

Commencement Remarks

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
Spring 2011 Commencement | St. Ignatius Church

First of all, let me say that you graduates have good cause to be proud of yourselves and ample reason to celebrate. I am privileged to be the one who handed you the tangible symbol of your accomplishments and learning, the reward for your labor and perseverance at USF. Having done so, I pause to also recognize and thank all those who have accompanied you along the way – your family, friends, classmates, our USF staff and faculty. I particularly thank our staff who are serving as marshals at this graduation, and I ask your teachers – our faculty – here on the platform to stand up now for one final round of recognition and appreciation.

My final remarks to you are taken from an essay by the popular lecturer-theologian, Ron Rolheiser. He wrote about a young lady at whose marriage he had recently presided. He first met this woman ten years earlier at a fourth of July celebration when she was a popular high school senior who had played on a state championship basketball team. On a warm summer day in Seattle, she sat tightly wrapped in a wool blanket, quiet and melancholy, while her carefree friends drank beer and celebrated. She was suffering from a particularly virulent cancer and the debilitating effects of chemotherapy. Her body and spirit mirrored the gloomy long term medical prognosis. Things looked very bleak. She was, however, surrounded on every side by attention, affection and concern. She was very ill but also very loved.

Over the intervening ten year period between cancer and marriage, the young lady – against all odds – slowly and painfully improved and ultimately returned to normal. But, as Rolheiser noted, once you've stared death in the face, "normal" is never quite the same again. He wrote, "When she eventually picked up the pieces of her former life, she knew that while things were the same again, they were also very, very different. In the wake of such an experience, ordinary life is no longer something you take for granted, there is a deeper joy in all things ordinary and a new horizon, wisdom, maturity and purpose that was not there before. God writes straight with crooked lines and cancer, terrible as it is, gives more than it takes."

With a return to health, came the profound realization that "... health is more than physical. It is also a thing of the soul, a moral tan, a depth, a wisdom." This woman, when asked if she would have chosen to give the cancer back so as to have enjoyed the life she had without it, answered, 'No, I would not give it back. Through it I learned about love.' The love she experienced when she was ill taught her that there are worse tragedies in life than getting cancer." In fact, there are only two tragedies in life and dying is not one of them. It is tragic to die and not to have loved, and it is just as tragic to die and not to have expressed your love.

Ten years ago a young woman had her youth and dreams stolen from her by a brain tumor. There was pain, disappointment, depression, some bitterness, scant hope. Everyone was luckier than she. That was then. Today that young woman is married, happy, wise, loving and very blessed by having learned at a young age that ordinary life is best seen against a bigger horizon, that life is deeper and more joy-filled when it isn't taken for granted, and that love is more important than even health and life itself.

I pray that your USF Jesuit education has opened you to that deep wisdom which comes at the most unwelcomed times from the awesome grace of God to those who are open to receive it; that you be graced at your relatively young age with a joy that celebrates the extraordinary in the ordinary; that the empty promises of status and wealth never come to dominate your life; that you find your life's purpose, your fulfillment, your satisfaction and God in loving and being loved.

Welcome, all of you, to the alumni association of the University of San Francisco.

The above remarks are from "A life not taken for granted..." by Ronald Rolheiser, *Catholic San Francisco*, September 18, 2009, p. 16.