

2009 R-MC Commencement

Dr. Thomas R. Morris, Virginia Secretary of Education

Keynote Address

Well, thank you, Mr. President, for that generous introduction. I'd like to take you with me everywhere I go to speak and have you repeat that introduction.

I'm indeed honored to be with you today, and let me say that I'm especially appreciative of the welcoming spirit. For someone who spent a good bit of time at the western end of the ODAC, your welcome is evidence of your generous spirit and your open minds.

I should say that every other year or so, for many years, I would spend time on fall Saturday afternoons here in Ashland. And for a good period of time it was always a pleasant experience, but in recent years it has been, to your delight, a very disappointing experience to have been here for a fall afternoon game.

What a great place this is to have a commencement. I've been at places where the faculty and the graduates sit in the sun during the commencement exercise. This is much better, the way you do it here.

Now, most graduates—and I'm here to speak to the graduates—say that they cannot remember who their graduation speaker was, much less what the person said. Can you imagine such a thing? I remember my college graduation speaker, and I remember what he talked about. He talked about ten minutes, and that is a good benchmark for this morning. Besides, it was Mark Twain who said he'd never heard a poor short speech.

And when I asked President Lindgren about this speech and how long I ought to speak, he asked me if I could Tweet. So I won't be long. I won't be long this morning.

Now, with the completion of your studies here, graduates, you have arrived. You are privileged to have been able to study with this well-respected faculty at a college like Randolph-Macon. You know you're privileged, right? If you don't I'm here to tell you. You are privileged. You are now joining only one third of the adult population in Virginia that has a baccalaureate degree. You have the passport to being a successful citizen and a productive member of our society.

And some of you I know will go on to live and work, not in the mother state—I don't know why you would, but some of you will go on to other states and other countries—and when you do, then you will be Randolph-Macon and the Commonwealth of Virginia's gift to those other states and to those other countries. What a great place to receive an education here, in the Center of the Universe, at an institution like Randolph-Macon that's been around for a long time.

I like institutions with a long history. They've had time to figure out what their mission is, what they do well, and be certain that they do that which they do well.

But I am here and also live in a county where Patrick Henry used to hold fort and live and work and get around this county, as you've done. But I'm here to tell you, to deliver the message, graduates, that you can't stay here. You've got to leave. It's time to move on.

Now, I know you'd like to, but I can't promise you it gets any

better than the four undergraduate years that you've had here at Randolph-Macon. But your undergraduate years are ending, and there will be a mourning period as you move into your postgraduate years.

Now, even though many of you will at some point continue your formal education, you have achieved two goals which I, as Secretary of Education, wish for all citizens of the Commonwealth. First, you have learned how to learn, and that will be a lifetime experience. You have taken responsibility for your own learning, and you'll now be able to do it without syllabi and without assignments, and that's what an educated person has to do, and that's what you can do and will do. You've learned how to learn. You can self-continue your own self-education.

And then secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, you now understand the importance of self-evaluation, the highest level of critical thinking. We assess everything in this society today, but the most important assessment, the most important evaluation you will do as you go through life is to evaluate yourself—what you're doing well, what you're not doing well, how to adjust and make changes. That is the mark of an educated and successful person.

So, self-education, self-evaluation. You have those skills now, and you take those with you from Randolph-Macon.

Now, the economy and the job markets are tough right now, and I don't have to tell you that, even if you didn't take an economics course here, although having taken such course would serve you well right now. And I'm serving with a Governor whose term ends about seven months, so I'll be right behind you in the job market, looking for another job. But what I want to say

to you this morning is that nevertheless, you have what it takes to make a good living. That's not the issue. The challenge for you is to make a good life.

Now, I trust that some of you will end up in the education profession. We have a need to replace the retiring baby boomers, and education is an honorable profession. A handful of you may follow your faculty into the higher education teaching. Some of you will pursue public service careers. I have found my three and a half years of public service very satisfying, and I wish those of you that go that route, well.

But I know from experience that more than half of you will end up in the private sector, in the business world, small business, make your own way, perhaps in the corporate world. But I'm here to tell you that the glamour is gone for the time being with regard to business, particularly the corporate world. The private corporate brand is tarnished, maybe even tapped, and corporate America is going to have to regain the public trust, and it'll have to do it with graduates like you that find your way into the private sector, that find yourself into the business world and become a part of that.

But if you choose the business world, there will be ample opportunities for you to serve. It was Louis Brandeis, a renowned lawyer and Supreme Court Justice, who wrote that the most important political office is that of private citizen. Being a private productive, contributing citizen of this country is the most important contribution that you can make.

So I would say to you as you go forward, participate in the life of your community; serve on boards and commissions. Hopefully some of you will get involved, run for the Board of Education, your local boards. Be involved in advocating for strong educational assistance. Stay informed.

Stay informed about the issues and remember the admonition of one of my favorites, Patrick Moynihan, the political scientist and United States Senator, who said that everyone's entitled to their own opinions but not to their own facts.

You, as college graduates, will have to set the facts straight for many of your fellow citizens as you go through this somewhat debased civil discourse, somewhat superficial discourse that we often have about important public policy issues. So I urge you to take seriously your responsibilities as citizens.

I don't talk about rights in talks like this because I learned early on that young people, they get it with regard to rights. I realized that when my younger daughter, before she was even in double digits, after I at one point had told her something she could not do that she wanted to do, raised her finger at me and said, "I'll sue you." And I had said, "You can't sue me. You don't even know a lawyer." And she didn't hesitate; she said, "Johnnie Cochran." So she got it. She got it. She knows that she has rights. But it's the responsibility piece.

We have a Statue of Liberty on the Atlantic Coast, and some say we ought to have a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.

Now, one of my agencies in the Education Secretariat—and it's a privilege for me today to be on the platform with my predecessor, Secretary of Education, Jim Dyke—is the Jamestown/Yorktown Foundation. And I mention that this morning because these two historic sites represent America's two beginnings, one at Jamestown 400 years ago and the beginning of a new nation following Yorktown some 225 years ago.

Our country has had many new beginnings, and graduates, so will you. You will have many new beginnings in your lives, with today being only one of the new beginnings. The challenge will be to make a good life.

Bill George, the author and CEO, asked the question in his book, “What is your ‘true north’?” Discovering your true north takes a lifetime of commitment and learning. You'll be working on this now for the rest of your life, but I'm here to tell you that it's well worth the eternal journey of self-discovery and self-awareness; and fortunately, you, as graduates of this college, have what it takes.

But you will have to deal with, wrestle with, and answer for yourself some of those big questions: What are your cherished values? What are your passions and motivations? What is your life's purpose to be? These are important questions, and only you—you'll get help from others—but only you can answer that question for yourself.

Now, when it comes to purpose, I recently saw the interview, and you may have seen and read about this young man whose purpose in life evidently appears to be to visit every Starbucks store in the world, and he's been at it several years and evidently has several more years to get to all those Starbucks. And I know there are probably a couple of the graduates out there saying, “Darn, that's what I was going to do.” But he's ahead of you on that.

That's probably not the purpose that I'm talking about that you have to struggle with, but I do say that George has asked the right question, “What is your ‘true north’?” Follow your internal compass, and people will experience you as authentic. Your task as you leave here is to find and follow your true north.

Now, you juggle many responsibilities in the various roles in your life; and so therefore, remember the three S's of a successful life that we've talked about in this brief time together. We talked about self-education; we talked about self-evaluation, and we talked about self-awareness and how important that is for you as you go forward.

Now, if you'll give me a moment, I will close, not with more words, but with an illustration of the various responsibilities that you will need to juggle.

Just a second.

(Produces three basketballs)

Let me explain up front this doesn't always work, and that's the way life is. So sometimes it works, and this is a little bit more of a stage than I'm used to, but let's see how it goes.

(Juggles basketballs)

Find and follow your true north.

Godspeed.