

As all of today's graduating seniors who read emails from the president know, right after Spring Break I sent a message noting that I would be speaking for a few minutes at today's Commencement exercises, and asking for suggestions—what's on their minds as they take this next step? I also asked you—the seniors—to tell me—in just a few sentences—what have been the best things about your Drake experience. I want to first thank the many of you who responded for your thoughtfulness, responsiveness and—most of all—for your honesty in sharing your aspirations, fears, hopes and concerns with me.

You were so thoughtful, and so forthcoming, and so inquisitive, that you have to know that

if I responded to all of your wonderful suggestions and questions, I would be up here talking for 3-4 hours, and that would end up being the *worst* part of your Drake experience.

But I want to provide you with a composite view of the Class of 2014 as you're about to graduate, based on what you've collectively told me (you'll note that it's a study in contradictions!): you're nervous about the uncertainty of the future, and confident that your Drake education has prepared you for anything; you are anxious because you don't know exactly what you're doing next and excited about the opportunities that lie ahead; you are wondering if you'll ever find a job, and you're eager to get started on your new job; you are thrilled with your acceptance into a

graduate program, and fearful that you're not prepared for it; you are, with good reason, proud of your successes and afraid of what will happen when you fail; you are worried about work/life balance and justifiably proud of the ways in which you've managed studying, community service and recreation during your time at Drake; you can't wait to get on with the next stage of your life, and you don't want to leave all of your friends and the embrace of the Drake community behind. And I suspect that most of you are feeling *all* of these things all at once...

So, I want to reassure you that this vacillation, this uncertainty and ambiguity are not only *normal*—they are *unavoidable* and ultimately quite *useful* qualities of this magnificent and

exciting life transition on which you're about to set forth. They are also important characteristics of the future that lies ahead of you.

The 19th century Danish philosopher Kierkegaard argued that *each individual is responsible for giving meaning to life*. As you go forward, *you* will define the essence of who you are as a human being; you will define the meaning and purpose of your life, by the choices that you make and the ways in which you make them. You will, ultimately, define who you are and why you are here by your thoughts, your words and your actions.

I hope that by invoking an existential philosopher that you don't think that I'm

abandoning the very real world of your dilemma for some abstract, self-indulgent academic fantasy (as much as academics like me seem to enjoy those journeys...). I am trying to communicate two very important thoughts: you have tremendous *freedom and opportunity*—*you* get to decide who you are, who you will be, and whether or not your life has purpose and meaning. All of those wonderful questions that you asked me in your emails? You *each* have both the opportunity and responsibility to answer them for yourself. That's the *good* news.

The *challenging* news—and it's an exciting challenge—is that it won't be easy. It's not supposed to be easy. The choices ahead of you are not diads, they're not the neatly-labeled

opposites of thesis and antithesis, they're not ones and zeroes. They are complex, multifaceted, ambiguous, and very, very exciting!

Let me tell you why I think not only that you're ready for the challenge, but why you should embrace it with great confidence, enthusiasm and optimism. For one thing, taking on this challenge is nothing new for you. The timeworn graduation speech cliché that "you are now leaving the protective halls of ivy for the real world" is an ancient and overused artifact—it has no relationship to your experience at Drake. Your time at Drake has been firmly and intentionally embedded in the so-called "real world—making the connections between the world of the classroom and the

world of practice is a defining characteristic of a Drake education.”

As a Drake student once pointed out to me, you have been doing "real" and important things for a long time. You have been advocating and acting on behalf of change and compassion in our world and making significant contributions in professional experiences that have taken many of you literally around the world!

In the course of your time at Drake, you've immersed yourself with energy, wisdom and commitment in issues ranging from climate change, poverty, civil society, politics, social justice, community engagement, children at risk, war and terrorism, to sustainable energy,

the economy, entrepreneurship, health and wellness, and many, many others. Those things *are* the “real” world, and you’ve been up to your ears in them for some time now.

The other reason that I know you’re up to the challenge is the promise of Drake University’s *Mission Statement* that—as you all know—says that Drake University “provides an exceptional learning environment that prepares students for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishment and responsible global citizenship.” If we’ve kept that promise—and your responses to me suggest that we have, and if you’ve done your part, I have no doubt at all that you are prepared for the challenge ahead—the challenge of defining who you are, of defining your meaning and purpose, by the

choices that you make and the actions that you undertake.

So I'm going to take a bit of license here, given that so many of you asked me for a personal response to your questions--

I'm going to ask you to indulge me as I make a very intimate connection between your existential challenge—the challenge of defining your own life—and the promise of Drake University's mission statement. I am going to be presumptuous enough to share *my* aspirations for you as you make those choices—I want to tell you what *my* definitions are of that promise:

A meaningful personal life:

- Is one that is about *others*, not about you

- Is one in which some part of the world is better because you were here—whether it's a big part, or the individual lives of others, you should strive to make your time on earth a net gain for all of humanity; that the fact that you were here *made a difference*
- A meaningful personal life is one that is guided by a set of core values and beliefs that enable you to make consistently wise and ethical decisions
- If Kierkegaard was right (and I personally agree with him) that you define the meaning of your life by your choices and actions, your choices and actions should be serving others, not self-serving

Professional Accomplishment—let me tell you first what it's *not*:

- It's not measured by salary and stock options
- It's not measured by big houses and expensive cars
- It's not measured by power and authority
- It's not measured by title and stature

What it *is*:

- You should be able to answer—positively—the same question about your organization as I encourage you to ask about yourself—are you working within an organization that in some way is making things better, that is it *serving* the greater good

- Is the organization grounded in a clearly articulated—and consistently followed—set of ethical and moral guidelines?
- Are you contributing to moving the organization forward toward achieving its goals?
- Are you helping others to grow, develop and find fulfillment in their work?’
- Are you successfully insisting that your organization contribute meaningfully to the welfare of your community
- Are you successfully insisting that your organization minimize its negative impact on the environment

And, last,

Responsible Global Citizenship:

- Taking personal responsibility for the welfare of our planet and the living beings that inhabit it
- Having what Sandy and Lena Astin termed an “Ecumenical world-view:” the recognition that different cultures and different nations have different belief systems, different assumptions about the fundamental questions of human existence, and that those beliefs and assumptions all have *equal* value
- Striving constantly to understand your country’s role in the world, how you can continue to improve it, and to understand how your country is perceived by others
- Learning to communicate effectively across cultural differences

- Aggressively pursuing opportunities to interact meaningfully with people who are different from you—seeing difference not as something that separates us, but as a way of expanding our own experience and connecting with something far bigger than we are as individuals.

So those are—with great presumption on my part—my aspirations for you as you fulfill the promise of Drake’s mission and take on the existential challenge of defining the meaning and purpose of your life.

You may remember that I also asked you in my email to tell me the best things about your Drake experience. I can tell you that every time

I read those responses, it just reinforced for me what a special place Drake University is, and how special you all are. So I'm going to close by responding to the suggestion that I received that I do a Drake version of David Letterman's Top Ten list. But you'll notice two departures from Letterman's format—first, they're not ironic and sarcastic, they're sincere and moving; second, there's twenty-two things on the Top Ten List (and I'm sure I've left some out...).

So here are the words and phrases that were repeated over and over in your response to that question:

My professors; People; Opportunities;
Challenge; Growth; Support; Self-Realization;
Understanding; Change; Discovery;
Relationships; Community; Passion; Reflection;
Service; Commitment; Mentors; Connections;
Friendships; Knowledge; Love; Compassion.

That's how you have described your Drake experience, and for those of us who are here to make sure you are prepared to live out your dreams for yourself, I can't tell you how powerful and rewarding that narrative is.

I'm going to use a word that your generation over-uses, but is applicable in this instance: *amazing*. You, the Class of 2014, are literally amazing—I am amazed by who you are, by

what you care about, by what you've done in your time at Drake, by what your dreams and aspirations are. If there *is* a real world out there, they're going to be equally amazed. Best of luck—we're very, very proud of you.