

# R-MC Commencement Address: Delivered by Tim Russert

May 31, 2008

"Distinguished honorees, distinguished guests, and Class of 2008, before all else, congratulations: you have finally made it. I like this idea of having a sponsor sit behind you, keeping you under control while I give the commencement address.

I'm often asked my favorite Meet the Press story in the proud 60-year tradition of the longest running program in the history of television. It was another Presidential year, 1992. George Herbert Walker Bush was in second place in the polls in May of 1992. Bill Clinton was in third place. And leading the pack was an independent candidate by the name of Ross Perot. He came on Meet the Press, and I said, "Welcome; you're now a candidate for President. You've identified the deficit as the biggest issue confronting our nation. What is your solution?" He said, "What?" I said, "You're running for president. You've identified the problem. What's your solution?" He said, "Now, if I knew you were going to ask me these tricky questions, I wouldn't have come on your program."

We went back and forth, and he was his feisty self. I had to catch a shuttle flight from Washington to New York after the show, and the flight attendant ran down and said, "What did you think of Ross Perot?" I said, "Ma'am, unlike talk radio or cable television and now the bloggers on the Internet, I don't offer my own personal views. I try to elicit information from my political guests so that you, the viewer, the voter, can make up your mind independently. But I'm curious, as a viewer, as a voter, as a flight attendant, what do you think of Ross Perot?" She said, "He strikes me as the kind of guy that would never return his tray table in the upright position." Amen.

Before you can begin to move on to the next phase of your lives, you must undergo the last grueling hurdle in your career here at Randolph-Macon College, the commencement address. Let me be honest with you about my own experiences with commencement addresses. I have been through several of my own, sat through dozens of others, and I can't recall a single word or phrase from any of these informed, inspirational and sometimes interminable speeches.

In preparing for today, I thought about presenting a scholarly treatise on the Obama-Clinton Presidential primary, but I thought better of it because it still goes on. I guess I'm like that noted philosopher, the philosopher-king of the English language, Yogi Berra. I get it eventually. After Yogi had flunked his exam, his teacher ran down the aisle, shook him, and said, "Don't you know anything?" Yogi looked up and said, "I don't even suspect anything." This is the same Yogi Berra, who, when asked whether he wanted his pizza cut in six or eight slices, said, "Six. I can't eat eight."

It's not often you have a chance to meet and talk with people who share the same background and the same values, so let me skip the temptation of lecturing but rather have a conversation with you and take just a few moments of your time. Like each of you, my life changed forever on September 11, 2001, at 8:46 a.m. I don't think the English language yet includes the words we need to express our sorrow and shock for what happened on that day when most of you were high school sophomores and juniors. Only in our heart can we give full and complete expression of our grief and the shocking sense of personal loss, the agony of seeing our nation so violated; and yet we have learned much about ourselves since that day, about the fragility of life, about our deep love for our country and about our real heroes.

I decided to write a book about my dad, as your president mentioned, *Big Russ*. He was a truck driver and a sanitation man. He worked two full-time jobs for three decades, and he never

complained; and that was after he nearly died when his B-24 Liberator went down in World War II. That is the story of his generation. He never graduated from high school, but he taught me more about the quiet eloquence of his hard work, his basic decency, his intense loyalty. He taught me the true lessons of life. I am indeed the first person in my family to have the benefit of a college education. And so, with you, I chose a school that was different, and I made the choice, and you made the choice deliberately.

The education you received at Randolph-Macon College isn't meant to be the same you could receive at scores of colleges, public or private, in Virginia or across the country. You've been given an education that says it's not enough to have a skill, not enough to have read all the books, or know all the facts. Values really do matter. Its only justification, this extraordinary place, is because it has a special mission—training young men and women to help shape and influence the moral tone and fiber of our nation and our world. And that now means, as graduates, you have a special obligation and responsibility. Graduating from Randolph-Macon has given you incredible advantages over others in your generation. Yes, I've heard the sometimes dissenting views from Ivy Leaguers. You think you have it bad; you should indeed try to be a Buffalo Bills fan in Washington, D.C. I actually took Meet the Press to the Super Bowl a few years ago when the Bills were playing. At the end of the program, I looked at the camera, and I said, "Now on to the Super Bowl. It's in God's hands, and God is good and God is just. Please, God, one time, go Bills." My colleague, Tom Brokaw, jumped up and said, "You Irish Catholics from South Buffalo are shameless. You can't pray on the public airwaves." I said, "Brokaw, you'll see the power of prayer." Well, I got back from the stadium after the Dallas Cowboys slipped by, 52 to 10. The first person I saw, of course, was Brokaw, who yelled across the room, "Hey, Russert, I guess God's a Southern Baptist."

You have something others would give anything for. You believe in your God, in your country, in your family, in your school, in yourself, and in your values. Remember the message our parents and grandparents and teachers repeated and repeated and have tried so hard to instill in us—the belief if you worked hard and played fair, things really would turn out all right. And after working and interviewing senators and governors and meeting popes and interviewing Presidents, I think they're right.

It sure seems funny; Will Rogers had it right—the older you get, the smarter your mother and father seem to get. The values you've been taught, the struggles you have survived, the diploma you're about to receive has prepared you to compete with anybody anywhere.

People with backgrounds like yours and mine can and will make the difference. In Albania, a young girl loses her father at age eight, leaves home for India as a teenager, in her own words—quote—"to care for the unwanted, the lepers, people with AIDS." Believe me, works of love are works of peace. She became a living saint—Mother Teresa.

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela, former President Nelson Mandela, a brave black man who worked his way through law school as a police officer and spent 28 years in prison to make one central point.

We indeed are all created equal. And on September 11th at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon here in Virginia, it was our brother and sister police and fire and rescue workers who properly redefined modern day heroism. All these men and women have one thing in common with you. Like the past, the future leaders of this Commonwealth and this country and this world will be born not to the blood of kings and queens but to the blood of immigrants and pioneers.

It is now your turn. You'll have the opportunity to be doctors and nurses and teachers and lawyers, bankers and social workers, soldiers, journalists, entrepreneurs, businesspeople, and more. And in those vital professions, your contributions can be enormous. You can help save lives, provide

posterity, record history, prevent disease, train young minds. Your family, your education, your values have prepared you for this challenge.

And remember it is your grandparents and your parents who defended this country, who built this country, who brought you into this world and gave you the chance to live this American dream. Will your generation do as much for your children? You know you must. Every generation is tested. Every generation is given the opportunity to become the greatest generation.

And so, too, with the Randolph-Macon graduates of 2008, you were born and educated to be players in this extraordinary blessing called "life." But please do this world and yourselves one small favor. Remember the people struggling alongside you and below you, the people who haven't had the same opportunity, the same blessings, the same Randolph-Macon education—eight children a day shot dead in the streets of America, 25 percent of eighth graders never graduating from high school, 35 million adults in our country without a high school education.

If we aren't serious about continuing as the world's premiere military, economic, and moral force in the world, we have no choice. We need all of our children contributing and prospering. We can build more prisons, and we will. We can put more police on the street, and we should. But unless we instill in our young the most basic social skills and cultural and moral values, we'll be a very different society.

We must motivate, inspire, yes, insist our children respect one another, love thy neighbor as thyself. We must teach our children they are never, never entitled, but they are always, always loved. And we must do everything in our power to make sure schools are meaningful, skills are learnable, jobs are available, that we protect our environment, and make our world, their world safe and secure. No matter what profession you choose, you must try even in the smallest ways to improve the quality of life of all children in this great country.

Make a commitment today as you graduate that you will volunteer just a few hours a week in the months and years and decades ahead. No matter what your political philosophy, see if there is a child you can tutor or mentor or coach or help. Some are sick. Some are lonely. Some are uneducated. Most have little control over their fate. Give them a hand. Give them a chance. Give them their dignity.

The best commencement speech I ever heard was all of 16 words, "No exercise is better for the human heart than reaching down to lift up another person."

That is your charge. That is your challenge. That is your opportunity. That's what I believe it means to be a member of the Class of 2008 of Randolph-Macon College. For the good of all of us, please build a future we can be proud of. You can do it, but please get busy. You only have 2,300 weeks before you'll be eligible for Social Security.

When I accepted your president's invitation, I thought I could relax here in Ashland for a day at least, but the Obama-Clinton race does go on. The Democratic National Committee is meeting as we speak to decide how to seat the delegations from Florida and Michigan. The Puerto Rican primary is tomorrow. So I have to get back to Washington and start reporting. But before I go, a final thought: Have a wonderful life. Take care of one another. Be careful tonight. And for the rest of your life, work hard, laugh often, and keep your honor. Of course, go Yellow Jackets!"