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Fairfield University

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Bishop Lori, Fr. Von Arx, Fr. Blaszcak, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, my co-honorees, families and friends of the Class of 2011 and family and friends of mine – and, most of all, you wonderful graduates. I congratulate you most warmly. This is one of the great days of your lives and you should savor every moment of it. How lucky you are! And how lucky you are to have been the recipients of a Jesuit education!

I have thought long and hard about what I would say to you. I've heard many commencement speeches in my life so I know what is typically said. But from the outset I've wanted to give you something somewhat different than the standard commencement speech, something a little more personal even though I'm a very private person and have not said some of this before. Let me first tell you why I've wanted to do something just a little more personal. First, I revere the Jesuits who, together with the faith, quite literally saved my life when I lost my husband and both parents in the same year. If I can strike a chord with even some of you by being more forthcoming than I'd have to be, I'll do it in their name. And second, I venture to suggest that you,

the Class of 2011, and I have more in common than you can even imagine – unless, of course, you’re one of the lucky ones who’s never been scared and never lacked confidence.

Let me start with this. Neither of my parents had English as a first language. My father’s father died when Dad was a teenager and Dad went to work to support his mother and siblings as a carpenter and as a builder’s mule, hauling carts of wood to construction sites when it was too icy for the mules to make it up the hills. My mother was the daughter of a fisherman in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, the youngest of ten children. She came to this country at 19 to be a nanny. I was the first one in my family to go to college. I was desperately homesick my freshman year and uncertain and very scared and I didn’t do very well that first year. I went on to be a full-time mother for 13 years before I went to law school and my first job out of law school was as 1 of 2 women Assistant U.S. Attorneys in an office of 62 Assistant U.S. Attorneys and the first woman to do criminal work, appearing before all male judges. Scared? Every day. And let me just say there were some very tough years between then and now, years about which only my son and I really know. “What does not destroy me,” it has been said, “makes me stronger.”

This is where I come from. This is what has made me whatever it is that I am. And I tell you this and I will tell you some of what I've learned along the way in hopes of encouraging those of you who on this very happy day might be just a little anxious, a little apprehensive, a little scared as you enter the next phase of your lives.

Some people feel that most of the lessons in life have been learned early on. There was a wonderful essay many years ago by a writer named Robert Fulghum who said that most of what he really needed to know about how to live and what to do and how to be he learned in kindergarten. This is some of what he said:

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some. Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder.

There's a lot of wisdom there; indeed, doesn't it seem to very sweetly integrate living and learning, the very foundation of Jesuit education? Let me add a little of my own wisdom learned since I was in the sandbox. Now, you're going to hear me use the word "success." Let me make it clear at the outset that when I speak of success I'm not speaking only of professional success. Success can be as simple as the warm feeling you get when you smile at a stranger, someone you know must be lonely, and having that stranger return your smile. It can be the bringing of a child into the world and raising that child to be a good man or woman – my greatest "success" is my son. It can be conquering a bad habit or taking on a good one or reaching a goal you have set for yourself.

First of all remember this. There is no substitute for good old fashioned hard work. Now I understand that there are things outside of ourselves – luck and the good Lord are two of those things – that can make the difference between success and failure. But it is not enough, in most cases, to point to other people's success and attribute it solely to luck. More often than not, I think, by dint of hard work, we make our luck. You sell yourself by working hard – you evidence dedication and a commitment to excellence, critical if success is to come. I'm reminded of the story of the

rockcutter who, on the 101st blow with the hammer, finally split the rock in two. Some would say it was the 101st blow that did it. No. It was the 100 blows before that one which made success on the 101st possible.

Determination. Hard work. Essential if you are to succeed, whether that be as society defines success or quite simply as making someone or something a little better.

I have also learned that we can always do more than we think we can – we can be stronger, we can be braver, we can be happier, we can be more successful in our personal relationships. We can be more successful in our chosen careers. But none of this comes without believing that we can do it and then by giving it our best shot. We have to believe in ourselves, and then we have to try – with faith, with courage, with hope, happy to be alive, and appreciating the little ways in which day by day we grow and improve, never taking these things for granted.

I am speaking of attitude. I am speaking of enthusiasm. I am again speaking of hard work. I am speaking of the fact that you will never know that you can do what you set yourself to do unless and until you try. With each little success, the fears and the insecurities will start to fade away. But even if you don't reach a particular goal, you grow from the reaching, you

learn from the trying. Samuel Beckett said, “No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” Or, in the words of the wonderful Scottish proverb, “I am wounded but I am not slain. I shall lay me down and bleed awhile. Then I shall rise and fight again.”

All my life I’ve worked hard – and often uphill – to be a good wife, a good mother, a good daughter, a good sister, a good friend, a good lawyer, a good judge, and if I have failed in any of these, it was not for want of trying. And when you are troubled and when tough decisions have to be made and maybe when you’re tired of trying, I recommend an inner sanctuary to go to – a few minutes, maybe more, of peace and reflection and prayer. And never forget the critical importance of integrity – of standing on a matter of principle – of doing what is right. Fr. Daniel Berrigan said it well, “Some stood up and sat down. Some stood and stood and stood.”

And so I come to what I believe is probably the most important thing I can tell you, at least it is to me: To whom much is given, much is required. St. Ignatius linked love of God with love of neighbor. “No exercise is better for the human heart,” it is said, “than reaching down to lift up another person.” This is the heart of the “living” part of the integration of life and learning, the core of Jesuit education to which I referred earlier. This is the

heart of what you have been taught here – the vision of “finding God in all things.”

Make it more than a vision. Look around. See what needs to be done and do it. Because it’s right – and because you can – you can do it if you try.

The Jesuits of this great University and their many dedicated colleagues here have shown that they have faith in you. Repay that act of faith and do whatever you can to see that the sick are healed, the frightened are comforted, the lonely are visited, and that you fulfill the purpose of the educational mission at Fairfield – to be the “global citizens” this new and difficult world needs now. To be men and women for others.

I leave you with a parable that’s stuck with me since I first heard it some years ago. A man said to the Lord, “What is the difference between heaven and hell.” The Lord says “I’ll show you.” The Lord takes the man to a room. In the center of a table is a huge pot of delicious looking and wonderful smelling stew. Seated around the table are a number of skinny, starving, desperate looking people holding spoons. The spoons, though, are longer than their arms. They try, but cannot feed themselves.

Then the Lord takes the man to another room. Again, a table with big pot of delicious stew. The people seated around the table are also holding

spoons longer than their arms, but are happy and obviously well fed. “What, Lord, is the difference?” asked the man. “Why are they so happy?” The Lord smiled. “They’re feeding each other.”

I return to where I began. My parents lovingly gave me both roots and wings, the roots which keep me committed to family and faith, and the wings that have, after these many years, brought me here to congratulate you on this very special day. God bless you. God bless Fairfield University.