

Class of 2011 Undergraduate Valedictory Address

Stephen Michael Bottari, Jr.

May 22, 2011

Father President, Members of the Board of Trustees, Honored Guests, Members of the Faculty and Administration, Family, Friends and Members of the Class of 2011. I welcome you as we gather here on Bellarmine lawn for this momentous occasion – an occasion that invites talking about the journey ahead, the uncharted territory, the ways we'll go forth and explore.

We hardly ever hear about explorers these days, though. After all, the lines on the map have all been drawn, the blank spaces filled in, the edges of the earth flattened.

But there are still explorers. And while they no longer chart new rivers, encounter new civilizations and discover new worlds, what they do instead is try to understand the world we have, answer all those questions that still remain unsolved.

One such explorer is Dan Buettner. He's traveled from Alaska to Argentina, Italy to Okinawa trying to answer the question: how do you live to be 100?

Humans seem to hold this age as the goal for life. At the very least, being a centenarian gets you a shout out from Willard Scott and Smuckers on The Today Show.

How do you do it though: Are there certain foods to eat? Exercises to do? Jobs to have?

Well, Buettner studied so-called "blue zones," his term for regions of the Earth with the longest life expectancy.

His findings were remarkable. Despite the fact that these blue zones were located on different continents, spoke different languages and had vastly different cultures, there were certain characteristics that ran through all of them.

I stumbled upon Buettner's explorations not from Oprah or a self-help book, but in Professor Olivia Harriott's Identity and the Human Genome, a biology class here at Fairfield, part of my core curriculum. Those not familiar with the core might not know that Fairfield students take half of their classes in subjects outside of their respective majors, from math to music, forensic science to foreign language. This well-roundedness leads to the formation of *cura personalis*, the whole person.

So today, I'd like to highlight three of those blue zone traits, one's you'll find right here at Fairfield University. You see, in the process of trying to form the whole person, this Jesuit liberal arts university in suburban Connecticut is itself, in many ways, a blue zone.

The first of these traits is called "Moai." Moai is translated as, "meeting for a common purpose" — community. In Okinawa, Japan — the capital for longevity in the world — Buettner's research team found that each person had a support system of a half dozen lifelong friends that met regularly. In the US, even though the average Facebook user has

115 “friends,” our number of good friends averages only around one and a half.

Here at Fairfield, we've been fortunate to experience intentional communities—ones similar to those support systems found in Okinawa—our own Moai's. From Freshman Experience classes to living and learning communities — Fairfield students have unique opportunities to connect.

Those who lived in the Loyola residential college our Sophomore year had Moai's that explored deep, thought-provoking questions firmly rooted in the Ignatian tradition: Who am I? Whose am I? And who am I called to be?

Those who went on service trips bonded while playing soccer with kids in Jamaica, and building a house for a family in New Orleans.

Those who went abroad found their Moai in the fellow Fairfield students who explored new worlds with them in places such as Florence and Brisbane, Galway and Rouen. We traveled together, and transformed ourselves into global citizens.

In the fall of 2009, I studied with other Fairfield students in Managua, Nicaragua. Each night, sitting there in the sweltering heat on a back porch in the developing country's capital, we talked about what new challenge the day had held, what new catalyst had sparked a personal change. This community, our Moai, helped us process some pretty intense times and celebrate the unforgettable ones--like sharing a Thanksgiving dinner of pasta with hardboiled eggs, our housemother's specialty, and sharing how thankful we were for the new friendships and support system on which we could now depend.

Each member of our class, in his and her own ways, has been a part of a community like this during their time here. And our lives are richer for it.

The second blue zone thread that runs through Fairfield is balance. In another blue zone, Loma Linda, California, people take 24 hours off each week to relax, reflect and pay reverence from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. They also take frequent nature walks. While I don't know that many of us took nature walks during our time here, we did find a good balance between work and play. Despite sometimes greeting the rising sun in the exact same chair we were in the night before in the café at the DiMenna-Nyselius Library, we stayed on top of classes, clubs, teams, organizations and meetings. Fairfield is a clearinghouse for excellence: producing a caliber of student who can not only think critically and write succinctly on complex topics, but who can do so while event planning, running organizations and advocating for social justice.

In terms of play, each in our own way found our method of "downshifting" through intramural sports, Glee Club, the video game club, or by going on a Kairos retreat or seeing a Broadway show. Sometimes, downshifting was as easy as savoring a chicken turnover at the Levee. I'm not suggesting our time here wasn't challenging—it could be downright overwhelming. But, let's admit it, in Twitter terms: “#SeniorsDontStop.” Translated to the vernacular: we found that balance in our lives. Class of 2011, we made it here!

The third blue zone trait is "Ikigai." Roughly translated from Japanese it means, "the reason for which you wake up in the morning." This is a large part of college — discovering what it is you love to do, what fulfills you. This is also the hardest part of college. Many of us have changed majors, changed career paths, changed our maps for the future, and that's a good thing. Because nothing can be more important than truly finding that one thing that makes you wake up every day with a smile on your face.

Some of us will find it in a certain career path — being a teacher or a molecular biologist. Others among us will find it in being a parent. And for some of us, we'll even find it in our pastimes, whether they be hot yoga or fly-fishing.

When I was on service trip in Ecuador, we traveled to a barrio built on a trash dump. So many houses and stray dogs and people live on this lifeless land that smells of burning trash and dry earth. It was there at an after school program that I met Aidriana, a precocious little girl with a big dream: she wants to be a doctor. This is her Ikigai. It's the reason she's so driven in school, why she's teaching herself English and why she does extra math problems while the other kids play soccer and jump rope.

Seeing her so set on this goal, seeing the passion in her eyes when she talks about it, compelled me to start thinking about my driving passion in the Communication field. In a way, Aidriana helped me find my Ikigai: helping people share their stories; journalism.

Back here at Fairfield, I focused my studies on storytelling in television, film and books. I took Dr. Peter Bayer's 300-level American Literature class. We read a book a week, thousands of pages that I read on the train to and from New York City where I interned with ABC News some 36 hours a week on top of my five classes. The lack of sleep and sheer amount of work were managed by this spark that had been ignited and led me to push the boundaries of my capabilities. And now, thanks in large part to a push in the right direction by a little girl in Ecuador, I start my Master's in Journalism at the Newhouse School of Communication in July.

What about Aidriana? Will she one day be a doctor? I don't know. But, she has a dream that motivates her every day to do better, to be better, to want more. And that motivates me. That challenges me.

So today, I challenge each one of you — graduates, faculty and family alike — to ask yourself what is your Ikigai? What is the reason for which you get out of bed every morning?

Find your purpose. Fall in love. And love your life.

Class of 2011, never forget the professors, family and friends who helped you get to these chairs — these are the people who make your journey worthwhile. Whether yours is a journey of 100 years or however many, take this Fairfield University education, the responsibilities it bears with it, and all the discoveries you've made over these last four years. And go! Live each day with a readiness to take on whatever comes your way. Because with community, with balance, and with a driving purpose for life, you can handle it. You are now a graduate of Fairfield University, so go forth and explore!