



Patrick F. Leahy

Undergraduate Commencement | May 21, 2016

Well, congratulations, Graduates! You did it! Now, answer me this: Was the tassel worth the hassle? My university president once famously said: “Universities need commencement ceremonies. It’s proof that something actually happens around here.” I’m glad to have all of you here today, proving that something actually happens around Wilkes.

Before I address our most recent alumni, allow me to thank some people who are here today.

First, let me thank the hardest working person here today, our sign language interpreter, Laura Tomlinson. Thank you, Laura, for making this ceremony accessible to all of our guests.

Next, let me recognize both the Wilkes Civic Band under the direction of Professor Phil Simon and the Wilkes Chorus under the direction of Professor Steven Thomas. Thank you all for enriching this ceremony.

Also, while I’m at it, I’d like to thank the unsung heroes of this weekend here at Wilkes – all of our colleagues in physical plant, public safety, and food service – for their hard work in preparing the campus for this celebration. Thank you for all the ways you support our students.

I’d like to thank all of the parents who are here today. You are our students’ first and best teachers. You parents are the individuals who helped to make this experience possible. Our students want you to know that they understand the sacrifices you have made. They want you to know that it will all be worth it and that the best is yet to come. You have supported, encouraged, and challenged your children. Their achievements today are your achievements, too. A professor of mine once told me that there are three times in one’s life when pure joy spreads across people’s faces: brides and grooms on their wedding day, the first time parents hold their newborn babies, and parents on their kids’ graduation day. I’m sure there are others, but looking around today I see in the parents’ faces the wisdom of that statement.

I’d like to thank all of the Wilkes professors, student support staff, coaches, and other mentors to our graduates who are here today. You are the individuals who accompanied our graduates on their Wilkes journeys. Each of you has dedicated the one life you have to live to making your students successful. One student told me: “Wilkes is a place where faculty and staff members don’t give up on you.” Another student said this about one of his coaches: “He didn’t have to do 90% of the things he has done for me. He was my father away from home.” On behalf of all the graduates, let me extend a sincere thank you to all of the faculty and staff here at Wilkes.

Graduates, find a special way on this Commencement Day (or in the days ahead) to thank these

individuals – your parents, your professors, anyone who has taken an interest in your success – for gracing your life. Students don't get to a graduation day without the help of a lot of people. Tell these people how important they are to you and how much you appreciate them.

Graduates, you and I share a special bond. We arrived at Wilkes together four short years ago. If I were a student, I would be sitting with all of you. You are my classmates!

It's been a great run over the past few years. We have come a long way, changing in ways that we could not have imagined 4 short years ago. But, this is just a start. After all, today is Commencement Day, not Completion Day. We celebrate today a new beginning, not an ending.

The tendency for me on such a special occasion is to try to sum it all up for you. Sum it all up? Sum up perhaps the most productive, interesting, meaningful period of your life in just a few moments? How is that possible? How would I adequately explain the "college vibe" that the SUB offers, the social scene at the library, Susie's omelets in the dining hall, our unique residence hall experiences, like 40 West 504? Would anyone other than a Wilkes Colonel fully understand: Club Day? Casino Night? The Big Event? Films at Movies 14? Bowling at Chako's? Monday night wings at Bart & Urby's? Thursday night pitchers at Rodano's? (You didn't think I knew about those, did you?)

It's not possible to sum it all up, so I'd like to share some parting comments with you about one of those often-used, sometimes misunderstood, four-letter words. Yes, I'm talking about hope. (I'm not sure what you thought I was going to say.)

Hope is a word that is over-used, which I think denigrates its true meaning. Hope is used everyday it seems. How many times have you said: I hope this test goes well. I hope I can find a parking space. I hope this person asks me out. Even today on your commencement day I bet you said: I hope it doesn't rain. Right now you are, no doubt, saying: I hope Dr. Leahy doesn't go on too long. In these cases hope is used as a synonym for "wish" or "pray." That's one way to look at hope.

But, hope means so much more than that. On occasion, this often-used term is expanded to mean maintaining optimism and faith in the face of daunting odds. All of you keep hope alive when you enter exam week. You athletes keep hope alive when your team is losing. People keep hope alive when they are confronting hardship. In the classic film *The Shawshank Redemption*, which is based on a Stephen King short story, the main character is wrongly imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. He tells his fellow prisoners that it is hope that keeps him going. "Hope is a dangerous thing," one of his fellow prisoners tells him. At the end of the film the main character writes that "hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." The great French explorer, Jacques Cousteau, said it this way: "If we were logical, the future would be bleak, indeed. But, we are more than logical. We are human beings, and we have faith, and we have hope, and we can work." Hope in these instances is used as a synonym for keeping the faith. That's another way of looking at hope.

But, I'd like to introduce to you today – your commencement day – a new way of thinking about hope that will be relevant for each of you. There was a real-life man, who was wrongly imprisoned, much like the character in that film. He was a playwright in Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation during the 20th century. He led a non-violent revolution – what became known as the Velvet Revolution – to free his country of Soviet influence. This playwright ultimately became the president of his country. His name: Vaclav Havel. A reporter once asked him how he dealt with the challenges in

his life. He said this. “I just carry hope in my heart. Hope is not a feeling of certainty, that everything ends well. Hope is a feeling that our life and our work have meaning.”

What I wish for all of you graduates here today is that throughout your lives you carry hope in your hearts, that your lives and your work have meaning.

But, how do people find meaning in their lives and their work? Artists and philosophers throughout the ages have been trying to answer this question. What can I offer to this age-old question? Well, I can only offer you a few hints from my own experience. On your commencement day, my classmates, I offer you the following four hints to a meaningful life.

First, love work. Do not stop searching until you find work that you love to do. The best way to do that is to not listen to others. You know, the people who whisper in your ear that you should do this or you should do that. There’s only one voice that you have to listen to. It’s that voice deep down inside each one of you. I had people throughout my life whispering to me, and it led me down dead-end paths. It was only after I had the courage to listen to my own voice that I discovered work that I love.

Over spring break I went on vacation with my family. At the end of the week I told my nine-year-old, Brian, that we needed to pack up to go home. He said: “But, I don’t want to go back to school.” Then, he asked if I wanted to go back to work. I said: “I have enjoyed my time off with you immensely, but I cannot wait to go back to work.” He was incredulous. I sat him down and tried to explain that I wish for him that he finds work that he loves so much that he never has to feel like he is working. It was a special moment in my life when I could impart real wisdom to my youngest child. He listened and said: “I still don’t want to go back to school on Monday.” As the saying goes, find work that you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.

Second, serve others. The Washington Post exclaimed a couple years ago: “Good news! The next 50 years are going to be amazing.” Your next 50 years will be triumphant: unprecedented medical advances, unimaginable technology, space exploration, and on and on. But, your next 50 years could also see unbearable human suffering: environmental degradation, food and water shortages, unprecedented inequality. What will you do about this?

You now have an opportunity, a responsibility really, as an educated person to serve others. Our world needs you, perhaps now more than ever. As the Bible itself implores: “To whom much is given, much is expected, not that you be burdened with such responsibility, but find fulfillment.”

Whether it’s your co-workers, your customers, your neighbors, your students, your patients, your community members, or your fellow humans around the world, find a way to serve others.

Third, nurture relationships. Life’s most precious assets are the people you meet. Surround yourself with good ones. In the end it’s all about the people in your life. Athol Fugard, the South African playwright, once said: “The level of our daily lives, one man or woman dealing with another man or woman, is finally the central arena of history.” It’s all about simple, human relationships.

Think of your friends here at Wilkes. These are the people who made your experience here so special. We are a community where, as one student recently told me, “when I was falling and crashing, everyone was there to lift me up.” Quite possibly the best friends you ever make were made here at Wilkes. I hear it from our alumni all the time. Stay in close touch with each other. Dance at each other’s weddings. Serve as

Godparents to each other's kids. Celebrate each other's successes. Comfort each other during life's difficult moments. As the President of my university told me many years ago: "Don't waste love."

And fourth, dream big. For many of you, this Commencement Day is the fulfillment of a dream: to graduate from an American, private University – the best education at this level in the world, an education afforded much less than one half of 1% of your peer group around the world. When you received your diploma, you became a college graduate. Congratulations on achieving this first dream.

And, if it's not really your dream, then it may be your parents' and grandparents' dream. For you first-generation college graduates, this may be a dream literally generations in the making. Today, you at once honor your parents and grandparents and blaze a trail for your children and grandchildren. One of our first-generation graduates told me: "This is a huge first step for my family. I am doing this for them." I hope you first-generation graduates will stop and think for a minute how you've just contributed to your family.

But, I hope the realization of this dream today simply makes possible what it is you really dream about. Start today – on your Commencement Day – to dream anew. Dreams give life purpose and meaning. Eleanor Roosevelt said: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." If your dreams don't scare you – I mean really scare you – then they aren't big enough. All of you have the capacity, even the responsibility, to dream big, beautiful dreams. I hope you will. And, I hope you will start today – your Commencement Day.

Love work, serve others, nurture relationships, and dream big – four fairly simple hints for leading a meaningful life.

"Hope is not a feeling of certainty, that everything ends well. Hope is a feeling that our life and work have meaning." My parting wish for all of you classmates is that you always carry this kind of hope in your hearts. May your lives and your work always have meaning.

Congratulations, my classmates. We will miss you very much.