—for example, in teamwork, or family, or spiritual growth—might look like. It’s also the only way that you’ll understand the actual cost, the trade-offs, and what you might gain by making anything number one.

That may be the best part of a new season for you. Number one, it’s a chance to admit that you’re not God, that you have to make choices. Number two, the joy of growing even when (and maybe especially when) you choose poorly and you find out, maybe, that you cannot achieve what you sought. However, you’ll never know that unless you pursue it like a person who’s learning to skate without fear of falling down (the professor that just won the H.O.P.E. Award would tell you I stole that from C. S. Lewis).
So, before I share my final two points, I’ll just summarize. Everything on your calendar, as it’s always been and always will be, results from values. It’ll either result from what you value or what someone else values. Number two, I hope you engage this new season by being proactive in making choices about what is most important. Now, two last points.

The Good and Bad News about Organizations

First, I had the opportunity to sit behind Professor Andrew Le at a piano recital recently. He invited (I think it was supposed to be children) to come up on stage at the recital, but my wife and I climbed up there as quickly as we could. I wasn’t merely amazed at Professor Le’s ability to demonstrate technique in his right hand as he proved his value for the composer and the intent for that piece of music, but that his left hand was in sync with his right hand. You will likely seek to have that type of synergy wherever you work—with your colleagues, with your institution or organization—a place where you would hope that values could be shared and effectiveness could be achieved together.

However, this may be the most difficult task that you’ll ever experience. Now you might think that’s because if you work at a place that doesn’t share your values at all, you’ll be miserable. This is true. However, I would say the more difficult task is working with other people who share your values but may define them slightly differently or may value them in slightly different order. I’ll give you an example. A couple of weeks ago I was talking to a physician leader at one of the top hospitals in the United States, and we were discussing the difficulty in valuing patient intimacy and healthcare cost management (I don’t know if you know this, but healthcare is kind of a big deal right now). When you prioritize healthcare costs just
slightly above patient intimacy, you get markedly different activity. In the same way, if you elevate patient intimacy over healthcare cost management, you’ll get even different activities. And what’s more, is you will get tension. People working at the hospital will notice and take sides. And you may find at work, even with people whose values you share, that the political behavior and the self-indulgent behavior that you engage in will surprise you. In fact, it may be so bad at times that you need to leave.

My advice to you in seeking to live out your values with others is to hold onto your desire for alignment. Don’t seek to leave too quickly. Be patient. Realize that change arrives long after the invitation has been sent. In addition, realize that working for alignment among those you work with will take time and it won’t be handed to you. You have to be humble with others.

Having said that, seek excellence in what you value unapologetically and don’t accept the false humility that might be disguised as indecisiveness or an actual love for comfort. In some cases you will need to leave where you choose to work; in some cases you will need to stay and grow. I pray you have the wisdom to know which to do, and when.

Any Hope for Next Season?

Finally, I would add that it is impossible to proactively live out the values in your life without hope. Although I love Hope College, I’m not referring to this institution. Nor am I referring to a kind of hope that’s a wishing well, like “I hope that Florida Gulf Coast University makes it to the final four.” As we all know now, that would be a wishing against the odds. I’m instead referring to the Christian view of hope as a confident expectation that all things will be held together and are held together by God.
This may be difficult to imagine when you think about the diversity even across the group of students you’re graduating with and what they consider to be valuable. How could it be possible to work with shared values and shared priorities?

However, our Dean of Chapel read moments ago:

“...all things have been created through him (Christ) and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Colossians 1:16b-17

As I sat in the hospital room years ago, my hope did not begin with my knowledge, or my talent, or my will (they had all failed me). My hope was that, despite my brokenness, God was at work changing me, and changing the world and all that was in it. Even now, how could I possibly give you good advice? How could I give anyone advice, given how broken I am? I can’t - unless somehow my heart and will are changed and I’m given the wisdom to use my education and talents to accomplish something of value. And I need God to influence my choosing of the values, my priority of the values, and my humility in engaging in a community.

CLOSING

In closing, you are at the end of a season. You have a calendar wide open ahead of you. My hope is that are specific and precise about what you value, and that you engage others in discussions of those values and do not become someone who only thinks about their values in silence. I pray that you ultimately experience the joy that comes with moving onward and upward with the hope of the Creator of all that is good. May God bless and keep you Hope College graduating class of 2013.