

Commencement Remarks

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
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Let me conclude this ceremony as it began: by congratulating those of you who received your diploma, the tangible symbol of your accomplishment and learning and the well deserved fruit of your labors at USF. I also thank your parents, family, friends, all those who supported you, and those university benefactors whose generosity supplied the scholarship assistance that some of you may have benefitted from.

As we processed in this afternoon to the regal strains of Pomp and Circumstance, I could not but recall the loss this past year of Charles Skinner, our long time evaluator of transcripts and less than light-handed organist, who may be the only person other than myself not to have missed a single commencement ceremony over these past ten years; and then my thoughts turned to our beloved faculty colleagues: Oren Harari, Maureen O'Sullivan and Vicki Siu. While we mourn their loss, we also celebrate their legacy. These memorable teachers, scholars, mentors and remarkable human beings were outstanding but not unique at the University. They were emblematic of the quality staff and faculty here at USF who are the very heart of the matter and our proudest boast. This is an occasion for us to acknowledge and thank them, so I ask our faculty here on the platform to please stand and be recognized.

Psychologist Marc Lewis tells a story that is apropos for this occasion. It is about the Great Blondin – renowned circus performer and inventor of the high wire act. In 1859 Blondin announced to all the world that he intended to cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope. Five thousand people including the Prince of Wales gathered to watch. Halfway across, the performer suddenly stopped, steadied himself, back flipped into the air, landed squarely on the reverberating rope then continued safely to the other side. During that same year, Blondin crossed the Falls a number of times -- once blindfolded, once carrying a stove, once in chains, and once on a bicycle. Just as he was about to begin yet another crossing, this time pushing a wheelbarrow, he turned to the crowd and shouted "who believes that I can cross the falls pushing this wheelbarrow." Every hand in the crowd went up. Blondin pointed at one man.

"Do you believe that I can do it?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe you can," said the man.

"Are you certain?" said Blondin

"Yes," said the man.

"Absolutely certain?"

"Yes, Absolutely certain."

"Thank you" said Blondin, "then sir, get into the wheelbarrow."

You realize by now that the truth you know makes demands on you. There will be times when your deepest beliefs and most strongly held convictions will be overshadowed by how scary the consequences appear to be for acting on your beliefs and convictions; then you will have to decide whether or not to get into the wheelbarrow. There will be times

when in order to be true to yourself and to your heart's surest reasons, you will have to make a leap of faith – and when that time comes, I pray that you may be so inspired that fear does not prevent your getting into the wheel barrow and crossing safely to the other side of the abyss. Take to heart the words with which the Christian gospels begin and conclude: “do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid of following “the better angels of our nature” nor of the price you may pay for doing so. When the time comes, get into the wheel barrow.

Let me further suggest to you that however you may measure success now – fame, fortune, approval of others -- stay open to the possibility that you – like many of us -- may have it all wrong. Resolve now to graciously accept a new and deeper awareness of what really counts when it comes, as a grace, a gift given to you so that you might enjoy that “full and more abundant life” that is God’s sure promise to those who live with integrity, passion and self-sacrificing love.

And now I encourage you get on with whatever it is you intend to do with your life. Know that you go with the blessings and best wishes of all of us here this afternoon, and realize that henceforth and forevermore you belong to the alumni association of the University of San Francisco. We will stay in touch with you.