

Commencement Speech at St. Andrews University

James L. Morgan, Jr.

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**President Baldasare, Members of the Board of Trustees,
Members of the Faculty, Proud Parents, and above all
graduates: Good morning and congratulations to the St.
Andrews Class of 2018.**

**It is such an honor to be here today. It's an honor to be with
you, your teachers, your parents and your friends. I grew up
here, in Scotland County, connecting with St. Andrews in many
different ways all through my life: first, as a camper at Music
Camp, then attending concerts and sporting events here, next
as a member of the Board of Visitors, as a Trustee, walking on
the track, taking voice lessons, and even one particularly
interesting semester teaching a music technology course. And
though I may still just be a redneck from Laurel Hill, I do know**

an amazing institution when I see one. We are lucky to have St. Andrews in this community and we are lucky it draws the people it does, people like you, from around the world here to our little town.

I want to say a special word to the parents that are here this morning: you haven't seen your kids in four years, but now you're about to see them every day -- when they come up from the basement to tell you that the Wi-Fi isn't working. If they majored in fine arts or philosophy you have good reason to be worried: the only place where they can get a job now is Ancient Greece. You will spend more money framing your child's diploma than they will earn in the next six months. Trust me, I've been there. But the good news is that those Liberal Arts degrees do teach you how to think logically and write understandably and how to engage easily with other people. I've met many CEO's over the years who were renown for their skills in business, but who majored, it turned out, -not in

finance or economics—but in English Lit. or History. So there is hope! My own daughter majored in film at NYU, and then earned her MFA in screenwriting at Columbia, and now she has a great job –of all places—at Charles Schwab, yes the investment company, producing online videos for their website. Who woulda thunk it? It is exciting to see what you folks are going to accomplish now as you commence your journey (that’s why they call it Commencement, I guess, because you are commencing). As Dr. Suess said, “Oh the places you will go!”

Right at 43 years ago, I commenced my journey – I graduated from Wake Forest University. The reason I know the exact number of years is because, hanging on the wall of my office, I have my framed, sheepskin diploma --now dry and shriveled up-- and it gives the date of my emancipation from college: May 19, 1975. Our Commencement Speaker that day was actually quite famous at the time: she was U.S. Representative

Barbara Jordan, Democratic congresswoman from Texas. Ms. Jordan was the first southern African-American woman elected to the House of Representatives, one of the early and important voices in Congress calling for Richard Nixon to be impeached and, later, a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

So you see, MY graduation speaker THAT day was quite a bit more substantial and legendary than YOUR graduation speaker on THIS day. But you also should know that, as I have reflected on Barbara Jordan's speech at Wake Forest, it has really helped me enormously with writing this one, because it turns out that I can't remember a single word she said. Not. One. Word. This liberating discovery enables me to proceed without any fear that something I say today might somehow change you or discourage you from whatever you were already planning to do with your life, because I am absolutely sure you won't remember a word of this either!

When I try to recall what I can of my graduation from Wake Forest, I remember that it was a warm May day in Winston-Salem, very much like this one today in Laurinburg. I remember that quite a few of my fellow graduates were attending the ceremony impaired by various substances. I remember there was a hot rumor going around that the seniors in one sorority had promised to walk wearing nothing at all underneath their graduation gowns. Thus, for most of the proceedings my friends and I were totally focused on trying to discover which of our female friends had or had not followed through on that pledge. So you see, it really isn't The Honorable Barbara Jordan's fault that I don't remember anything about her commencement address! I was very distracted.

Well, obviously, and for these reasons, my own experience of graduating from college didn't provide me much help with

writing this speech. But don't get me wrong, I take my task today very seriously. When I got the call two months ago to be your speaker, I decided to prepare with the same intensity that many of you devote to an important term paper. So late last night I began to write!

Actually, that's not true. I initially started working on this speech a couple of months ago by watching on YouTube every single commencement address I could find: Steve Jobs at Stanford, Bill Gates at Harvard, Conan O'Brien at Dartmouth, Will Ferrell at USC. I watched all of them. Every single commencement speech on YouTube. It's a lot. So if you hear anything I say today that sounds vaguely familiar, like you might have heard it somewhere before -- YES that's because I absolutely lifted it from one of those speeches. I feel no shame about that -- they were all excellent! And why should a great line only be used once? Even what I'm saying right now -- this

plagiarism disclaimer-- I stole it from Tom Hanks' 2007 speech at Yale!

Ok, but seriously, today I want to talk a bit about where we all go from here. I'm sure you have plans for this afternoon, right? And I'm guessing you might have an idea, at least, of what you are going to do this summer. And then after that maybe it gets a little vague. On my graduation day, the day I got my Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology, I had already auditioned for and been hired by a full-time touring rock band. And I knew that immediately after I left school, I would drive to Charlotte to begin rehearsals, and then go on tour for the summer. It didn't matter at all to me that my job playing music had nothing to do with my degree in Anthropology. I had only majored in Anth. because I discovered it was the easiest major at Wake Forest, that half the football team majored in it, and it gave me a path to achieve what my parents desperately wanted for me and what they were paying for: a degree from Wake Forest

University. After that, my plans for life were pretty vague. But that summer, I was going on tour! It would be a huge party. And whatever life held for me after the summer, I guessed, I would figure out later.

I think one of the differences in culture between me graduating in 1975 and you folks today is that now there is much more of an emphasis on going to college in order to start your career in something. “To get a good job, get a good education,” the saying goes. So the government offers low interest student loans to encourage as many as possible to go to college. And for some kids, a degree directly resulted in landing a position at a prestigious company with good pay and benefits. But, on the other hand, one of the big disappointments for many has been that they have gone to college and accumulated a pile of student loan debt, and they are not doing much better in the job market than their friends that went straight to work after high school.

Well, statistics say that when I graduated in 1975 only 18% of men and 10% of women had four-year college degrees. (By the way, today that figure is way on up to 33% of men and 34% of women). It wasn't that college and the job market were totally disconnected when I was in school, I'm sure my parents were pretty concerned with what I would actually do with an Anthropology degree! But since more than 80% of the US population at that time did NOT have a degree, the expectations were less. Most people currently working didn't have a degree. So there was, I think, more of the sense that you went to college to get your education, and then afterwards you decided what you wanted to do for a living and went about getting trained for that. So you did have a lot of History and English Lit. majors going back into their family businesses and learning that career, soon after graduating from college.

I remember that during my senior year at Wake Forest, some kids from the Baptist Student Union started handing out a Christian tract from an organization called Campus Crusade for Christ. It was a little yellow paper booklet that was titled “The Four Spiritual Laws”. And I forget now what three of the laws were, but my friends and I used to make fun of the First Spiritual Law, which said on page One of the booklet: “God Loves You And Has A Wonderful Plan For Your Life.” Which we changed to: “God loves you and has a wonderful man for your wife!”

But the older I get now I realize how true that first of the Four Spiritual Laws really is. God does love you and does have a wonderful plan for your life. Your life isn’t chaos, though it may feel that way sometimes. Life is not “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing,” as Shakespeare famously said. Your life has meaning, and the scary part is that you can make all the wrong choices and never get to the reason

that you were put on this planet. Or you can acknowledge that there is a plan and set about discovering what it is.

One thing I've noticed that is trendy these days is for people to say that "The Universe" is telling them things. "The Universe wants me to take a year out to travel." ...that sort of thing. This sense of pop spirituality is considered in a video sketch by the comedienne Amy Schumer called "The Universe." It opens with the science popularizer Bill Nye standing against a backdrop of stars and galaxies:

NYE: The Universe. For centuries, humankind has strived to understand this vast expanse of energy, gas, and dust. In recent years, a stunning breakthrough has been made in our concept of what the universe is for.

[Zoom to the Earth's surface, and then to a yogurt shop in which two young women are chatting.]

FIRST WOMAN: So, I was texting while I was driving? And I ended up taking a wrong turn that took me directly past a vitamin shop? And I was just like, this is totally the universe telling me I should be taking calcium.

NYE: Scientists once believed the universe was a chaotic collection of matter. We now know the universe is essentially a force sending cosmic guidance to women in their 20s.

Zoom to a gym with Schumer and a friend on exercycles.]

SCHUMER: So you know how I've been sleeping with my married boss for like six months? Well, I was starting to get really worried he was never going to leave his wife. But then yesterday in yoga, the girl in front of me was wearing a shirt that just said, "Chill." And I was just like, this is so the universe telling me, "Girl, just, like, keep sleeping with your married boss!"

Well it may not be true that The Universe has a plan for your life, but I do believe that God does. God loves you and has a

wonderful plan for your life. It's really true. I recognize that in the audience today there are likely many diverse religious traditions, so I don't want this to sound specifically Christian, which is my tradition. If your spiritual heritage is Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Sikh - wherever you find the roots for your faith, this notion of God loving you and having a plan for you life is still compatible. So if we are talking about God having a plan we are really talking about much more than "The Universe" telling you something. Maybe it is easier to talk about a "dream" for your life, which is really your calling, or to put it another way, your Vocation.

The word "Vocation" is confusing these days because it is used in several contexts: We say Vocational Rehab, Vocational Guidance, Vocational School. And it has kind of evolved to mean, "what you do", or "how you make your living". But it really means so much more than that.

Fredrich Beuchner wrote the best definition I have ever

read about Vocation in his book, "Wishful Thinking". He says this:

"Vocation: it comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God.

There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest.

By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

So let's focus on those two things for a minute: where your "deep gladness" and the world's "deep hunger" meet.

Well there is no doubt about that second part: the world's "deep hunger". There is plenty of darkness out there! We live in a world that has apparently abandoned civil discourse. A world now bereft of common decency, warm-heartedness, selflessness, friendship, courtesy, respect for diversity and inclusion. A world that is intolerant of cultural, political and gender differences. We daily encounter bigotry, racism, misogyny and misanthropy. Each year around the world millions still die from preventable diseases and extreme poverty. So, if you want to be a part of meeting the world's "deep hunger" there is plenty of hunger out there for you to meet. And the world needs your "deep gladness", whatever that is.

So what exactly IS that second part to your Vocation: what Beuchner calls your "deep gladness"? Every one of us here has dreams about our lives. Every one of us here possesses gifts and talents --things that we do well, almost without even

trying. You probably have had the experience of doing something where you get so immersed in it that the time flies by and at some point you look up and the sun has set and the room is dark and the day is over, and you had no conception of the passage of time, you were so into whatever it was you were doing. Minutes and hours passed by and you can't believe how much time you spent working. But its like it's not work to you: it just feels like something you were born to do.

When you have that experience, when you feel something like that, you are starting to find your “calling”. Your vocation. And when you realize that you have found what you're put on the planet to do, you have to find a way to do it and do it as much as you can in your life.

Now this can be complicated. It turns out that the things that we are gifted at, the things that we were put on the planet to do, that we're called to do, are not always things that pay us a

living wage. And so I find that there are two categories of calling: one that I would say is your Vocation with a capital V, which is your calling from God -- if you want to put it that way: your purpose for being on the planet. And then, number two, there is your vocation with a little v: which is the thing that you can do to make money and maybe also be something you're very good at. But is not always the thing that transports you, that makes you feel like you found the your "special-purpose" as Steve Martin says.

Now don't get me wrong. You will absolutely, positively need to "make a living". With this many parents here, I would never tell you otherwise. You need to find a job where you can make enough money to pay your bills, get off your parent's insurance, qualify for a mortgage and eventually send your children to college and pay for your daughter's wedding. You will have to work hard to make that kind of money, and trust me, you will definitely experience boredom and drudgery on

occasion. That will not mean you are off track or in the wrong place. Jobs are not always, and at all times, fulfilling. That is why they pay you to do them! That is why they call it “work”.

But the idea of finding your calling, your vocation, is more than just finding work that pays you. It means --and this is important-- that somewhere in your schedule you make time for meaningful, purposeful work. Work that you believe in, work that gives you a sense of fulfillment. If your life is solely, only, about making money, and that alone, you will slowly dry up on the inside. Your soul will atrophy. So this is tricky: you have to make a living and earn money; and you have to find your calling, your purpose for being on the planet. Sometimes those are the same occupation, and sometimes they are separate. Maybe I can illustrate from my own life.

I grew up around musicians. My dad, James L. Morgan, was a jazz saxophone player and a classical clarinetist. His brother,

Morris Morgan – you may have seen some of these names on buildings around this campus – was a fantastic jazz piano player up in Raleigh. But neither of them, as much as they loved playing music, were able to make their living doing that. They learned to make money doing other things, and they both found great fulfillment ultimately giving some of that money to institutions they believed in, institutions like St. Andrews. But their entire lives they both continued to play music – because they loved it. It gave them that sense of deep gladness.

And I faced the same dilemma in my life. I inherited their talent for playing and composing music. And, just like my father and my uncle, I found it almost impossible to earn a living doing that. So I had to find other ways of paying the bills, and then continue find ways to play. After touring with that band I mentioned, I went to seminary and found I was gifted at preaching, felt the same gladness when I did that as I did playing music. And ever since my life has been a quest to find

ways to do both: keep playing music and keep preaching and somehow make a living at something. Finding that balance has never been easy, but I keep working at it.

I take solace that I'm not the first person in history to have to find a way to do this: the apostle Paul was famous for helping start the Christian church, and for writing all those letters that eventually became part of the Bible. But that is not what he did for a living. While he was preaching and founding all those churches at Galatia and Phillipi, he had a side job. He was in the textile business. Actually the Bible says he was a tent maker. He made tents for a living and sold them to people. But his joy, his gladness, his calling was the work he did preaching, writing and founding churches that he was NOT paid to do.

So what is it today that gives you your sense of deep gladness? Do you know, at this point in your life? You may not have gotten there yet. It might be something you discover later. Or

you may know now. Maybe it is music. Or writing. Or building Habitat houses. Or painting. Or dancing. Or serving meals in a homeless shelter. Or spelunking. Or hiking. Or day-trading. Or white-water rafting. Or fly-fishing. Or creating spreadsheets. Whatever it is, make no mistake: you must, MUST, DO, THAT. You have to. You have to keep doing that thing that gives you gladness. And if you get paid to do it – GREAT. Awesome. But it is not a requirement. It really is irrelevant whether you can get paid to do it or not. Like my father, well into his seventies, putting together his big band “The Jimmy Morgan Orchestra”, you do it because it gives you a sense of deep gladness.

But what IS a requirement, is that you find a way of using your deep gladness not just for your own pleasure, but to actually engage the world’s deep hunger. If your deep gladness is writing, write something that offers hope. If you are a dancer offer movement class at a rehab center. If you are great at numbers, see if you can help someone with their taxes. If you

love white-water rafting, take a child with cancer down the river some Saturday. It is exactly what the therapeutic riding program here at St. Andrews does for people whose gladness is riding horses. My dad's way of doing it was to pay all the expenses of his big band and then offer to have them play for free at a hospital fund-raiser. He was doing what he loved, but he also found a way for his deep gladness to meet the world's deep hunger. And you can too. Whatever your gladness is, use it for more than just your own pleasure. Use it to somehow beat back the world's darkness.

You are the first graduating class of what is known as 'Generation Z'. Born in or after 1996. The world is either going to get better or get worse because of you -- because of the choices you and your peers make during your lives.

If current technological trends continue, you all will probably live a very long time and the rate of change in your life will likely increase exponentially. But there will always be this one

constant: if you dare to try to find your Vocation, with a big V -- that work you are called to that meets the world's deep hunger, this long life you are about to live will be fulfilling and full of deep gladness. The world's needs will change, but your deep gladness will not. You may discover more gifts, more ways of following your path and connecting to your world, but that basic sense of being called to use your gifts will always be there.

Ok, I'm about to finish up. I want you to know that after all these years, my Wake Forest friends and I are still really close. We've nursed each other through heartaches and danced at each other's weddings. We've vacationed together and gotten to know and love each other's children - and we've danced at THEIR weddings. So my advice to you is this: Grab the good people around you today, and don't let them go. The biggest asset this school offers you is a group of peers that will be both your family and your school for life.

To close, I want to leave you with one of my favorite sayings by the Jewish rabbi and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel: “To be or not to be is not the question. The vital question is: how to be and how not to be.”

Thank you, and God Bless the Class of 2018.