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Commencement Address

St. Andrews University  
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Thank you, President Baldasare, for that nice introduction. The introduction was so kind, generous, and so filled with exaggeration it sounded more like a eulogy than an introduction. Having endured the eulogy, ladies and gentlemen, you know what comes next – a viewing of the body.

Class of 19. A quick 53 years and 8 months ago, I sat exactly where you sit this morning. It was September 1965. The occasion was St. Andrews' opening convocation. I was a freshman. Our speaker was St. Andrews' president, Dr. Ansley Moore, after whom this beautiful and destructive lake is named. That strikes me now as a bit odd because Dr. Moore was neither beautiful nor destructive. In any event, during his speech Dr. Moore said the following, word for word. "Here at St. Andrews, we will not teach you how to make a living. We think you will find that making a living is relatively easy. We want to engage you in the harder quest, and that is, how to make a life."

Over the past 50 years I have often recalled Dr. Moore's remarks. He was exactly right. Making a living – particularly as a graduate of St. Andrews – is relatively easy. But making a life. Well, that's a whole 'nother matter.

Making a life. That's why I am here. I am St. Andrews' graduation present to you! I have been brought back through a time machine to tell you how to make a life! The secrets I am about to share will save you decades of anxiety, trial and error, and many a dead-end street. Please feel free to take notes.

Where might we look for guidance on how to make a life? To obituaries, of course. Where else? Obituaries have caught my attention for years. I read them all every day. No: it's not what you think. It's not to see if I am listed among the dead.

To begin with, I am amused at all the ways it is said that a person died. Some just come right out and say that so and so died or so and so passed away. Many say the deceased went to heaven or she went to be with her Lord or was called home. I particularly enjoy those that are more poetic or metaphorical. Such as: “Denise set sail for a distant shore” or “Allen left for the grand surprise God has in store for us all.” Here’s a good one: “Sarah died peacefully in her sleep at 92 years of age, thankful she would not have to live another day with him as President.” No, I’m not going to tell you who the “him” was when Sarah died – I’m stupid, not crazy. We are not going to get into politics.

Here’s my favorite to date: “Tim was a ferocious competitor. He could find a way to turn everything into competition, even washing the dishes. And he hated to lose. Tim died as a result of cancer. But he would want to point out that when he died, so did his cancer. Accordingly, he did not lose to cancer: cancer did not beat him. It was a tie.”

Today we consider obituaries to glean what we can about making a life. Imagine the scene. Family members gather, in the midst of their mourning and grief, seeking to recount their loved one’s life in the best possible light. In that moment they are of course keenly in touch with their own mortality. Here they are, where life and death merge. There’s no room for nonsense. We get to what really matters.

You will find in almost every obituary four components or subject matters. First there’s a description of family – parents, spouse, children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, and so on. Ahhh . . . the centrality of family. Second, the vocational piece – what the decedent did in his or her work life. Then there is a third part: a section about his community. What were his associations, affiliations, groups? With whom did he hang? Community is a problem these days. We’ll come back to it. But no surprises so far. We all know how vitally important family, vocation, and community are to a life well lived.

But then we get to the fourth component: what he or she did for others. Perhaps this piece surprises you but check it out. Every obituary will have something in it about giving to others or service to others. Sometimes you can tell

it's a stretch: "Ralph once picked up litter as part of a Clean Rivers Day." Sometimes it doesn't show up until you get to what you can do in lieu of sending flowers: "contribute to the American Cancer Society or to your local SPCA." I know, I know. It would be better if it suggested gifts to St. Andrews. At another time President Baldasare will be pleased to speak with you about legacy gifts. But to my point. On this occasion of deep, even sacred reflection on what makes for a good life, there is awareness that a life is not full, that we are not all we can be or all we are created to be unless we are involved in service to others.

Well, there you have it. Making a life is about committing yourself to family, vocation, community and service to others.

It would appear that my work here is done. But not so fast: I pivot abruptly to talk directly about you, the Class of 19.

Class of 19. You are awesome. Sure, the word is terribly overused, but in this instance no other word is adequate. You are awesome.

A month ago I was here for Alumni Weekend. During that weekend hundreds of us former graduates learned and saw first-hand what you have been through this academic year. And we stand in awe of you.

In the face of the great flood you were evacuated. Three weeks later, you came back -- not just some of you, not just most of you, but every single senior came back. You lived and attended classes on a campus that looks like it's been bombed. You hustled to find places to hold class, you found corners to meet with your professors in. You went back to your athletic teams and played your hearts out to salvage your seasons. You ate every meal on paper plates and with plastic utensils. You did all this and more without grumbling or protesting. You exhibited extraordinary tenacity and perseverance in order to be here today. In so doing, you created a legacy at St. Andrews that will be remembered forever. Awesome.

Consider what else happened here. You overcame these huge challenges through and as "community" – you, your fellow students, faculty, administration, and staff. Arm in arm, together. In reaching this graduation day, you accomplished and embodied real community. Real community – where all those things that try to divide and separate us melt away and simply do not

matter – those differences in culture, the color of our skin, religion, politics. St. Andrews was recognized recently as the 4<sup>th</sup> most diverse student body of all of North Carolina’s colleges and universities. Not for a moment did you let differences diminish your collective tenacity or impede your ultimate success. You leaned on each other and gained strength through your differences. That’s just awesome.

When you leave St. Andrews, you will be going out into a world where this kind of community – where anything even resembling this kind of community -- is dreadfully rare.

Fewer and fewer people come together in anything except family and work. Across the country bedrock clubs and organizations that have existed for 70 years, 80 years, a hundred years or more are folding every day because no one joins anymore – Rotary Clubs, the Elks and Moose Clubs, the Jaycees. Volunteer fire and rescue departments are closing left and right because no one volunteers. Non-profit organizations cannot find board members. Church membership continues to decline. People these days do not know the people who live on their block – or even next door – and they certainly do not spend any meaningful time with neighbors. We know now that cell phones and social media do not bring us together; they push us into greater isolation.

Loneliness. Spirit crushing isolation. This is the fundamental crisis of our day. The more publicized crises are in large part consequences of this pervasive, ubiquitous feeling of “aloneness.” In 2017, 45,000 Americans committed suicide. Could anything be more lonely than suicide? More than 72,000 persons died from drug overdoses. Drug abuse – just a slow form of suicide. Young people in particular are in the grips of this “aloneness.” Between 2000 and 2016, suicide rates among children age 10-17 increased by 70%. In my home state of Virginia it was just reported that 16% of all middle and high school students – that’s 1 in every 6 children – have seriously considered suicide. How could this be? These kids should not be thinking about anything more serious than whether to have fries with their cheeseburgers – but instead they are thinking about killing themselves!

I hope you will never again be the victim of a flood. But whether water is involved or not, you along with the rest of us will have times when you are inundated, when you will be at risk of drowning in the tribulations, misfortunes, disappointments, and tragedies that are part of every life. You, however, have now tasted the benefits of community when times are tough – and the taste is delicious. You stand now as a shining testament to the fact that none of us needs to endure life’s hardships alone – that we can come together as community and lean heavily on each other when life turns cruel.

Your community this year may not have been perfect. Someone may have been left behind. Perhaps you personally have felt lonely. Maybe you even feel lonely today. But look around. You are surrounded by souls who have been through this with you, whose mettle has been tested, and who have proved they will be there for you. Look to your faculty, staff and administrators. They know your name, and they will remember you personally forever. That’s part of what makes St. Andrews special. I shudder to think what would have become of me if Professor Dick Prust had not been here for me to lean on in my time of need. Reach out when you’re down, in trouble and you need a helping hand. Everybody needs somebody some time.

Some of you may know the story of the University of Virginia men’s basketball team. Last year UVA was first No. 1 seed ever to lose to a No. 16 seed in the NCAA tournament. Embarrassment, ridicule, humiliation followed. This year’s team – with the kind of grit and determination that you now know about – fought through ferocious competition and miraculously won the national championship. In an interview following the championship, the coach, Tony Bennett, made an observation that goes far beyond basketball or any other game. He said, “If you deal with adversity correctly, it will punch you a ticket that will take you places that you could not have gotten to otherwise.”

The secret to making a life. You see, the secret is not about strategies to avoid pain, or toil, or hard times, but rather overcoming adversity when adversity comes your way.

My dear and fellow St. Androids. You have dealt with adversity correctly. Your ticket has been punched and you will go places you could not have gotten to

otherwise. Please hear this also as your call – a call for you to serve others by building community in all the places you go and with all the people you touch when you leave this special place.

Do you see the irony? I came here to tell you how to make a life, but you stole my thunder. You did us all one better. You showed us how to make a life.

May God bless each of you – and may God bless St. Andrews.