

# Elizabeth Brennan Bollman

## Valedictory Address

May 17, 2009

From those to whom much is given, much is expected. President Obama, Fr. Jenkins, distinguished faculty and guests, family, friends, and my fellow graduates: these words came from a mother's letter to the fiancé of her only son, which she read aloud at the bridal shower. The young couple had successful business careers, and promise for a happy future. Yet, listening to the mother's advice, they chose to learn about the world's disparities, immersing themselves in issues of education, health, and poverty. They started small, but their gifts now total \$20 billion. The mother, now deceased, would be proud of her daughter-in-law, Melinda Gates.

From those to whom much is given, much is expected. I heard this same mantra from my parents. Your family may have told you something similar. Notre Dame has taught us all.

In our time here, much has been given.

First, Notre Dame gave us an education...obvious, right? But what did we learn? I don't remember organic chemistry syntheses that consumed me as a freshman. I do remember sobbing after I bombed my first orgo test—shocked to learn what studying hard really meant. You have probably forgotten the thesis statements for many of your term papers, but you do remember writing them for three days straight in the library basement, finally emerging triumphant. Rather than push the details, Notre Dame taught us to think critically and to tackle tough problems.

Second, Notre Dame gave us community. When we arrived, we might have thought this meant touchdown pandemonium followed by haphazard Irish jigs and crowd-pushups. We now know the Notre Dame community bores into us much more deeply. Our housekeepers care enough to leave kind notes on our white-boards. Professors care enough to invite their entire 125-person genetics class over for dinner. If you have ever had friends, RAs, or mentors make the time to listen and help, then you have received our community.

Lastly, Notre Dame gave us deepened consciences. Our families taught us to distinguish right from wrong. But here, we also came to see society's ills as moral problems—realizing we must address concerns outside ourselves. We boxed for the Bengal missions. We TAPed into theology and faith. We CLAPed loudly for labor justice. And we applied our energies to Green ND. Out of the distinct ways we got engaged, lasting passions grew.

From those to whom much is given, much is expected. Now, what is expected?

Our education here exposed us to complex ideas, so we hope to be successful in solving real world problems. But I hope we also confront failure. Through office-hour frenzies and soul-sapping all-nighters, we learned accomplishment isn't cheap. We had to do tough work, which is often not fun. And our best efforts didn't always lead to the right answer. Frustration tempts us to avoid the difficult tasks, to instead focus on the easy and efficient. But if we think about our

education, we realize we gained the most from the times that we failed. You may have spent a whole summer on a research project...and gotten spectacularly inconclusive data. Yet, you learned a process of inquiry that excited you. Next time may bring a discovery.

Sometimes we fail in painful ways. I lived at a Catholic Worker women's shelter during one summer and befriended a woman named Maggie. Almost my age, she'd been addicted to half a dozen different drugs, and incarcerated twice. I spent hours listening to her erratic thoughts, trying to form the special connection that might make a difference. And she responded, making me hopeful. But one night, she ran away, back to the streets. I'll never know what happened to her, which still troubles me. Maybe I couldn't have done more, but I thought I failed Maggie. I met another woman who stayed clean, regained custody of her daughter, and continues on a good path. That's success. I want to be willing to fail for a glimpse of success.

After the challenges we've met here, we should continue to risk disappointment. Remember: life does give partial credit. Our best efforts may fall short or even backfire, but we are expected to struggle. To pursue what matters, even if it hurts. Only through tenacity can we make an impact.

From those to whom much is given, much is expected. The community we received became a home for us, so we expect to remain close. Yes, let's stay connected with the familiar, but also be comfortable with the unfamiliar. We can choose to not fit in. To be outsiders.

No doubt each of us has somehow been an outsider during our time here. One student displaced herself when she traveled to Cambodia to work in an AIDS hospice. She imagined she would be 'helping' these sick people. Instead, she was the helpless one. She found herself sitting among a group of female patients chattering in Khmer, who barely acknowledged her presence. She felt useless and isolated. But she continued to sit in these conversations she didn't understand, and she communicated by teaching the ladies to make paper flowers. She didn't do anything for these patients; she let herself simply be with them. When she left them with bouquets of flowers, they left her with tearful goodbyes. These people, sick with AIDS, taught her it was okay to be uncomfortable, without words. It was okay for me to just 'be.'

As outsiders, we have influence. We are leaving a place that believes in common human dignity and solidarity—ideas from the Catholic Social Tradition that grounds the University mission. We are leaving a place that has recently intensified a commitment to environmental sustainability. We may enter a place radically different. So let's be different. Notice people too frequently ignored—the bus drivers, the custodians, the homeless on the street—and take time to have a conversation with them. Insist on recycling. Who cares if your co-workers give you grief for carrying around your empty soda can? Our community gave us values, so we're expected to live them, even if we don't fit in as a result. As we converse with strangers, and do strange things, we become strangers—but by being different in our new communities, we can lead.

From those to whom much is given, much is expected. What are the implications for our deepened consciences? Rather than help us confidently make decisions, our consciences should disturb us. Make us unsettled. Over the past year, we watched as the global economy imploded. The resultant job insecurity and weakened markets affect each of us, on a personal level. We are coming of age in a trying time, but economic fears are not our only problem. With pending

climate change fallout, heightened global violence, and raging pandemic diseases like AIDS and tuberculosis, we will spend much of our lives in an acutely suffering world. All of this upsets us.

The world suffers, but I have no doubt its crises involve issues about which we have grown passionate during our years here. Therefore, we have the ability to solve these problems. Notre Dame gave me the opportunity to spend time working on neglected diseases in Haiti, and what I learned about the country is messy. Haiti fascinates me, perplexes me, devastates me...but I cannot wait to go back. We have each been unsettled by something, and we must not forget this distress when we leave campus tomorrow. Let us keep 'going back,' bringing whatever knowledge and skills we can offer—but most importantly, bringing our passion.

From those to whom much is given, much is expected. From our education, we expect to seek tough challenges, even if we fail. From our community, we expect to not fit in, to lead as strangers. From our conscience, we expect to feel forever unsettled, because our distress gives each of us power. We can transform our world.

It has taken me four years with you, my inspirational classmates, to understand what my parents wanted me to learn from their mantra. I simply need to recognize all that I've been given, and in doing so, to expect much from myself.

So thank you, Notre Dame, for your gifts. The class of 2009 thanks our family, friends, professors, coaches, mentors, service staff, and Fr. John—who began this journey with us.

You have given much to my classmates and me. Please, expect much from us.