

Haley Scott DeMaria
University Commencement Ceremony
May 20, 2012

Thank you Father John.

Members of the Board of Trustees, fellow honorees, Father Jenkins, honored guests, parents, families, friends, and most importantly the class of 2012, welcome and thank you. It is a true privilege to share this day with you, to be honored with a degree, as you are honored with your degrees, and for me to join the class of 2012.

When Father John called to invite me to be your speaker, he first mentioned that the University wanted to give me an honorary degree. That news alone was so unexpected and overwhelming, that I missed the part where he actually asked me to give the commencement address. It wasn't until I read a copy of the press release that I realized I would be your speaker. Over the next several days, I thought to myself many times, "Wow! I can't believe Notre Dame asked me to be their graduation speaker."

Perhaps some of you thought the same thing.

As I stand before you today, we have many things in common. The list of those who have stood at this podium before me is certainly impressive, and I am honored to be added to that list. However, there are two words I am able share with you that few before me can:

I understand.

I understand what it is like to sit where you sit as graduates of the University of Notre Dame.

I understand that while football weekends are awesome, it can be annoying to have the quads and the bookstore crowded with alumni – people like me, and soon you.

I understand the fun and challenges of parietals, Du Lac and Pig Tostal.

I understand what it is like to lose a classmate in a very tragic way.

As graduates, all Notre Dame alumni celebrate today with you. But the class of 2012 and my undergraduate class of 1995 share sadness as well. The loss of life at a young age is an emotional experience that will stay with you long after you graduate. I understand.

You will find, as you navigate through life, the words, "I understand," are very powerful when they are sincere and honest. These words carry the strongest meaning when spoken by someone who has lived through a similar experience.

I also understand today is not about my story and me. I have no political agenda or platform to promote. Today I share how my experience as a student and an alumna of Notre Dame relates to you, your lives and the future experiences you will have as graduates of this University.

It is often said that college is the best four years of your life. I disagree. Your time at Notre Dame has been special and unique, but I promise you, it is not all downhill after today. The best is yet to come.

What that “best” looks like, none of us can know. But you are prepared for your next adventure, and you are prepared well. Look around you: your roommate, your classmate, perhaps your teammate or a professor. Think of how much you have learned from them. They have made you a better person, as you have made them. That is who we are at Notre Dame. As anyone who has experienced the student section in the Purcell Pavilion or Compton Family Arena, or in the football stadium knows, our strongest trait is our community. Though each of us has to find our own way, none of us at Notre Dame has to do this alone. You have learned from the best, just by being here.

The most significant lessons, however, did not necessarily occur in a classroom. Academics are important, and we celebrate that today. I have a degree in History, which is wildly popular with my children, as I explain the historical significance of every location we visit. But an education is so much more than textbooks, exams and going to class.

As a member of the Notre Dame family, I learned what is truly important in life: gratitude and making a difference. It is easy to make a living; it is more gratifying to make a difference.

I am often asked, “Do you wish your accident had never happened?” Believe it or not, this question does not elicit a simple answer.

Yes, I wish everyday that two of my teammates had the opportunity to sit where you sit.

But I also know that everything I have – my family, my children, my friendships - and everything I am, has evolved from this tragic event, and my time at Notre Dame.

So the answer is a paradox. Yes, I wish it had not happened, but I am so grateful for the blessings that have grown from it and the opportunity I have to make a difference.

This is perhaps the greatest lesson I learned at Notre Dame: that life may not take you down the path you planned, but with the foundation you’ve laid at this University, it can still be a very good path.

We can't change the past. There are events in our lives over which we have no control. But what we can control is how we react to them.

I truly believe this.

I truly believe that each of us has a choice every day; that each of us can wake up tomorrow and find something negative in our lives on which to focus. But that each of us can also wake up tomorrow and focus on and celebrate the blessings in our lives. This is certainly easier to do on some days more than others. But even in our darkest days, we can choose the brighter path, the one of gratitude.

This is more than the glass half full or half empty. This is a choice, and I challenge you to make that choice each day. Do you wake up tomorrow upset that you have graduated and are leaving Notre Dame? Or do you wake up tomorrow celebrating your achievements and your future? That is your choice. It is all a matter of perspective.

Perspective is an important word to remember. I learned perspective from a man named Christopher Reeve.

Christopher Reeve was a famous actor in the 1970s and 80s. Your parents know him; perhaps you do too. He was Superman – by many definitions – but literally the lead in the Superman movies of the 80's. Handsome, talented, charismatic; I hesitate to compare him to a current actor, but before there were Ryan Gosling and George Clooney, there was Christopher Reeve.

The week I graduated from Notre Dame, Mr. Reeve was involved in a horse riding accident, shattered two vertebrae and damaged his spinal cord. He was left paralyzed. As you can imagine, I took a keen interest in his story; not only because I grew up with his movies, but also because I felt a kinship with what he was experiencing. I understood.

Mr. Reeve did not recover as I did. He never walked again. Yet, he lived the remaining years of his life as a remarkable advocate for spinal research, raising millions of dollars and awareness for the cause.

Does his family wish his accident had never happened? Of course. But I know there are millions of spinal injury patients who are grateful for his efforts; for his decision to wake up each day and see the blessings of a situation he could not change.

But that is only part of my education in perspective.

I had the great privilege of meeting Christopher Reeve a few years after his accident. He asked me about my injury; I asked him about his. Our descriptions were remarkably similar: he shattered two cervical vertebrae and I shattered three thoracic vertebrae. In fact, except for the location of our injuries, they were identical.

I will never forget our conversation; and what Mr. Reeve said next changed my life. Knowing that we shared a similar injury and a different fate, he looked at me and said, "Ah. You're one of the lucky ones."

And I knew at that moment that I was. Six surgeries, collapsed lungs, heart failure, on-going nerve damage, spending months in the hospital when I should have been with my friends at Notre Dame. There was much to be upset about, and many negatives on which to focus. But I knew at that moment, that I was lucky. That I was blessed.

That is perspective. And it is with that perspective that I choose to live my life.

And just to note, to make sure I had the exact details of his injury correct, I googled "Christopher Reeve spinal injury;" thankfully, unlike your graduation speaker, he does have a Wikipedia page.

There are three things that have sustained me, that have carried me through my challenges and have rejoiced with me. My faith, my family and my friendships. While academically, three "Fs" wouldn't be celebrated; in life, they are to be embraced. Faith, Family and Friendship.

Notre Dame is a community of faith. You have lived it for four years. You will be sustained by it for the rest of your lives. The Notre Dame family or the spirit of Notre Dame, whatever you want to call it, is the community of faith that unites us far beyond our days as students. Just as the words "I understand" are powerful when spoken truthfully, so too are the words, "I will pray for you."

The power of prayer is just that: powerful. It is why we flock to the Grotto and why on any given day, particularly during exam week, light from hundreds of candles burn for our prayers. Because we believe in that power.

About five years ago, I met a woman who had just moved to our town and was a new parent at my children's school. I was wearing a Notre Dame Swimming shirt, because as an alum, you spend even more money at the bookstore.

But she noticed my shirt and asked me, "Did you go to Notre Dame?"

I said, I did.

She asked, "Were you on the swim team?"

I said, I was.

She said, "Were you in the bus accident?"

At this point I just nodded yes to her, and she asked me, "What ever happened to that girl who was paralyzed?"

And I quietly responded, "That was me."

Then this woman, who I just met for the first time, over 15 years after our swim team bus accident, said to me, "I prayed for you."

That is the power of faith. That is the power of prayer. Believe in it and trust in it and nurture it.

It is important to nurture all relationships, because along with our faith, they are the most important aspects of our lives. At times our family relationships and friendships – and even our faith – may falter. But when one is weakened, the other two will sustain you. Family, Faith and Friendship; those are your guiding forces.

But I am not unrealistic. As you graduate and begin your careers, there will be bills to pay, rent and mortgages to figure out, and life expenses that increase when you are no longer a student. Your job, whether you work inside or outside the home, will consume great amounts of your time, dedication and energy. My advice to you is this: Love what you do. Believe in a cause and make it your passion. Find your passion, and make it your career. In doing so, you will make a difference because life is too short to do otherwise.

As an athlete and a competitor, I spent the first 18 years of my life focused on winning: winning the race, winning the meet, being first and the best. I am sure many of you understand this concept of “winning,” although hopefully not in the Charlie Sheen way.

But when I returned to swimming, after I won my first race, I spent two years never winning another race. Not one race, ever again. It was the first of the odds I couldn’t overcome.

I had been told I wouldn’t walk; I did.

I had been told I wouldn’t swim again, and I did.

I was told I would be in the hospital up to a year learning to walk again, and it was two months.

I was told I would walk at best with some sort of leg braces, and I walk unaided.

I was told I might not be as fast a swimmer as I was before, and I wasn’t. For someone who had spent her entire life focused on winning, I had to face that reality and my limitations, and I had to embrace it and accept it, if I was to live a happy and healthy life.

I never won another race again at Notre Dame. But you would be hard pressed to tell me, that in all ways that matter, I did not win. It’s just a matter of perspective.

What though the odds be great or small, I am – we are all – so excited for you! You leave here today as a proud graduate. You will return in 5, 10, 20 years even more proud to have graduated from Notre Dame. I know you will make Our Lady on the Dome proud. I have no doubt the class of 2012 will change lives.

You have the tools – the academic, social, emotional and spiritual tools – to commence your life as an alumnus. Congratulations! Today, we celebrate you and all you have accomplished. But we also celebrate all you have ahead of you: a life filled with faith, friendships and family; a life of gratitude and of making a difference.

As you leave here today, may the odds be ever in your favor. God Bless and Go Irish!