

LIFELONG LEARNING

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I am honored and pleased to be joining the Class of 1985 in these commencement ceremonies today. I suppose that if we were to go back in the history of commencement addresses at The College of Saint Mary, we would find the usual number of speakers playing on the word "commencement" to suggest to the graduates that the commencement ceremony signaled the completion of their formal schooling and the commencement of adult responsibilities.

But that particular message does not seem appropriate for today's graduating classes. If this class is typical of those across the nation this spring, many of you have already entered upon your adult responsibilities. Some of you are already in the labor market, some with full-time, others with part-time jobs. Some of you are married; some are parents; a few may even be grandparents. Most of you have probably exercised your voting rights; many of you are financially independent; some are already active in the affairs of your community.

Thus, as today's commencement speaker, I cannot really suggest that you bid a fond farewell to the carefree days of your youth and commence upon the challenge of adult responsibilities. Many of you have already done that.

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Perhaps then I could play upon the other commencement theme of the past, which is to express the hope that your studies at Saint Mary's have given you the education that you need to live a happy and productive life. The trouble with that message is that regardless of the quality of your education here, it is highly unlikely that it will last you the rest of your life.

For the first time in human history the speed of social and technological change has overtaken the length of the average life span. As recently at 1900, the average person in the United States lived only forty-seven years; today the life expectancy is seventy-two and rising. But it is not only the extended life span that makes it impossible for your college to offer a lifetime guarantee with your degree. We are living in an era in which knowledge is expanding and changing so rapidly that in some career fields, knowledge is obsolete within five to ten years. Between 6000 and 7000 scientific and technical articles are published each day, and information doubles every five and one-half years. Change is occurring so rapidly now that entire industries are created and wiped out within a single decade.

Margaret Mead once said that the world into which we were born is not the world in which we will live, nor is that the world in which we will die. In the world in which I was born, for example, the average citizen had never heard of, let alone experienced, television, commercial airplane travel, computers, credit cards, or frozen foods. And the speed of social change has been just as great. Within easy memory of most of the people in this audience, the United States has moved from

rural and small town to metropolitan living, from homes in which a majority of mothers were home most of the day to homes in which most mothers are employed, from an average national educational attainment from a little over eight years of formal education for the average citizen over the age of twenty-five to more than a high school education today.

Social and technological change has been enormous in my lifetime. Lest you conclude that I am unusually well-preserved and spry for what must be an advanced age, let me hasten to assure you that I have enough years remaining in my life to witness changes even greater than those that make my world so different from the world of my parents.

If your education at The College of Saint Mary has been a good one, it will not last you a lifetime. Rather, it will make you acutely aware of the need for continuous lifelong learning. Ironically, the more education you have and the better it is, the less likely it is to last you a lifetime. Research shows clearly that college graduates are considerably more likely than high school graduates to be active in adult learning, and each additional year of schooling adds to the probability that you will participate in classes, workshops, and discussion groups as an adult. Thus, I suppose it is fair to say that today's commencement is more likely to launch you into new kinds of learning activities than to conclude your formal education.

Most of you will probably be involved in some form of organized learning activities next year. Increasingly, your employer will offer it or require it. The most rapidly growing segment of education of today is corporate education. Employers are spending almost as much

money on the education and training of employees as all fifty states combined spend on higher education. The reason for the rapid rise of corporate education is that we are entering the "information society" --an era in which knowledge and our ability to generate it and use it are becoming powerful economic assets. Computers and telecommunications are replacing machines and mass production as the symbols of economic power and productivity. In 1950, only seventeen percent of all workers were employed in information jobs. Today more than half of all workers are generating, processing, or utilizing information.

Although many people think the rise of computers decreases the need for knowledgeable human beings, quite the reverse is true. The age of technology calls for especially heavy investment in the development of human resources. Unlike the fossil fuels that provided energy for the industrial revolution, the technological revolution is fueled by information which is a non-depletable, expandable resource. Moreover, it is self-generating; the more people use it, the more it expands. If we handle education right, we will never run out of the energy supplied by creative innovative people. Steven Jobs, the youthful founder of Apple Computers, is the symbol of the new economy. He did not possess land, which was the capital asset of an agrarian society. He did not possess machines or factories or even large amounts of financial capital, which were the economic assets of the industrial age. Rather, he used knowledge, innovation, entrepreneurship, and human creativity to launch a corporation which saw profits in the first quarter of 1985 zoom to forty-six million dollars.

Rosabeth Kanter, the noted Yale consultant on business management, labels "idea power" the most important economic stimulus of all, and urges companies to develop the creative capacities of their workers. Peters and Waterman, the authors of the best-selling book on corporate excellence, label the new approach to management "productivity through people" and they advise corporations to treat people--not capital spending and automation--as the primary source of productivity gain.

On the job and off, many people are making education a continuing part of their lives. Last year approximately one in every three college-educated adults participated in some form of adult education, most of them to improve their job performance or their opportunities for advancement. Researchers tell us that there are approximately forty million Americans who are currently either in the process of changing jobs or careers or who are thinking seriously about such a change. A majority of these mid-life career changers say they will need additional education in order to make the change. Other people enter into adult learning activities because they enjoy the activity of learning or because they want to know how to do something better. We are surrounded with opportunities for learning--so much so that I call our times the renaissance of adult learning.

Centuries ago, Aristotle, Jesus, Socrates, and the other great teachers of ancient times taught adults, not children. Their methods would be considered formal education in today's jargon, consisting largely of lectures or sermons, teacher-student dialogues, and adult discussion groups. Their curriculum, too, was one that we would

associate with formal education, emphasizing not so much how to do things as how to think about things. The lessons of the ancient teachers were heavy with the abstractions of ideas and values and the life of the mind.

For a relatively short span of history--actually only a couple hundred years--civilization advanced through concentrating on formal schooling for the young, and adults were pretty much forgotten by educators. And so I call our times the renaissance of education for adults because it represents a rebirth of attention to the life of the mind that is as significant to our times as the original intellectual renaissance was to the 17th century.

The signs of the learning renaissance are all around us. Researchers estimate that between 80 and 90 percent of the adult population carry out at least one self-directed learning project each year and that the typical adult spends about 500 hours learning new things from a variety of sources. But perhaps the most visible sign of the learning society is to be found in the choices that are available to adult learners. Colleges and universities provide only about a third of all organized learning activities for adults. The remainder is provided by a vast array of non-collegiate educators, including employers, churches, museums, libraries, government agencies, and professional associations. In addition, the paperback book industry is selling more self-instructional books than ever before in history, and television is offering a varied menu of documentaries on science, art, and history, many of them in courses offered for college credit.

Saint Mary's promised you an education relevant for the future.

Far from leaving education behind you as you leave the classrooms of Saint Mary's, you are entering a future in which learning will become an integral part of your lives. Learning and new opportunities for learning are moving American society from a linear to a blended life-plan. In the linear lifeplan, which we once thought was the way to live, education was for the young, work for the middle-aged, and enforced leisure for the elderly; in a blended lifeplan education, work, and leisure go on concurrently throughout the lifespan. Almost half of all college students today are studying part-time, and many couples, retired people, and others are asking for more part-time jobs. The good life today consists not of all school or all work but of a blend of work, education, and leisure.

Now that I have told you why I am not going to use this commencement ceremony as an opportunity to welcome you to the world of adult responsibilities nor to suggest that you bid a fond farewell to your learning days, perhaps I can spend the remaining few minutes talking about what I think this commencement should mean to you today.

I suggest that upon this occasion you are commencing upon your life as a self-directed learner. So far you have had a lot of help with your learning activities. As a society we have suggested what you should study through designing college curricula that seem appropriate to the wide diversity of learning interests these days. We have told you where to study through developing the most complete network of colleges and universities the world has ever known. We have suggested

how you should learn and from whom through providing well-trained college faculties who have exposed you to both ancient and modern methods of teaching and learning. While the clear preference of most of your teachers is that you should learn because you want to know, we have, in our collective wisdom, provided plenty of support through a system of rewards and threats that suggest that if you don't learn because you want to know, then perhaps you should learn because you want to pass the course or get an A or get a college degree.

Those of you who made it as far as the commencement ceremony today have demonstrated your ability to participate in directed learning. The challenge that awaits you is to demonstrate your capacity to take on more responsibility for self-direction. The better your education, the more able you are to "commence" your lives as lifelong learners. There are occasions, to be sure, when your employer or your profession will require continued learning on your part. By and large, however, you are on your own. It will be up to you to make informed decisions about what, where, when, and how to learn. In these days of the learning renaissance, you can learn almost anything you want to learn in almost any way you want to learn it.

Ultimately, the quality of your learning at The College of Saint Mary will be judged not so much by what you have learned as by what you are prepared to learn.

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