The Valedictory---25 Years Later

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Friends, Members of the Class of 1985, Sons and Daughters of Holy Cross:

I have been asked and happily volunteered to speak to you tonight. The Valedictory, 25 years later. The question of what to say tonight is daunting. It is not as difficult however, as some questions that have come up this weekend, like what happened to all the statues of the naked people that were here? I liked them. Don't get me wrong; the statue of the Christ hand on the library steps is nice, so is that old guy with the beard, the one that looks like Frank Vellaccio. But the naked people were hot. And where is Ho-Jos? Where is it? Where did they put it? What are we supposed to do if we want to go to the Rum Keg Lounge later? Or have a craving for a big breakfast? Perhaps we will never know.

I have thought for a long time what I might say on this occasion and am humbled by the honor of trying to find a worthy echo to my voice of 25 years ago.

I looking for inspiration, I followed the Holy Cross principle, both learned and reinforced, of being open to all things. I read Graduation speeches. These are wonderful source material for how to live a full, rich and round life—and I urge you to look at or listen to Mark Shriver’s excellent Commencement address from last weekend. But WE
are not graduating tonight. The lives that lie before each of us this evening are not as limitless, nor as unfathomable as they were 9,144 days ago, on that sultry May 24th when we commenced.

I read eulogies, and obituaries. Some of the best writing about the human condition can be found in writings about the end. But we are NOT at a funeral tonight; Far from it--although if you stayed until the end, I am told last nights’ reception did look an awfully lot like a traditional Irish Wake, complete with bodies.

In our valedictory, I used the analogy of our lives being a play. Here we are at the show tonight—and I am speaking metaphorically, not about the Crusadists tape we will see shortly. Tonight, for each of us, it is not time for the overture. It is the intermission. I have promised to be brief. A standard intermission is fifteen minutes. Tom Flynn, LJ Mitchell, and Joe Terranova gave me ten minutes; I will do it in eight.

We are neither alone, nor unique in our search for meaning in the middle part of our lives. Dante Alighieri gives us guidance. In his poem The Divine Comedy, he articulates, in the grandest terms our language has, what was happening to him. It begins “Midway upon the journey of my life, I found myself within a darkened wood, the straight-away path had been lost.” St. Ignatius of Loyola is an inspiration. The results of Loyola’s struggles in contemplating the meaning of his life have profoundly altered the course of history. Tonight, at Holy Cross, we find ourselves at the midpoint of our lives--our life's equinox.
I would like to borrow, and borrow liberally, the words of our classmate and friend, Lynn MacDonald, (Holy Cross taught me to borrow from the best and that if you ask nicely, it is not plagiarism, it is research!) My memories of those early days at Holy Cross are vivid and happy, tinged perhaps by the sentimental streak that is the curse and blessing of those with an Irish heritage. I recall the manic enthusiasm of the Purple Key Society members lugging boxes and clothes into Clark. As my parents drove off, and the world shifted, I felt scared and alone, and helpless. I remember those feelings slipping away at Mass upon hearing for the first time “Lift High the Cross.” The song was a new tradition for me, and it lifted me up to. That night, that first night, was fun and strange, and electric. It is hard to feel anything but joy and possibility on Easy Street.

We were adolescents then. Our skin was smoother, and our hair thinker, and we could drink all night and make it to class on time. It is a time that is hard to remember, and impossible to forget. We had such easy access to intimacy. A lifelong friendship could be forged in the course of a single evening at the Pub, or on a road trip to New Haven.

In four years at shared tables at Mother Kimball, served by the charming Big Red. (Who can forget her? "What kind of fish is that? Regular Fish.") We matured, we acquired ourselves, and we confirmed what matters. Warm weather water wars turned into snowy celebrations on trays from Kimball that served many purposes. Creative Writing 101 turned into our Senior Thesis. We laughed and cried, partied and prayed. We became a community, and we became ourselves.
There is I am sure in each of us, a common thread of respect and gratitude running through us for this place, and for what it has given. I hope that that gratitude translates to our giving back to the college. Our classmate Andy O’Brien will speak about that more specifically, in just a few minutes. I hope we are as generous to Holy Cross as she has been to us.

Each time we write a paragraph—striving for eloquence, or a simple declarative sentence that communicates our ideas, each time we wrestle with a problem involving numbers on any scale, or try and invoke the lessons of history, we are using our Holy Cross molded minds. We hear the voices of those who sculpted us. Maurizio Vannicelli stating, “We are privileged people. Do not forget this.” Or Fr. Reboli lushly exhorting—“look at the painting—what is the artist saying to you? ” Our DNA comes from our parents, and from their parents before them, and ultimately, from the God of our understanding. But it is our experience of, and our experience at Holy Cross that we have to thank for how we think: for the keenness and insight we use in our current lives. The skills and character cultivated here are the tools needed for a life well lived.

We have Holy Cross to thank for much of who we are, and for what we possess. Holy Cross did not just give us the tools needed, in human and spiritual terms, to live life fully, it has provided far more. In architectural terms, we got the floor plan, AND the brick and mortar—also the wallpaper, and the plants. We honed our skills at being friends and we were provided friends. Holy Cross has peopled our lives. We have danced at one
another's weddings (at least, for some of us, in states that allow this), smiled at baptisms, confirmations, anniversaries, and graduations—the list could stretch the length of the Massachusetts Turnpike. We have helped mold each other’s children into worthy continuers. Some of our children may even attend Holy Cross, in the words of the Crusadists...”Send in the Clones... “

These same Holy Cross friends are there when in the words of Robert Frost, “we have been acquainted with the night.” They are here when the joy of a wedding turns to the pain and trauma of a divorce. They are here when our kids are in trouble, or we need to be taken to the doctors, or the mental hospital. Who here has not been on the receiving end of a comforting message from a Holy Cross friend when a parent has died, or some similar awful event has occurred? Those of us at mass tonight saw the family of Tom Burke, our classmate who died in 9/11, and could not help but be moved. Holy Cross and our love for it goes on, even when we do not. Some of us have had our lives saved by our friends from Holy Cross. If we have absorbed the lessons of our school, our burdens are shared. We were taught to be men and women for others. We ARE men and women for others.

At Holy Cross, we listened to the voice of Fr. LaBran as he exhorted us to let our selves be loved. I visited that blessed mans’ grave this morning and I swear I could hear his voice boom “Yahweh!!! God is all around us.” (We only need to look).
Dante found himself in the middle of a darkened wood, on the wrong path, but from that place, he created poetry. St. Ignatius of Loyola, in the middle of his life, while recovering from wounds in battle prayed; after spending ten months meditating in a cave in Manresa, came out of his experience with the conviction and the enlightened knowledge that God is in all things, and that each person is a manifestation of God. With this knowledge he changed the world.

Tonight, in the middle of OUR lives, we find ourselves not in a dark wood, or in a cave, but on a hill that we adore, surrounded by light and air and love, adjacent to Easy Street. We are privileged people. We are here with people we love, and to whom we are blessed to depend upon. Holy Cross has given us that. And we are grateful. Like Dante, we too can make poetry. Like Ignatius Loyola, we too can make sure we see how God so clearly shines in each and every one of us.

I don't know about you, but I can't wait for act 2!