

Marywood University
Commencement Address
May 14, 2022
Thomas P. Foley

Sister Mary, Bishop Bambara, Sister Ellen, Chair Lori and your fellow trustees, Dr. Clark, members of the faculty and staff, parents, grandparents, guardians, aunts/uncles, brothers/sisters, teachers/mentors and most importantly graduates—almost!!

Let's start out from this podium with some straight talk—I come from a family of bluntly honest men and women. Sister Mary, I did a little focus group at a family wedding last weekend with about 30 of my nieces and nephews who best fit the demographic arrayed before us. When I asked them what I should talk about, they brushed that question aside and let their Uncle Tom know very clearly that the commencement speaker is the least important person at each and every graduation. And should be.

“They don't know you, Uncle Tom, you weren't here the last four years with them, you don't follow them on Instagram (nor they you!), you weren't even in their study group, and frankly they really don't want to know ya at this point. They just want to get that diploma, get all the hugs they have earned, and move on. Fair enough.

Somebody once said that “graduation speakers are a little bit like the body at an Irish wake—you know they have to be there, but nobody really expects them to say very much.”

All that said, it is my honor to be with you today. Honor because while I have only to perform up here for a few minutes, these graduates have been at it for years—all to get to this stage, on this day, to get that piece of paper, a single sheet which represents so much more than the few Latin words inscribed on it. Before I say more about the graduates, let's start with the shortest prayer I know—thank you.

First thanks to you, to Sister Mary, the shining star in the Marywood universe. You know how good she is, not just at what she does, but how she does it. I like to tell people that Sister Mary is really good at her job, a neat combination of brains, perseverance, grace, wisdom and wit. I like her most because of the last—Sister Mary is fun—I hope many of you have gotten to experience that side of her. And don't take my word for all her good qualities—she just got elected to lead the association of 90-plus colleges in Pennsylvania for this next year—unanimously. So people at places like the Penn in the East and Waynesburg in the West know all about Sister Mary, too.

Second, thank you to all your professors, your instructors, career and student affairs counselors, your mentors, your coaches, those hardworking men and women that fed you, cleaned up after you, and kept all the Covid germs at bay. The American historian and journalist Henry Adams wrote two centuries ago that “a teacher affects eternity, they can never tell where their influence stops.” That is so true of *all* the folks I just mentioned—not just your professors—and I hope you pay forward their generosity to you when you become mentors and teachers and influential forces in other peoples' lives.

Finally on thanks, and most importantly, just a word to all the parents and guardians, the grandmas and grandpops, aunts and uncles, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, BFFs and BNFs (brand new friends), and for some of you, your children—thanks to all of you for helping these graduates get to this point.

We thank you for the roles that each of you played in the lives of these graduates—incising, nudging, driving, prodding, pushing, propelling, cajoling, coaxing, convincing, insisting, resisting, demanding, arm twisting...and sweet talking them. You are the people in their lives who built up their confidence or perhaps knocked it down a few notches, whether it was showing them how to tie a slip knot or how to rig a fishing line, how to catch a fly ball or how to handle a sly insult, how to sing retro 80s songs in the car with them or how to make the perfect pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving.

You came with them today and it wasn't just to drive the car. You accompanied them because you made them, because you love them and because now you are brave enough to really let them go. They say courage is the first virtue and we thank you all for showing it in abundance—the courage to let them walk to the bus that first day of kindergarten and the courage it will take to let them walk away from this hall today—leaving us all just a little bit behind. Graduates, let's give your family, your loved ones a hand—no let's give them a standing ovation.

American humorist Art Buchwald once gave these two sentences as his complete graduation speech—"We gave you a perfect world. Don't mess it up." Really, that's all he said, and everyone who was there still remembers to this day.

Well, I can't say that, because we didn't. We maybe left you more problems than even my generation—the generation who grew up in the Cold War—inherited. It wasn't our intention for you. But you have come of age during decades of the most intense change this planet has ever known—in all its billions of years reforming itself. For you, change isn't just a constant, it's exponential—happening so fast that it's hard even to catch your breath. What do I mean? Let me give you some numbers—four, ten, 250,000 and one million.

- ✓ Four, as in **exabytes**...that's 4 times 10 to the 19th power of unique, new information will be generated in the world this year--more information than was generated in the past fifty centuries together!
- ✓ Ten, as in **the warp speed of technology**. Think about it: when the radio was invented it took thirty-eight years to reach a market audience of fifty million people. It took Facebook two years. It probably takes Lady Gaga about ten minutes. "*Breaking news*" is an oxymoron for you.
- ✓ 250,000, as in **the average number of electronic messages** that a Marywood graduate has sent or received--emails, texts, Tweets, Instagrams, whatever. And if you are like my sons, that might be just this year!
- ✓ Million, as in **we are fast approaching a million words** in the English language...that's more than 5 times what Shakespeare had to work with in the 16th century.

Bottom line, we are in awe of you –the generation of Tiktok, Reddit, Snapchat, Twitter, and (still) Facebook. You carry in your pockets a smartphone that has more computing power than NASA did when it put a man on the moon six decades ago. *But* all that change, all that brain power comes with responsibility, and that is your challenge going forward.

You know, the pessimists are saying that all this technology has turned us into a "post-truth world." The Oxford dictionary even made that its word of the year and defined it as "relating to or distorting circumstances for which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

Harvard historian Jill Lepore worries that "the sheer quantity of facts now available makes people cynical about truth itself." And make no mistake, developments in the technology of communication are like "tectonic shifts under the very ground on which education rests," as theologian/lawyer John Sexton put it, in the "fields of knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination."

The info pessimists says that all this technology has created a world

- ✓ Where the new arms race is between facts, "alternative" facts and fake news.
- ✓ Where the internet is less a resource and more an armament, an on-line "echo chamber" that can weaponize *public* narratives while it transmogrifies *private* images.
- ✓ Where personal opinions don't exist, only algorithms which divide people into pre-ordained warring camps.
- ✓ Where things called memes and bots can misrepresent, misshape and mutate the truth, and then cogenerate and disgorge disinformation, almost instantaneously.

- ✓ Where the so-called “attention economy” is withering, as info overload crushes peoples’ attention spans so it is increasingly impossible to *discern and flag, filter and block* mis- and dis- information from our conscious and even our subconscious mind. And
- ✓ Where blind conviction gets more *likes* than genuine curiosity, and where digital cruelty designed to foment fear and breed hatred generates more views than content that speaks to what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.”

When you hear all that, it sounds like, as Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa put it in her 2021 Nobel Peace Prize lecture, “an atom bomb just exploded in our information ecosystem.” And it all sounds pretty grim. But the truth is these problems aren’t exactly new, especially not to you.

Anne Applebaum studies all this for a living and says that “the question of what is propaganda and what is truth has plagued politics since politics began.” Bullies, whether in the schoolyard, on the campaign trail or over the internet have “always tried to intimidate, gaslight, polarize and scapegoat.” Only now they do it electronically and try to wear us out with a constant barrage of argument, the fictions fired faster and farther than ever before. It makes people my age worry about the very idea of truth.

And that is one reason that I am in awe of all of you. All this “epistemic chaos”—this stuff-- doesn’t scare you—it doesn’t scare our sons. It doesn’t scare my nieces and nephews. Because you grew up with this, and being skeptical--of information and even the institutions that produce it--is part of your DNA. You have been building and refining your own internal fact checkers your whole lives.

And *how* you learned here at Marywood is key to the dependability of your personal fact checker in the so-called post-truth world.

- ✓ At Marywood, you learned to think deeply, analytically, courageously.
- ✓ At Marywood, you learned sitting next to people unlike anyone you ever knew before—your classmates from 32 counties, 26 states and six foreign countries.
- ✓ At Marywood, you learned on the very instruments that pass all this info around. (It’s why we are always asking *you* to fix *our* computer). My grandson Henry is four years old and he can make movies out of the photos on my iPhone—I can’t.
- ✓ At Marywood, you learned to think critically: to evaluate propositions, to research and validate facts, to listen actively and to ask questions, always ask questions--because there are no bad questions, only good ones that didn’t get asked.
- ✓ And at Marywood, you learned to navigate conversations on even the most difficult and uncivil subjects in civil and respectful ways—because that is the Marywood way.

Bottom line, you’re already teaching us on this side of the rostrum how to deal with this info overload, and we are paying attention. Thank you for that, and please don’t stop. And there is more help on the way. Governments and civic institutions recognize that serving citizens means fighting disinformation. Courses in *information* and *media literacy* are popping up as early as middle schools and *digital literacy* training is already a critical element in workforce training. As one observer put it, “education for veracity” is fast becoming an “indispensable ingredient for all education.”

Perhaps most importantly, the pressure to *get it right*--on social media for example--is overwhelming, from the left, the right, and the middle in this country. Nobody wants Russian bots interfering in our elections, neither side wants the other to have any advantage on the info continuum--so they have self-enforcing incentives to get it right (even if only to keep the other side in check).

Permit me one last serious thought. Try not to conflate *free* speech with *true* speech. Insist on equal time for truth, but don’t let that goal get hijacked—in the name of free speech—for every crazy idea, absurd conspiracy theory or false narrative that shows up on your news feed. Free speech does not mean silencing certain voices, but it also does not

require us to listen to every street corner squawker—or to force others to sit and listen, either. Everyone has a voice that deserves a chance to be heard, but you must decide who and what is worthy of your trust and of your time.

In our drive to get every *opinion* equal time, don't forsake your search for what is true, what is accurate, what is really happening, what is factual. Not what a certain swath of public opinion says is happening, but what you have learned by listening, researching, evaluating, validating, verifying, talking and listening again—all those skills you have learned here at Marywood. That is the responsibility that comes with education. That is the price we pay as citizens in a democracy.

You, graduates of the class of 2022, will be our teachers on this pursuit of truth in a constantly changing digital world. And we are grateful.

Change, to be sure, is constant and it is happening faster than ever. The sheer volume of new information and content brings with it tidal wave after tidal wave of changes big and small—social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, familial. It can be easy to feel untethered by all of this, to be swept up off your feet by something new and caught in a frightening riptide of unfamiliarity. It can make us feel hopelessly adrift, filled with questions—*what are the real facts? Who is trustworthy? Is that cat really playing the piano?*—and grasping for answers.

I don't have an easy solution for you. We are not here with a lifeboat that will help you navigate these stormy seas of everyday life and everlasting change. But we can tell you that some things don't and won't change no matter the pace of life in the digital world—a few immutable truths that may help you build your own raft and find your own North Star.

These are lessons learned from our parents and ancestors, people wholly unfamiliar with the digital age. We are in a part of Pennsylvania where lots of Sister Mary's and my ancestors— from places like Italy, Ireland, all over Europe—came to settle in the 19th and 20th centuries. None of them had computers or iPhones, few of them had college degrees, many of them—like my grandparents—didn't have the luxury of a high school diploma.

But they were still plenty smart—they planted seeds that grew you, didn't they? And they left plenty of lessons that no amount of temporal change will ever undo. Let's finish up with a couple of those lessons, those truths, from our analog ancestors. Their lessons aren't subject to digital decay or 404 errors; their lessons haven't withered over time and their learned truths speak to the best of our shared humanity.

The first truth I learned from them is that the happiest people in the world don't necessarily have the best of everything, they just make the best of everything.

My father worked in an electronics factory his whole life, never made a big salary, never had a big job title. My mother, the only child of Great Depression-fatigued parents, gave birth to and raised 12 children, never complained about the dozens of carpool assignments every week, never forgot to leave some dinner in the oven for the ones who got home late from practice.

The two of them worked the busiest booth at our church carnival every year, joined the mother's and father's club at each of our schools. My father coached every team at our little grade school, he worked each chicken barbecue for every good cause in our small town, and my mother fed anybody we dragged through the kitchen door with us. They were family people first and community people right after.

When my father died, it was the biggest funeral that town ever saw—2,500 people came—and every single one of them had a story. My parents didn't have the best of everything, but they sure made the best of everything—and that's the best advice I can give you today. Make the best of what you have. Better yet, share some of it—on a team, in a family, with your community. That will make all the difference.

So, the first thing I know is true—the happiest people in the world don't necessarily have the best of everything, but they sure know how to make the best of what they have.

The second truth they taught us is that kindness is the universal language. Even in those rare instances when people don't respond to that “language,” it will at least be clear that it is their problem, not yours.

Certainly, *charity* is a form of kindness. You knew that before you came to Marywood and you practiced it here with your outstanding record of community service.

Sometimes, *clarity* is a form of kindness too—knowing when to tell someone what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. Your mom and dad know exactly what I am talking about there. The soldier and diplomat Colin Powell once said that “being kind doesn’t mean being soft.” I think he meant that kindness is not just some coefficient of “niceness.” Kindness is often just appreciating the fundamental dignity in another person, recognizing that another human being deserves your respect and maybe sometimes helping to bring out the best in them as a result.

It is important to remember, too, that the opposite of kindness is not strength, it is cruelty.

So kindness in all its forms is the universal language. And there is an uncommon shared strength in it. As wartime President Franklin Roosevelt said, “Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel in order to be tough.” Neither does a person.

The third and last truth they handed down is that it’s all about the stories, the ones you tell, the ones you write, the ones you live. At our son Matt’s college graduation, Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel said that “the universe is not made up of atoms, it is made up of stories.” Well, if he is right—your ancestors brought remarkable stories with them on their journeys. And some of you are just beginning to tell those stories here in America.

We know there are 730 stories—different stories, inspired stories, stories of quiet perseverance and of exuberant (and well-deserved!) celebration—here at this graduation. Some of you are sprinting across the finish line here today with arms held high in triumph, some of you crawled the last few meters—or miles. Different stories, different places, different faces, but today, each of your sagas has the same chapter title: “Graduation Day.” And whether you ran, walked, or crawled, whether you are exhilarated or exhausted, you did it.

We thank each of you for the special story of your family that led you to Marywood. We applaud your whole family for having the courage to let you go out and write the next chapter in the story of your family.

So, go out and work hard, play hard, pray hard. Think hard and think critically. Take some chances along the way. Write your story. And remember the shortest prayer is the two words we started off with today—thank you.