

**John Patrick Shanley Commencement Speech
College of Mount Saint Vincent, May 16, 2009**

They asked me to say something because you're graduating. I thought about it. I want it to be of value. I want it to be good advice. So let me start with something you can take to the bank. When you get up in the morning, drink two glasses of water. Whatever else I say, remember that. Drink two glasses of water when you get up. Easy to remember. Good for the kidneys.

Second, not to bring up something upsetting, but when you leave here today, you may go through a period of unemployment. My suggestion is this: Enjoy the unemployment. Have a second cup of coffee. Go to the park. Read Walt Whitman. Walt Whitman loved being unemployed. I don't believe he ever did a day's work in his life. As you may know, he was a poet. If a lot of time goes by and you continue to be unemployed, you may want to consider announcing to all appropriate parties that you have become a poet.

Next. Be nice to your parents or guardians. They are exhausted. They don't even know why anymore. They're too tired and too poor to figure it out. But I'm here to tell you: You are the reason they are exhausted. And if you feel guilty, that's good. It's important to feel guilty at graduation. Not for being born, or costing a fortune. You should feel guilty for going through puberty. Nobody should have to live with anybody going through puberty. Look at your parents. They are in shock. They have seen something terrible. They have seen you go through puberty. Puberty is scarier than the scariest movie ever made.

So here we are. Commencement. You've gone through puberty. You've made it through college. Your loved ones have staggered to this event and it's graduation. The day stands before you like an open gate. What's on the other side? You gotta wonder. A hideous job, a satisfying marriage, a spiritual quest?

I'll share with you my experience. I was born and raised in the Bronx. I've worked like a dog all my life. I have had my heart broken numerous times. I have had great success, humiliation, physical affliction, and I have seen the face of despair. When I stand here, I feel like I've dropped out of the mouth of a storm and my hair is crazy on my head. That storm is life. Life is very long and very short and it's unknowable and strange and terrifying and beautiful and it's spooky and boring and bitter and nasty and elegant and extreme, and if you are lucky you have the courage to want it to be all those things. You commit to it. You commit to live and not run away. It's true I've learned nothing. It's true nobody changes, not really. But if you commit to your life and live it, you will become more and more truly YOU. And that's a great thing. That has something of the Divine in it.

My hair's gone grey from struggle, pain and strife. I have drunk too much whiskey, written some rotten plays, and gotten married too many times. And what have I achieved as a result? What progress have I made? At the end of it all, here I am, brothers and sisters, back in the Bronx. That's the secret of life. No progress whatsoever! I started in the Bronx and I'll end up in the Bronx. You will have a million thoughts and insights, injuries, and maybe love and children, but at the end of it all, you will end up right back here. Square one. Exhausted. Like your parents. Watching the whole circus unfold a second time. And you will know for certain nothing except one thing! You lived. You did it. Your life will be the sum of everything you do. Nothing more. So you should do a lot of stuff, and it should be worthy.

When I was thirteen, at Cardinal Spellman High School in the Bronx, I saw a play called *Cyrano DeBergerac*. The main character in the play is a freak. He has an obscenely long nose, he's the toughest guy in his regiment, and he's a poet. I was 13 when I saw this play and it changed everything for me. It said, if you are not mindful, you will be distracted and deceived by this practical world. It said, There are other things than money power and position, real things, and these are the things that make life sweet: Honor, courage, love, poetry, glory, beauty, nobility of purpose, gallantry and friendship. I walked out of that theatre and I thought: I can live a beautiful life. I know I am a freak, but some guy who died a hundred years ago just showed me there is another way of living. You can do it anywhere and no one can stop you. And I'm saying that to you. You can have a beautiful life.

You want to have an exciting life, a surprising life, this is what I suggest. When you choose to speak, tell the truth. The truth is a personal thing. It's what YOU think. No one knows what you think until you tell them. You can summon your courage and express yourself. Do it with kindness, do it with care, but say who you are and let it stand. If you do this, you will be a force in the world. When you tell the truth, other people tend to tell the truth in reply, and things happen. When you lie, you're boring, and nothing changes. That's been my experience. You are going to die. We're here for like ten minutes. Make it count. Use the time. It's your turn at the mic.

Another thing: Look at each person and remember that life is sacred and fragile. For that reason, all encounters should involve a certain carefulness. The flame that burns in each man and woman is a piece of the miracle we call life, and should be treated with dignity, honor and love. The world around us is full of pain, cruelty, wars and starvation. Occasionally you, or your government, is going to have to imprison somebody or kill somebody. Because life is sacred, you should be sad about this. Treating anyone violently is a deep trauma for us all. The killing of an enemy or a madman is not a cause of rejoicing, but for sobriety and reflection. Life is sacred and fragile.

Which is why jail is another burden, a burden that we all carry. We have a lot of people in jail in this country. And I must observe, on some level, when your brother is in jail, you are in jail. Have compassion and respect for the dignity of these forgotten people. It's good for the soul.

Something else. I grew up with the feminist movement, and they have fought many battles that needed to be fought. There is still more work to do. But I would also like to point out that there is nothing wrong with treating women tenderly, with speaking of them respectfully, with honoring them as women. There is nothing wrong with true gallantry. There is nothing demeaning or wrong with gallantry.

Does it matter that I'm saying these things to you? Will it make any difference in any of your lives? I don't know. But I have to do my job and give you my best thoughts. Each of us should give it a try, you know? Each of us should try to be helpful, to be kind, to have an open mind to the thoughts of others.

A few years back I was with my sons Nick and Frank in upstate New York. We saw a beautiful graveyard and stopped to look. I was standing among the stones when my son Frank said: "This is so weird." I asked him what he meant. He said "I don't know. So many dead people." I said to him, "Frank, most people are dead. Just a few of us are alive. We're the weird ones." It's strange and brief and almost glamorous to be alive. Enjoy it. Live it. And every morning when you get up, drink two glasses of water.

Thank you.