



Patrick F. Leahy

Undergraduate Commencement | May 20, 2017

Well, congratulations, graduates. You did it. Now, answer me this question that has been asked through the centuries: Is 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 graduates, allow me to thank some people who are here today.

First of all, I’d like to thank Mr. John Passan for being here today and for agreeing to become part of your class of 2017. As you now know, John Passan spent his life in service. First, he served his country as a member of the greatest generation, who fought to save the world from tyranny during World War II. Then, he came home and built businesses, employing hundreds of families in Northeast Pennsylvania. Along the way, he served his community in numerous ways. Finally, in his retirement, he spends his time giving away the money he made to various charities in and around Wilkes-Barre, including, of course, Wilkes University. You graduates can also lead a life like John Passan, if you dedicate yourselves to your work, to your family and to your community. Please join me one more time in recognizing now Dr. John Passan.

Second, I’d like to thank all of the parents who are here today for entrusting your children to us at Wilkes. If you stop to think about it, you probably cannot believe that your little boy or little girl is about to graduate from college. Wasn’t it just yesterday that you were teaching them to walk, to ride a bike, to read? Where has the time gone? (I feel these same emotions as my oldest daughter graduates from high school next weekend.) The great irony in life is that, when raising kids, the days are incredibly long, but somehow the years are incredibly short. How does that happen? 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 and that they appreciate what you have done for them. One of our graduates told me recently, “If it weren’t for my family believing in me, I wouldn’t be here today.” 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: 1) brides and grooms on their wedding day, 2) the first time parents hold their newborn babies, and 3) 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.

And third, 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, “We students have such unique relationships with faculty members. We want to make them proud, like a parent, but we can be vulnerable with them, like a friend.” Another student said this about one

of his coaches, “He didn’t have to do 90 percent 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 members here at Wilkes.

Graduates, find a special way on this commencement day (or in the days ahead) to thank these individuals — your parents, your family members, 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, while your time here at Wilkes is coming to an end, this is just the beginning. After all, today is commencement day, not completion day. We celebrate today a new beginning, not an ending.

The tendency for me, as your university president, 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 vibe that the SUB offers, the social scene at the library, our unique residence hall experiences? Would anyone other than a Wilkes Colonel fully understand: Club Day? Casino Night? The Big Event? The Block Party? One World? 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?) And there are so many other memories.

You’ve been one of the most passionate, involved classes in memory. You’ve shown all of us what it means to “Be Colonel.” Never was this ever more apparent than when you lost classmates. Your support of the Ratchko, Smarkusky and Kachurak families — as well as your support of each other — was inspiring. You all have come a long way, changing in ways that you probably could not have imagined four short years ago.

Such a rich experience can’t be easily summed up. It’s just not possible. So I’d like to limit my remarks to sharing with you some parting comments about the one thing — in my opinion — you will need to live an amazing life: hope.

Hope is a word that is overused, which I think denigrates its true meaning. Hope is used every day 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.” 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 as you graduate from Wilkes and begin the rest of your life. 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 was 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, 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.

Recently, I was driving on the Cross Valley Expressway with my youngest son, Brian, who is 10 years old. He saw a billboard for the Powerball. He asked, “Do you buy Powerball tickets?” “No,” I said. Then, he asked, “Dad, what would you do tomorrow, if you won the Powerball?” I said, “Hmm, I think I would get up and go to work because I love what I do.” “You’d go to work?” he said inquisitively. “Why?”

Here was my big chance, one of those rare moments when a father can teach his son about life. I proceeded to tell him that I wish for him that he finds work that he loves, work that he loves so much that even if he didn’t need the money, he would still do it because he enjoyed it so much and found it so important. I explained that work/life balance is a false choice, that he should find work that is his life. He listened and said, “I still think you ought to buy a Powerball ticket.” As the saying goes, find a job (a career) 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.” Not that you be burdened with such responsibility, but find fulfillment. There’s one sure-fire way to find fulfillment in your life: serve others. Whether it’s your co-workers, your customers, your neighbors, your students, your patients, your community members or your fellow human beings 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, protect dreams. 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 one percent of your peer group around the world. When you receive your diploma in a few short moments, you will officially become 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.” 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 protect dreams — four fairly simple hints for finding meaning in your life and work. In other words, four simple hints for keeping hope in your life. “Hope is not a feeling of certainty, that everything ends well. Hope is a feeling that our life and work have meaning.” My wish for all of you on this commencement day is that you always carry this kind of hope in your hearts. May your lives and your work always have meaning.

Sum it all up in just a few minutes? It’s just not possible for me. So I leave it to the poets, in particular, to the great American poet, Walt Whitman, to do that. Over a century ago Whitman wrote a piece that a movie of my generation, “Dead Poets Society,” has helped to make famous. It bears repeating today at your graduation. Whitman wrote:

“The question, O me! so sad, recurring--What good amid these, O me, O life? Answer.
That you are here--that life exists, and identity;
That the powerful play goes on, and you
may contribute a verse.”

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be? Congratulations, graduates. It has been our privilege here at Wilkes to be a part of your life these past few years. We will miss you very much.