

## Fairfield Commencement

First of all, thanks to Father von Arx and the Board of Trustees for this honor, which I don't deserve. By tradition I'm now a member of your class. So to my fellow graduates, and I can now say, my fellow Stags: Congratulations! And I look forward to seeing you at our 50<sup>th</sup> reunion when you'll be a spry 71 and I'll be 104.

Fairfield has a special place in my heart and played a big role in my life, even though, until today, I wasn't a graduate. In 1985, when I started to think about the priesthood and entering a religious order, I was living in Stamford. So I asked my local parish priest what to do. And he said, "Well, you should get in touch with your home diocese and...you might as well talk to the Jesuits, up the street at Fairfield." That off-the-cuff remark changed my life. The next week I made my way up the Merritt Parkway to this beautiful campus and met my first Jesuit in the old Jesuit residence—now Faber Hall. By the way, Faber Hall, despite what you may have heard is not named for Faber College in Animal House, but for a Jesuit saint—Peter Faber. Anyway, if it weren't for Fairfield, I wouldn't be a Jesuit. So besides our degrees we have something else in common: Fairfield made us who we are.

A few weeks ago, I asked Father von Arx and a graduating senior, Margaret Mary DeMark about my talk and the first thing they both said was, “Keep it short!” So, rather than a long talk about something you could care less about, I’d like to give you a graduation present. I’d like to give you 10 things that I wish I’d known at your age. Ten things that would have made my life a lot easier. Some are pieces of advice that I’ve learned from wisdom figures. Others are the result of dumb mistakes. A few are insights from the great spiritual masters that I’ve adapted. And I’m serious about this. If you put them into action, you’ll be a lot happier.

1.) Well, the first one is three things that go together. They’ll save you a lot of heartache. Ready? *You're not God. This isn't heaven. Don't be a jerk.* So, you’re not God. Stop trying to do everything, to fix everything in your life and everyone else’s, and to make everything perfect. You can’t. Why? Because you’re not God. So stop acting as if you *were* God. A friend of mine, for example, told me the story about Pope Francis. My Jesuit friend was scheduled to meet with him, along with a few other Jesuits and four nuns. When the Pope entered the room, all the sisters fell to their knees. And the Pope said, “What are you doing? Get up! I’m not the Blessed Sacrament!” As the saying goes, there’s Good news and there’s Better

news: The Good News is that there is a Messiah, the better news is that it's not you.

Second part: this isn't heaven. Try not to expect life to be perfect. Once you realize that, you'll be able to enjoy life more, you'll find yourself more grateful.

Finally, don't be a jerk. Boy, I wish I had learned that one year ago. Look, you're sick, your boyfriend or girlfriend just dumped you, you just had a fight with your parents, your car broke down. Okay. You can be sad, disappointed, or angry, and you can share your struggles with your friends, but you don't pass on your anger. Just because you're upset doesn't mean you have to act like a jerk. Once I told a friend of mine, with mock seriousness "Oh my life is such a cross," and he said, "Oh yeah? For you or for others?" Good question!

2. Your deepest desires are *God's* desires for you. That's how God calls you.

Speaking to you through your desires--what moves you, what attracts you, what you're interested in, what, as the Jesuit Pedro Arrupe said, "gets you up in the morning"--is God's main way of calling you. So try not to listen to people who tell you that it's all about money, or success, or impressing people. Believe me, I've

been there, and that road is a dead end. The better road is one that lets you listen to where God speaks to you. And to start discovering those desires, you might ask yourself: What would you do if you could anything you wanted to do? If you've never been asked that question before, maybe you could start asking yourself. It may take a while to discover your deepest desires, but it's worth the wait.

3.) You already carry within you your best self. God has *already* made you a wonderful creation. But God's not done with you. How can you tell? Because I'll bet that you have an idea of the person you would like to be one day: maybe freer, kinder, more spontaneous, or more serious. Well, that's another call--a call from God to become the person you're meant to be. Listen to that invitation. And even if you can't be that person *now*, you can move towards that by acting *as if* you were that person. To make good decisions, ask yourself, "What would my best self do?" "What would the person I want to become do?" Soon, you'll find, you have become that person.

4.) You can't force people to approve of you, agree with you, be impressed with you, love you, or even like you. So stop trying. Boy, I wish I had known *that* at your age. I think I spent most of my 20s trying to get everyone to like me—and

the *one* person who didn't I'd really try to get him or her to like me. But no matter what you do, some people will approve of you, others won't. No matter how nice you are, some people will take to you, others won't. No matter how many successes you have, some people will be impressed others won't. So stop trying to get people to like you. It's impossible. Just relax and accept the fact that some people will like you and others won't. It will save you a lot of heartache.

5.) Stop comparing yourself to others. It's a dead end. In fact, it leads to despair. Why? Because when we compare, we always imagine someone else's life falsely. We see another person and we think, "Oh, man, they have it *made*." Their life is so perfect. But that's false. You know, I've met quite a few people who are famous, or rich, or celebrities, or whatever. And their lives are definitely *not* perfect. The problem is that we *know* that *our* life is kind of a mixed bag of good and bad. So we compare our own mixed-bag life with what we falsely perceive as another person's "perfect" life. And so, ours always loses out. It's a rigged game. Then we get depressed. So the old saying: *compare and despair*. Just don't do it!

6.) Be yourself! Or: Stop trying to be someone else. Boy, you think, if only I were like him, or her. *That's* who I wish I were. But you're meant to be yourself. You're a beautiful creation of God. And being holy means being you. Not another

person. We look to other people for a roadmap of who we're supposed to be, when all the directions you need are right inside of you. Man or woman, young or old, black, brown or white, short or tall, gay or straight, you are beautiful.

Remember: God doesn't make crap. As Jesus said.

7.) Even when you realize the right thing, the moral thing, or what you could call if you're Christian the Christian thing to do, it's still hard. When I was your age I thought, "Once you realize the right thing, all I have to do is do it." Not at all. It's hard to do the right thing. You're out at a bar and everyone starts dissing someone who is a friend of yours. It's hard not to join in. You're at a bar with some friends, and everyone starts talking about how lazy poor people are. It's hard not to join in. You're at work and everyone's doing something a little unethical. It's hard not to join in. It's easy to see what the right thing is, but hard to do. Well, here's the trick: do it anyway. Otherwise you won't be able to live with yourself. And sooner or later it will catch up with you.

8.) Listen to the right voices. You'll hear a lot of voices in your life. And let me tell you some voices not to listen to--whether they come from your friends, your coworkers, or inside of you. Voices that say the following things: "You're helpless." "It's hopeless." "Things can never change." Don't listen to that. Don't

give those voices any power. Here are voices to listen to: "Have hope." "Things can change." And "You have the strength to get through this." And, "Things will work out, in the end, and if they haven't worked out, it's not the end." Or as Julian of Norwich said, "All will be well, all will be well and all manner of things will be well." Listen to those voices.

9.) Happiness and freedom are linked. They're almost the same. As I said, I know a lot of successful people. But if they're not free, they're not happy. Because they're too attached to stuff. Ever seen the movie "Fight Club"? Admittedly, I don't recommend everyone going around punching people in the face, but there's an important insight in that movie. "The stuff you own ends up owning you." That's true not only about stuff, but also about money and status and power. It becomes a god and it owns you. So be free of anything that keeps you from being a good person. And you'll be happy.

10.) Finally, here are seven things to say every day. *I love you. Thank you. Thank you, God. Forgive me. Congratulations! Why not? And, Yes.*

My fellow Stags, I can't give you money since I'm a Jesuit and take a vow of poverty. And I can't give you any more advice since Father von Arx told me to be brief, and Jesuits take a vow of obedience. And I certainly can't give you a kiss

since Jesuits take a vow of chastity. But I *can* give you those ten pieces of advice, and I guarantee that even if you remember only one of them, it will help you to be happier. Because you deserve to be happy. Why? Not only because you are beloved children of God. But because today, on top of that, you're something really special: Fairfield Graduates. Thank you, and, as Jesus said, "Go, Stags!"



