

University of Notre Dame
2013 Valedictorian Speech
by Mallory Meter

Cardinal Dolan, Father Jenkins, distinguished faculty and guests, family, friends and fellow graduates: When I began to consider what I would say in this address, I was overwhelmed by the amount I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. My initial thought was that I wanted it to be unique. So many of these speeches are the same, using cliché after cliché to get one's point across. As I considered this idea further, I was struck by the realization that these addresses are so often delivered in this way because that is, perhaps, the simplest and most genuine way of communicating a message that is otherwise impossible to articulate. In light of this insight, then, my message to you today will proceed in just three simple steps. It is a message that we can use to find meaning in those thousands of Notre Dame moments, and it is a message, I hope, that we will all carry in our hearts for the millions of little moments to come.

Allow me, then, to begin with step one: say something shocking to grab the audience's attention. There were many moments I did not like at Notre Dame while I experienced them. For starters, the uncertainty I felt upon arriving here was not exactly quelled by the depletion of dignity I experienced during Frosh-O and Domerfest, or by the total annihilation of the little dignity I still possessed when I was forced to put on a Speedo and complete the swim test a week later. Then there were the dorm parties. After the sixteenth time of opening a dorm room door only to be pummeled by a wall of heat, the sound of "Party in the USA", and the smell of cheap beer, I began to question whether or not the social life at Notre Dame was for me. If I decided to forgo one of these gatherings, though, that was OK, because I likely had twenty hours of

homework to complete. Surely my friends at other schools didn't have this much work to do, and even if they did, they only had to focus on classes for their major which they declared at the beginning of Freshman year. No, I had to juggle hour after hour of literature, history, mathematics, science, religion, and some strange topic my professor called philosophy. Then, when I had finished all of my homework and the light at the end of the tunnel was finally visible, there were applications to be completed. Nearly everything at Notre Dame seems to require an application with no less than four recommendation letters. In fact, a required polygraph test seemed like the next logical step in the study abroad application process. And then there was the religion thing. As someone who has gone to a Catholic school since Kindergarten, I consider myself a kind of expert when it comes to the ins and outs of a Catholic education, but even I quickly came to realize that the importance of religion here was a categorically different kind of beast. After just a few weeks I actually began to see the shape of the cross in my toast and to develop a vague sense of being watched at all times. And last but not least, there was the never-ending responsibility thrust upon me as a Notre Dame student to always smile and nod politely as my waiter told me about the time his bosses' cousin's neighbor went to Notre Dame.

I'm sure many, if not all, of you can relate to at least one of these experiences, and this brings me to step two: cite a quote to make sense out of everything you just said. When Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist in Kurt Vonnegut's novel "Slaughterhouse Five", is asked by his wife what it was like to be a prisoner of war in World War II, his reaction is startling. Instead of reading a horrific account of the experience, the reader turns the page to see his response carved as an epitaph on his tombstone which reads, "Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt." Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt. When I first read this in high school, I didn't understand what this meant. I thought about that quote every once in awhile, however, and now,

six years later, I think I finally understand what Billy was trying to say. I understand because when I think back on these past four years, not only are the good memories the clearest, but even those things that seemed awful at the time now seem beautiful. We met our best friends during Frosh-O weekend, and Domerfest and the swim test are the things we laugh about now. When we think back to dorm parties, they now seem like a rite of passage, a kind of relic from a simpler time.

Now when we think about the strenuous academic requirements at Notre Dame, we realize that we were being immersed in topics that few would ever have the privilege of learning about, and that this immersion was led by some of the greatest minds and most respected scholars in the world. While our friends didn't have to memorize Freud's theory of sexual development, construct a comparative analysis on the messages of Christ and Muhammad, and understand electrophilic aromatic substitution reactions all in one night, we did, and it was empowering. School was impossible at times, but when I look back now, the clearest memory I have is not of the stress I felt at one in the morning on the fourth night of finals week. No, what I remember is the comfort of looking around the library and coming to the realization that all of you were right there with me, your presence pushing me along. What I remember is the audible buzz of hundreds of people learning at once, the sight of tables barely visible underneath empty coffee cups and books, and the strange feeling of euphoria I experienced as my friends and I all looked up and laughed at once for no reason other than pure delirium. Those applications were difficult, too, but now we realize that the opportunities they allowed us to have will forever be some of the most formative experiences of our lives. They allowed us to build homes in Appalachia and to empower young girls in Cambodia. They allowed us to apply what we had learned about finance, political science, and chemistry at some of the most prestigious

businesses, social organizations, and laboratories in the world. And for some of us, they allowed us to live and learn in another country where we got to feel the salt air as we climbed the cliffs of Dover, stand so close to Van Gogh's paintings of sunflowers that we could see every intricate brushstroke, and begin to dream in Spanish, French, and Italian.

Somewhere along the way, the emphasis on religion at Notre Dame became beautiful too. For those of us who are Catholic, perhaps our faith was strengthened. For those of us from the countless other denominations who are here today, perhaps the continuous engagement in questions pertaining to religion resulted in answers that served to confirm the beliefs you already held. And for those of us who do not adhere to any type of religion, perhaps the presence of religion was, at the very least, comforting, because, in the end, whether you pray to the Blessed Mother, bow towards Mecca five times a day, or live your life based on reason and the principles of kindness and fairness, we are all human beings attempting to be the best people we can be. In this sense, then, what the importance at Catholicism at Notre Dame reflected most was an attempt to challenge us to create a set of values by which we will always strive to be good, loving, and humble human beings.

We all had unique experiences during our time here, but all of the things that, at the time, were an annoyance or difficult now seem beautiful. Just as Billy Pilgrim saw the whole of his life as beautiful, our four years here now seem to be nothing short of perfectly invaluable, and this brings me to my third and final step: give a piece of advice. In keeping with my goal of making this address unique, my advice will not be to follow your dreams or to work hard. I have watched you all for four years. You are some of the most driven and capable people I have ever known, and there is no doubt in my mind that you will find success. My piece of advice to myself and to you all is something far more important, and it is to live every single day fully aware, present,

and conscious and to never stop searching for the beauty in the present moment. While this might seem simple, it is not. In fact, I believe that this ability is one that few people ever achieve and if they do, it is often too late. This lack of awareness is why the phrase “you don’t know what you got till it’s gone” seems to be a truism of the human condition. It is why thirty years ago will always be the good old days, and it is why that intangible pin-prick we call nostalgia is so often accompanied by a sense of sadness. But what if we could learn at our young age to live with a constant awareness of the beauty in the world and in our lives? What if we could realize that these days are the good old days, and what if we could appreciate what we have while it’s still in our grasp?

My fellow graduates, I believe with my whole heart that we can accomplish this. I’m not saying it will be easy. There are countless forces in today’s world working against us. As the world continues to move at a quicker pace, competition grows fierce, and Darwin’s idea of the survival of the fittest has never seemed more applicable. This, unfortunately, makes it difficult to slow down for even a moment lest we lose our lead in the race. Furthermore, beauty is often difficult to find amidst the war, genocide, poverty, and hunger that seems to plague our world. Despite these obstacles, however, I believe we can achieve this goal because of the education we received at Notre Dame. This place taught us to think critically, to reason, to evaluate, to debate, to question, and to create, and these are the tools it takes to avoid living unconsciously, prodded along by nothing but outside pressures and expectations. The things we have learned here can force us to see the beauty in the mundane and to appreciate and value the present. If we can use these tools Notre Dame has given us, I truly believe we can make the world a better place because if we are constantly aware of ourselves and of the good in this world, then perhaps we can be more aware of the good in others and strive to make this goodness known.

This is a realization that required thousands of little moments here at Notre Dame to arrive at, and in this very moment, this moment of opportunity and change, it is of the utmost importance. With this new realization, then, let us begin this awareness today. Let us honor our education by going out into the world and by using this awareness as a source of hope and healing for all. And most importantly, do not see today as an ending, because endings, which by their very nature so often hurt, also mark beginnings, and the beginning is a beautiful thing.

In closing, I want to thank every single one of you, my best friends, the people I met once, and the people I have yet to meet. It has been an honor to experience these four years with you. It has been an honor to live with you, to swim with you, to cheer with you. It has been an honor to learn with you and to learn from you, and it has been an honor, perhaps one of the greatest honors of my life, to become an adult with you. So, in the end, even though sometimes things in the present moment did hurt, our time together at this place was beautiful, and not merely because of the privilege of receiving a Notre Dame education. No, so much of that beauty also came from the privilege of experiencing the beauty inside each and every one of you. Class of 2013, I wish everything and more for you. I wish the world for you. Congratulations.