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LOYOLA GRADUATION SPEECH 2005

Most of the seniors sitting in front of you tonight met me for the first time four years ago. We began our journey on the fifth floor in The Art Studio or as I like to call it “The Loyola Penthouse,”

It’s fitting that our first meeting was on the top floor in that heavenly studio. It is also fitting that our last meeting together should be in this magnificent Church. Some of you and even I, on occasion, have drawn these magnificent columns, and the pictures on the walls, and the colorful stain-glass windows that seem to soar, yes, up to the heavens.

Graduation is a time for our seniors to say goodbye to the Loyola Family. This year the seniors and I will both be saying goodbye to Loyola. They are graduating, and I am retiring after thirty-eight years of teaching in order to have more time to paint.

So seniors, I have some things to say to you on this occasion, but before I begin, I would like to acknowledge some of the people who have made your wonderful education possible. They are the same people who have made my years at Loyola so rewarding.

I would like to start with your parents, families and friends. The first time you met me was at the Open House. One of the first things I talked about was the significance of creating masterpieces. During the Renaissance most people considered “Divine Inspiration” to be the influence behind the great works of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Tonight I would like to say to all of you, “Congratulations.” These graduates would not be here tonight if it was not for your Love, support, and inspiration. Ladies and Gentlemen here are “your” masterpieces.

There is also another family here tonight that I would like to acknowledge. It is the Loyola community. For me it is my second family. I know that many of these graduates feel the same way. It is a magnificent family and I am extremely proud of every one of them.

First there is Father Katsouras, or Steven, as I fondly call him. He is not only the President of Loyola, but also a dear friend. I will miss the many times we talked about art, books, politics, religion, and especially about food. The first day I walked into his office, I said, “This school is extremely lucky to have you as its leader.” I still mean it even though you did make me go to Cleveland.

Then there’s Mr. Lyness, or Jim, as I call him. Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Lyness is a true Renaissance man. Over the years, we’ve had the opportunity to find out that Jim is a talented singer, actor, director and teacher. Now he stars as our Headmaster of Loyola.

I also must acknowledge one of my most important mentors. He is such a dear and caring person. He is Father Prior. Our talks together will always be remembered.

Over the years I have worked with many individuals who have dedicated their lives to teaching. Now I would like to call your attention for a moment to this marvelous group of teachers sitting over there. You want to see my heroes? Well, there they are. I love um.

They really are heroes. For 18 years I have served alongside these men and women. I know the rewards of our profession, and believe me, there are many.

Teaching can be the most thrilling kind of work. It's definitely a challenging commitment. I know what it's like to be tired at the end of a day of teaching – it's a special kind of tired. Being a good teacher means taking total responsibility for what goes on in your classroom. It requires untold hours of preparation to create an inspiring lecture, teach a meaningful class, write and then grade a fair but challenging exam. Oh, do not forget the time your teachers also spend moderating or coaching one of our many extracurricular activities.

None of your teachers began their career in education to make a lot of money, or to receive some kind of personal glory, or even to be given the kind of acknowledgment I'm giving them. But this kind of acknowledgment is exactly what they deserve. Their dedication is unbelievable. Ladies and Gentlemen the Loyola Faculty.

Two years ago, I was attending a Jesuit School seminar in Cleveland with some of my Loyola colleagues. About three days into our stay, I was attending a meeting of Art Teachers from all over the United States. They all talked about their departments and showed examples of their students' work. When it was my turn, I talked about Loyola and showed them some pictures created by our students. Everyone was overwhelmed by the artwork. What impressed them was the size of our student body. They couldn't believe that such a body of work could come from a student body of only 200 students. Someone in the group called our school "The Little Jewel of New York City."

You want to know something? They were right. Loyola is a bright, beautiful, colorful jewel that glows right here in the middle of this magnificent city.

As these seniors know I spend a lot of time in class telling stories. Stories are a wonderful way to teach. Tonight, I'd like to tell you a few stories.

This first story was told to me at one of our recent alumni reunions. A group of former students came up to me and said they had been waiting for this reunion to tell me this story.

There were eight of them eating at a restaurant in Soho. It was a crowded place and the tables were very close together. The people at the next table were talking loudly enough that the Loyola students could hear every word.

It turns out that the people at this particular table were students at Pratt Institute. Their conversation was about their Art Professor. They were complaining about how their professor would keep telling them how terrific his high school students were. When they had problems working on an etching plate, he would say, "My high school students can

work that plate. Why not you?" Or when they didn't know the style of a particular painting by Picasso, he would say, "Not only do my high school students know that painting; they can tell me if it's an Analytical Cubistic paintings or a Synthetic Cubistic paintings.

Time and again the professor's references to these high school students would drive these college students crazy.

The Loyola students finished their dinner and paid their bill. On the way out, they stopped at the table of college students. One of the Loyola students asked, "Excuse me, but by any chance, is your teacher's name Mr. Stone?" "Yes, it's Professor Stone," one of the college students answered.

At that point the Loyola student said, "Everything your Professor Stone said is true. "We" are those students. Please have a nice evening." And they proudly walked out of the restaurant.

Those Loyola students were right. Tonight I want each and every one of you to remember those words. Whether you graduated with the highest honors, or you struggled to make it through your four years, remember: You are those students. And I should know - I've taught all of you.

It's important to be proud of whom you are and all you've accomplished over your four years at Loyola. We've watched you, we taught you, we coached you and we advised you. For us it was so exciting to see you grow and explore your many talents.

All the students I taught were told the story about Matthias Grunewald. He was a famous artist living in Northern Germany in the 1500's. Being so famous, he was given a special commission to paint a Crucifixion for the local hospital ward.

When Grunewald went to the hospital, what he saw overwhelmed him. In this large ward were beds where men and women lay moaning in agony. They were suffering from the plague and there was nothing available to cure their sickness or their pain.

Many weeks went by without the artist being able to begin his commission. You have to understand that in Grunewald's time all the artists were only allowed to create the Christ figure in a style where Christ did not experience earthly pain. For Grunewald this was a big problem. At the time it was considered blasphemy for any artist to not paint in this traditional style.

Finally, after many months of agonizing work, Grunewald completed his painting. Late in the night his painting was hung in the hospital ward. The next morning, there was a loud knock on Grunewald's door. Pulled from his bed, he was taken to the hospital ward. Waiting outside were the officials of the church. They had not seen the painting but they had heard that the artist had committed blasphemy. They pushed Grunewald through the front door, down the hallway, and through the doors into the hospital ward.

When they entered the ward, all the church officials were overwhelmed by what they saw. All the patients were quietly looking up at Grunewald's large painting on the wall.

Grunewald had not painted Christ in the manner that he was told. Instead, he had painted Christ in excruciating agony. In his Crucifixion, Christ's body had the same sores from the plague as the people who were suffering in this ward.

Grunewald's painting had a spiritual effect on the patients in that hospital ward. The patients were not offended by the painting of Christ in agony. No, they LOVED the painting. They loved it because from that painting they realized that Christ knew what they were feeling. They realized that He cared.

What Grunewald had created was one of the first truly expressionistic paintings of his time. What did he do? He screamed. He expressed the truth of all that he knew. He possibly could have been killed for creating this picture, but he had to do it.

For the last five centuries, people have come from all over the world to see this great work of art. The truth that Grunewald knew 500 years ago, the truth that he risked his life to express, is the kind of truth that is still so important today. Expressing what is really true about our world has never been easy, but it's the most important kind of truth there is. It's the kind that will last forever. Seniors: remember that.

Many years ago, when I was a student in high school, all the schools in the Los Angeles area were invited to participate in an art competition. Each school's art class was given one day to draw at a foster home for young kids. When I arrived, all the kids in the foster home were happy to see the kids from our school, just as I am sure they were happy to see the kids from all the other schools.

That day, all the students from my school played games with the foster kids, and later on, they sat down to draw. After playing ball with the foster children, I ventured out on my own. On the backside of this large old house where the foster children lived, I found a narrow passageway that led to an open area. This area was surrounded by cinderblock walls that were eight feet high.

Inside this square yard, or I should say graveyard, were discarded, beds, tables, chairs, and toys. The weather had taken a big toll on everything. Warped tables, chairs, broken toys and rain-soaked mattresses had been cast aside. I sat down alone and began to draw. I didn't completely understand it at the time, but something was telling me that this place full of discarded objects should be the subject of my drawing. This place was expressing a truth about all the foster children who had stayed in this home.

All the students from the LA schools were given two weeks to create a detailed drawing, painting, or collage from their sketches. I created a detailed 18" x 24" drawing and submitted it.

Needless to say my drawing was rejected from a major art show of the participating schools. A few weeks later I received a call from the Head of the Los Angeles School System. She had seen my work. She told me she had never seen a student produce work that was so honest and so emotional. She said she would be honored to hang my drawing in her office. I was overwhelmed. Here was someone who liked my work, even though it was so different from the others. For the first time in my life as an artist, I had screamed and it felt great.

Seniors, remember that first day in my class when you were sophomores. Remember when I asked each one of you to scream for me. Needless to say, it was a very difficult thing for most of you to do. But now you know how I teach. I wanted you to let everyone know you exist. Now the time has arrived for you to go on and let others know how great you are.

During our first meeting up in the Art Studio, or as I say again the Loyola Penthouse, I talked to you about creating those masterpieces. Every artist longs to create art he or she will always be proud of. Great works of art can be on a canvas, in film, in a book, on the dance floor or in a song. Creating something insightful for everyone is really what it's all about.

To the graduating seniors, I would like to say,

Make me proud . .

To the Loyola community that has been my second family for these last eighteen years,

I say thank you, I love you, and goodbye.
