

Commencement Brunch 2016

- June 11, 2016
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Good morning... and what a very good morning this is. Welcome graduating students, undergraduates, graduates, welcome parents and grandparents, families, children, partners, friends, university colleagues and alumni.

At other times in this Commencement Weekend, whether at the commissioning earlier this morning of our new officers from our ROTC battalion, or at the Baccalaureate Mass at St James Cathedral this afternoon with its choir and pageantry, or whether at the two commencement ceremonies tomorrow before large crowds in KeyArena, there needs to be a less solemn and a less formal occasion, and that is this Commencement Brunch. My thanks from the very start to the Office of Alumni Engagement who sponsor and have organized this brunch. Thank you for their leadership and for their welcome all of our graduating students as active, engaged, supportive, and connected alumni.

This brunch has one purpose for me and that is to joyfully and thankfully celebrate our graduating students. When Jesus came to the last supper with his friends he said, "With desire have I desired to eat this supper with you!" Today I say, "With desire I have desired to enjoy this brunch with you!"

Today is the fulfillment of an agreement, a pledge, a partnership. Several years ago when you started at Seattle U—whether as first-time in college students or as transfer or advanced students—we promised that we would enter into a partnership of students, family, and university, a partnership of supporting and standing by one another, each in our own way. We said then that—though we could hardly believe it—there would come a day when we would be together again—students, families and university—the day of commencement from Seattle University. At the beginning there was uncertainty, some fear, a few tears, but an abundance of love and of hope that there would be this day of fulfillment of the pledge, the promise, the agreement, the partnership. The day has come, let us rejoice in it, let us congratulate and thank one another for being faithful to our promise, let us thank God who rejoices over you.

I often say it and I believe it deeply that more than anything else it is the kind of students who choose Seattle U who most of all make us to be who we are. They are students who want a city and its opportunities; they are students who are political and social activists in service and in justice; they are students who love the arts and culture; they are students who know and want the richness of diversity; they are students who have a spirituality and have deep humanitarian commitments; they are students who want a big future in a global world. These are the students who choose Seattle University. These students are you and you make us to be who we are. I for one would not want to work with any other kind of students. Thank you for being who you are.

But it is not just the choosing of Seattle U by you as this kind of student. It's who you become, what you do, what shape you give to the university, what legacy you leave which makes us an ever-changing but better university. I believe you do this, more than in any other way, by

finding your voice here and in these years, each in your own way, often together or in solidarity, often in community engagement and in putting into practice your education. Perhaps some of you have found your voice in prayer, on a retreat, in solitude, in nature, alone or with a beloved person. The challenge of finding one's voice, finding oneself is never over. I'm still finding mine and enjoying doing so. I hope it's never done or complete.

Let me tell you a story about this from my own family, one which maybe the parents, and particularly the grandparents, among us can appreciate. (By the way, let's hear it for all the grandparents among us. I believe commencement weekends were made especially for them.) Back to the story! My parents, who lived to 100 and to 96, lived in their retirement here in Seattle. I used to visit them on a Sunday afternoon each week for a couple of hours. I went one Sunday to their house and joined them in the livingroom as they sat in front of the fireplace reading the Sunday papers. In the course of the conversation I made some offhand remark about "students finding themselves". My Dad, who was approaching 90 at the time, fairly erupted, "Find oneself, find oneself; what is all this about finding oneself? When we were young we did not need to find ourselves. We got an education, were glad for it, we worked hard, we got a job, we got married, we supported a family. We did not need to find ourselves!" (Thanks, Dad, what do you really feel about this!) By the way—I wouldn't tell him this, but I think he really had found himself! I find him more and more every morning when I look in the mirror!

Sorry, Dad, but I do believe that finding oneself is the critical challenge of life. Sometimes, perhaps, it's not so much that you have to intentionally find yourself; it may be more that you get on with things and your self finds you. But in our day and age, and in the university years, finding oneself is front and center, job one.

Some of you may know a favorite poem of mine about finding one's self, one's voice, by Mary Oliver called "The Mockingbird". I may even have used it with you before. It is too good not to use now, as we celebrate you. It's about the mockingbird who mocks, echoes, imitates, repeats all other sounds and voices, but finds it hard to sing his own song, her own voice, their own self.

"The Mockingbird"
by Mary Oliver

All summer
the mockingbird
in his pearl-gray coat
and his white-windowed wings

flies
from the hedge to the top of the pine
and begins to sing, but it's neither
lilting nor lovely,

for he is the thief of other sounds—
whistles and truck brakes and dry hinges
plus all the songs

of other birds in his neighborhood;

mimicking and elaborating,
 he sings with humor and bravado,
 so I have to wait a long time
 for the softer voice of his own life

to come through. He begins
 by giving up all his usual flutter
 and settling down on the pine's forelock
 then looking around

as though to make sure he's alone;
 then he slaps each wing against his breast,
 where his heart is,
 and, copying nothing, begins

easing into it
 as though it was not half so easy
 as rollicking,
 as though his subject now

was his true self,
 which of course was as dark and secret
 as anyone else's,
 and it was too hard—

perhaps you understand—
 to speak or to sing it
 to anything or anyone
 but the sky.

Did you come to Seattle U echoing all the voices around you and have you found and learned and expressed your own voice? Is it the true voice which you express in the language of science, business, literature, art, math, psychology, philosophy, criminal justice, education, leadership, theology, nursing, social justice and action?

I believe you found your voice, your self:

- At Bailey Gatzert Elementary school, working with the children of our neighborhood and walking with them on their educational journeys as part of the Seattle University Youth Initiative.
- Immersed and excelling in academics, with six of you receiving Fulbright awards for the coming year, the highest number of Fullbrights we've ever had in a single year.

- Engaged in a variety of research endeavors and real-world projects such as the senior engineering projects under the guidance and mentorship of our faculty.
- As advocates for social justice, speaking out on issues such as diversity, inclusion and environment, both in our society and on our campus.
- In 16 hours straight, you found yourselves in the Campion Ballroom kicking up your heels at the Dance Marathon and raising an incredible \$110,000 to support children and families in need at Children’s Hospital.
- In business competitions, in addressing issues of homelessness and prison reform, in clinical and school placements, in social service agencies.
- In retreats and searches, in prayer and gospel study, in the quiet of nature and the solitude of the library, in the Chapel of St Ignatius.

I don’t say, “Hang on to what you’ve found” but rather let it grow, let it deepen, let it change, let it become ever more truly your self and your voice. Do this as our alumni, grateful for these years together, remaining connected with one another and with us, engaged, learning, helping one another and mentoring new students who choose Seattle U.

My final words to you in this Commencement Brunch which celebrates you are:

- “Thank you” for choosing and then making Seattle U be what it is and newly aspires to become because of you.
- “I apologize to you” for the ways in which your university has let you down or not lived up to its own mission.
- “I and we love you” and will always hold you with affection.
- And finally, “I pray for you” our students, our alumni, your families your beloved ones.

Enjoy this weekend. We celebrate you!