

Commencement Address at Notre Dame University

May 1998

Mr. Joseph Kernan

Thank you, Father Malloy. Your Eminence Cardinal Keeler, Bishop D'Arcy, Bishop Jenky, distinguished members of the platform party, members of the faculty, parents, family members and friends, my fellow graduates -- I am honored to be with you as a member of the great Class of 1998 on this day of celebration.

When Monk asked me if I would speak today I allowed as how I thought he was going pretty deep into the bullpen.

I was apprehensive, but looked to family and friends for support. A few days later I received a card, the same card from two different very close friends. On the cover is a beautiful photograph of an American eagle. Inside the inscription reads -- "Dear Joe, you have vision, you have fortitude, you have character ... who needs hair."

Armed with that vote of confidence I set about trying to figure out what I should say. And I realized that for me this is all about anniversaries.

It was exactly thirty years ago that my class graduated. Imagine what it was like with 1,500 graduates -- all men -- sitting in 1968 where you are today. I know I can't imagine what it was like, because I wasn't there either.

When I was coming out of high school, the oldest of 8 1/2 children at that point, I was trying to decide where I could afford to go to school. My Father, from whom I continue to learn, (he's here today), asked me where I wanted to go. I said, "Notre Dame." And he said, "Well then, go. Just do what you want to do."

I took his advice to heart, in every way, and therefore did not graduate with my class. He forgot to tell me about the moderation thing.

In three weeks I will be back on campus for my 30 year reunion. By the way we will all be together on the same reunion cycle. I can't wait to let my classmates know that I, who did not graduate with them on time, must from this day forward be referred to as "Doctor." I may end up in the lake a few times, but I figure it will be worth it.

It was 26 years ago today that I had the worst day of my life. It was ten days after I got shot down (that wasn't a real good day), and I made contact with the guy in the cell next to mine. I had to that point assumed that our escort had seen us eject, and that our status as prisoners would be known. He had been shot down after us and told me that our escort had lost us and we were presumed dead. I knew that I was O.K., but I could not imagine what my Mom, my Dad, Maggie and my family were going through. I cried.

My family means more to me than I would have ever thought possible. My one regret today is that my Mom is not here. We lost her to cancer four months ago. But I can tell you that she is with me every step every day, just as she was 26 years ago in Hanoi. In fact I think she was responsible for setting this whole thing up today.

You are all here because of your families as well. If you don't do anything else today, say thank you. Thank your grandparents, who lived through the Great Depression, and fought the Big War. They set the table for the bounty we enjoy today. Thank your parents. They made the decision to make your education a priority, and make it possible for you to come to this great place. And while you're at it thank everyone -- professors, coaches, friends -- who made your short time here among the most memorable of your life.

And while you are thanking your friends, make a commitment that you will see each other again no less than once a year. Seven years ago, one of our teammates died. Richie Lucke, who was our centerfielder, was 43, and I had only seen him once or twice since we got out of school. A bunch of us vowed we couldn't afford to let that happen again. We now get together at least twice a year to catch a game, play some golf, and be with each other.

You have worked and played, sweated and partied, laughed and cried, cursed and prayed with some of the best friends you will ever have. Don't let each other get away.

While I can't compare this graduation to the one 30 years ago, I can compare the South Bend-Notre Dame relationship of yesterday with today. When I was a kid South Bend was a blue collar town, losing jobs every day, and there was not only very little connection between the university and the community, there was often resentment.

Father Ted and Father Ned set about to change that. And Monk and Father Bill have taken it to the next level, making community involvement institutional. Most of you here today have been involved in some way: Christmas in April, Neighborhood Study Help, the Center for the Homeless, Habitat for Humanity. The list goes on. You have made my city a better place. You have made my school a better place. And I thank you.

About 300 of you will now take the next step, and for some length of time, give yourselves to public service. You will be here at home and overseas in volunteer, military or other government service. We all thank you for that commitment.

And for those of you who will be doing a thousand other things in a thousand other places, please continue the good work you have begun here. Coach a team, mentor a child, work for United Way. Do something, something you enjoy doing. Your community will only be the kind of place you want to live in if you make it so.

Now that things are winding down here, you're asking yourselves with greater urgency, "What will happen when I get out there?" And you may be thinking that all the good ideas are already taken, and it will be tough to make your mark.

In 1899 the Commissioner of the U.S. Patent Office, Mr. Charles Duell, said, "Everything that can be invented has been invented."

Bill Metzger is a retired Navy captain who spent almost six years as a prisoner in North Vietnam. (In fact Bill's roommate for about two of those years is with us today. Charlie Zuhoski was there yesterday as his daughter Joanna was commissioned an Ensign, and is watching her graduate today.) When Bill ejected from his aircraft he broke the femur in his right leg. Without proper medical attention the bones grew back side by side and his right leg was three inches shorter than his left. But he knew that when he got home they would be able to rebreak his leg and set it properly. After returning he was told by the best doctors available that because the rest of his leg had adapted to the new length they would only be able to get about an inch back. So after several operations he was fitted with prosthetic shoes that made up the now two inch difference. He hated it. He couldn't work out effectively and do some of the things he had dreamed of doing when he got back home.

During three and a half years of frustration he came up with an idea. He went to a Navy surgeon and told him that he wanted to take two inches out of his good leg. Bill claims that his only real problem now is that he's under six feet tall.

There are millions of discoveries waiting for you. Your tool bag is pretty full. You have gotten a great education from outstanding teachers at this extraordinary school. With all your other skills, unconstrained by prior history, you just need to look for new ways, sometimes obvious, sometimes courageous ways, to make a better life for yourself, your family, and your community.

I had thought that perhaps my job today was to give you advice. Advice and counsel based on fifty-two years of experience. Things like:

- Just do what you want to do - with moderation.
- Thou shalt not be a whiner.
- You are only as good as your ballclub.
- Stay away from the smokes
- Smile when you're not laughing.
- Let people get off the elevator, before you get on.
- Be civil.
- Don't take yourself too seriously.
- Don't cut in line or talk at a movie.
- Vote.
- As Kipling said, "Meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two imposters just the same."
- Wear sunscreen, floss, and stay in shape.
- Work on your writing skills.
- Hustle.
- You and your significant other should never wear matching outfits, and no one should be permitted to wear dark socks with shorts.
- Do what you say you are going to do, and do it when you said you would do it.
- Never, ever bet against Notre Dame.
- Treat everybody -- everybody -- with dignity and respect.

But I'm not going to do that. Instead I would like to ask you to do just two things.

I was recently asked what I was most proud of since I have been involved in politics.

After I was elected mayor of South Bend I was advised to get my phone number out of the book because Maggie and I would be pestered to death.

Nine years ago right now, a year and a half after taking office, our phone rang at home on a Saturday morning. I wasn't there, but Maggie was. It was a lady from South Bend who explained that her son was in the Army in Germany. She had just received a call advising her that he was sick, and it would be a good idea if she could come to see him. She had no passport, no birth certificate, no proof of citizenship, and therefore could not leave the country. She didn't know where to turn. Maggie called Terry Coleman, who worked in my office. He tracked down Mary Ann Ryback, our voter registration clerk, at Martin's Supermarket. They got the paperwork together, Terry went to this lady's

home and got her registered. Certificate in hand, she was able to get on an airplane that afternoon. She arrived at her son's bedside six hours before he died.

That's what I am most proud of.

We have an extraordinary capacity to do good things. And it doesn't have to take years to accomplish, involve complicated negotiations, or demand an advanced degree.

It most often is just a simple act of kindness.

It's real easy. Just commit, with me, to doing one thing, every day, that will make someone else's life better, easier, or more fun.

Give a stranger directions, shovel your neighbor's walk, drive someone to the polls.

Keep it simple, it usually won't take more than 60 seconds, and you can pick your spots by doing it at your convenience.

My last request is not so easy. You can't always pick your spot, and it's real uncomfortable to confront.

Seventy-four years ago today, when Maggie's dad was a freshman here, we had one of our finest moments. The Notre Dame student body met the Ku Klux Klan in downtown South Bend. The Klan had chosen South Bend for a rally to show contempt for the Roman Catholic nature of this community and this university. The confrontation was not peaceful, and by all accounts the Klan got their butts kicked.

Just a month ago some of you gathered on campus again to protest a Klan rally that took place just 20 minutes east of here.

I believe that bigotry is the greatest barrier to our living a life where we recognize that we are all God's children, equally, every day.

Prejudice rears its ugly head relentlessly in every corner of our planet. It all starts in more complex ways with jokes, and slights, and anecdotes that may seem harmless, or so we would have ourselves believe. But as it develops it actually becomes a simpler, more deadly, organization.

Eight years ago I visited Auschwitz and Birkenau. I thought my biggest problem would be reconciling my captivity with what I would feel at that place. Not a problem. I ended up being afraid because of the evil I felt there, and the realization that it could all happen again. Intolerance, bigotry, prejudice, racism are but some of the rungs on the ladder that leads into the abyss of the Holocaust.

Elie Wiesel said: "Those who kept silent yesterday will keep silent tomorrow."

We are all smart enough to know that we need no more warnings and no more proof.

Father Matthew Walsh, president of Notre Dame in 1924, mounted a cannon in front of the courthouse in downtown South Bend after the confrontation with the Klan.

He said: "There is no loyalty that is greater than the patriotism of a Notre Dame student. There is no conception of duty higher than that which a Notre Dame man holds for his religion or his university."

I will not be silent ever again. And I trust that neither will you.

So, my classmates, leave this place, this wonderful place, but bring Her with you wherever you go. Do good things by doing the right thing -- always. Have a great time, and think about someone else every day. Be kind to friends and strangers alike. Cherish your family -- every member. Be grateful for all you have been given, and share it every chance you get. Don't be afraid, just go for it!

And know that wherever you go on this earth to make a life for yourself and for others, you will find another member of the Notre Dame family to be there if you need them.

I look forward to seeing you at our reunion in 2003. In the meantime if there is ever anything I can do for you, just give me a call. My number's in the book.

Thank you.