

President Rick Hurley's Address

UMW's 105th Undergraduate Commencement Ceremony

May 7, 2016

Rector Cuellar and members of the Board of Visitors, . . . distinguished faculty, . . . friends, . . . and guests -- and especially the members of the graduating class of 2016:

It is a very great pleasure indeed for me to have the opportunity to speak to you today as we celebrate your achievements and look forward to an exciting future.

It is, however, a bitter-sweet time for many of you, I am sure -- as it is for me as well -- because I, like you, will soon be leaving this wonderful place that we have come to know and to love. Most of you will be leaving after four years here -- some less and some a little more -- but my retirement this year will mark the end of 16 years at the university for me -- the last six of them as your president.

So, if you can take your emotions today and quadruple them, you'll have some idea how I feel at this moment.

My main purpose today is to honor you . . . to congratulate you . . . to celebrate your achievement . . . and (briefly), to challenge you as you head into the exciting unknown of your future.

My long association with the university has given me an unrivaled opportunity to observe, in a very personal way, your diverse accomplishments—in the classroom and lab, in the theatre, and on the playing fields—and, throughout it all, to witness your dedication, your passion, and your pursuit of excellence. It has been an experience that has enriched my life beyond measure—to a degree that I would never have anticipated.

For that reason, I hope you will allow me to first take a moment to offer my own goodbye—to the place that has been my home—and to the people who have been my friends and colleagues—for almost as long as many of you graduates have been alive.

My experience has probably been all the more gratifying because my journey to the presidency did not follow the conventional path -- to put it mildly. Some in this audience, particularly faculty and administrators, may have heard it before -- but let me review it briefly for those who have not -- and especially for the graduates, because I feel like there are some lessons to be learned from my experience, although, to be honest, it was not the path I would necessarily recommend.

In any case, to those of you in the class of 2016 who are wondering where you will go from here: Believe me, you are far ahead of me when I was your age. Not only had I not graduated, I had not even begun college and -- quite frankly, never thought that I would. The reason was that I came from a thoroughly blue-collar family -- one that was not lacking in love, or respect, or solid values -- but not one where higher education was prized.

Consequently, my main goal in high school was simply to graduate -- and my highest achievement, probably, was appearing as a dancer on American Bandstand! I may have been the original “left shark” – but I was quite pleased about it.

(students can explain “left shark” to your parents. And parents can explain American Bandstand to the graduates.)

In any event, I went to work in the local DuPont plant where my father, grandfather, uncles, and just about everyone else in my small New Jersey town worked. After a while, I volunteered with the Army and spent 14 months in Vietnam at the height of that war. After the Army, I returned to work at DuPont for a while, then worked in construction, then found myself 25 years old working full time as a gas station attendant on the New Jersey turnpike -- by which time, incidentally, I was married and was the father of a young child.

Then came an epiphany. One cold, rainy day in November, when my hands were so numb it took both of them to pry off gas caps, I decided that there must be something better to do with my life -- and so, at that very moment, I made the decision that I was somehow going to college. Eventually, I did graduate from college, at the ripe old age of almost 30 -- and began a lengthy career in higher education administration -- a career that culminated in my being chosen as president of Mary Washington.

And so, as I said at my inauguration, when I speak of the transformative power of education, I am not just saying the words – I’m living them.

The privilege that I was given to lead this great institution -- and the support I have received in doing so from students, faculty, fellow administrators, board members -- and above all, from Rose, my wife of 46 years -- these are things that I will never forget and will forever cherish. And for that, I thank all of you from the bottom of my heart.

Now, as I just mentioned, my career trajectory was not necessarily planned, but it did provide me with some lessons for my subsequent life -- and I pass these along, not as grand philosophical principles, but as practical guidelines as you go about your daily lives.

- For example, always be prepared to take advantage of opportunities.
- Work hard to find solutions to problems, as opposed to ignoring them in the hope they will go away.
- Work at becoming a good listener.
- Be decisive, but not impulsive.
- Be humble about your successes -- and treat everyone with respect, regardless of their background or status.

But beyond these practical considerations, I urge you to employ the lessons of your education at Mary Washington in a way that will focus not merely on self but on society -- not merely on personal pleasure but on public purpose -- and that your goal always be not merely to make a dollar, but to make a difference.

In particular, I caution you against the complacency that can come from living in a country that is -- for all its shortcomings and faults -- still the greatest in the world.

Our privileged position allows us to often forget the blessings we all share: how few, for example, have the privilege of speaking freely without the fear of persecution; . . . how few have the right of worshipping as they choose; . . . how few have real opportunities for education and economic advancement.

We seldom consider how many in the world must be concerned each day with merely having food to eat or clothes to wear --and how many actually have to worry about going outside their own homes for fear of being injured, or killed, in those areas around the globe where war and violence are a daily way of life.

But we cannot be certain that the tide of history will always continue to flow in our favor—and we must be mindful that, in a democracy such as ours, the way of life we cherish can be destroyed, not only by the hostile action of foreign enemies, but by the misguided actions of our own people.

Thus we must not be misled by those who—to paraphrase John F. Kennedy—enjoy the comfort of opinion without the DIScomfort of thought.

Certainly yours is a world in which there is no lack of information and data. Nor is there any shortage of knowledge and technical expertise.

But what is needed for the future, more than ever, are persons with the wisdom to apply that knowledge and that expertise constructively—and, indeed, compassionately.

And so, here is the essence of my challenge to you today:

- There will be, no doubt, in your generation engineers with the skills to construct magnificent buildings. . . But who will be concerned about the resulted impact on the environment, and about the beauty and the livability of that environment?
- There will be technicians who will be able to facilitate the production of ever-greater quantities of goods. . . . But who will be concerned about the just distribution of those goods—about the alleviation of hunger and poverty?
- There will be doctors who may discover life-prolonging medicines. . . . But who will be concerned about the quality of life itself?
- There will be politicians who can master the means of getting themselves elected to public office. . . . But who will be concerned about the very purposes and goals of government?

And this is where you come in—because it is precisely these larger, and deeper – and, frankly, more difficult -- questions that will be your particular responsibility to address.

As beneficiaries of a broad liberal education, you are uniquely equipped to do so.

- Your knowledge of philosophy and religion, . . . of history and literature, . . . will let you place contemporary issues within a broader context.

- Your commitment to the principles of our Honor System has provided the basis for better evaluating the ethical and moral dimensions of actions, both public and private.
- Your analytical skills will allow you to weigh evidence and arrive at balanced judgments among competing points of view.
- Moreover, your communication skills will allow you, if you wish, to influence the opinions of others.

I realize this may sound idealistic—and that it may indeed seem like an unfair burden of expectation to place upon you.

But it is not I who place this burden: It is the burden of history – and that is the duty to make sure that the blessings bequeathed to us by generations past will be preserved for generations yet to come.

It is my hope that you will accept this challenge. It is my prayer that you will succeed. It is my conviction that you will do so.

One last observation for the graduating class:

Soon, you and I – together -- will be leaving this place we have come to cherish: you to experience challenges yet unseen and joys yet undreamed; I, to observe your accomplishments, warmed by the memory of having shared this part of your journey with you.

In a short while, after you have been awarded the degrees which you have so richly earned, you, the UMW Class of 2016, will join your voices in tribute to this nurturing place which has prepared you for your lives to come.

For the final time, you will salute your alma mater as you joyfully sing:

So here's to Mary Washington,
Our love will never die.

Neither will mine.

Thank you.