

“BE HEROES, BE TEACHERS AND BE CIVIL”

Keynote by Nicholas W. Allard
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[Speaking about “time” as both your President and Campus Minister have already done before me:] It seems to me like it was just yesterday that I was boarding the team bus in uniform and cleats after an away high school baseball game on a cold April evening, at that moment we suddenly learned of the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Yet, as we all know, that tragic, shocking event in Memphis, Tennessee, an event that rocked the nation and the world, was 50 years ago this month. The very day before he was shot, Reverend King delivered his unforgettable final speech, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”, unmistakably revealing Dr. King’s premonition of his own death less than 24 hours later. Those soaring words of faith and hope rose miraculously from his own Garden of Gethsemane moment. Today, the lesson of Reverend King’s final homily still inspires us with his vision of “the promised land” that he, like Moses, could see, but would never reach.

Five years before, in 1963, Reverend King came to Brooklyn Heights, to preach just a few streets away in the historic Plymouth Church—a center of the Abolitionist movement before the Civil War and a stop on the Underground Railroad.

He told the congregation: “It is possible to stand up against the unjust system, resist it with all of the strength and all of the soul force that you can muster, and yet not stoop to the level of hatred and violence in the process. And, therefore, this I believe — that we can work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship and yet not use second-class methods to gain it.”

As your unique, great college, St. Francis, celebrates the anniversary of its chartering, we all are called to heed Dr. King's words, especially in these challenging times. But his message is particularly important for the young people here today because, simply put: You are needed. You are well prepared and just in time—like the cavalry arriving in a Hollywood western— needed to make a difference in the harsh and disruptive struggles played out every day before our eyes and ears. All across America, and throughout the world, people are fighting over nothing less than the future of democracy, and the future of humanity. The outcome of fundamental disagreements, indeed epic fights over justice, equality, globalism and the environment, for example, will determine whether the values and institutions that have proven to be vital to empowering people will continue to evolve, improve, and endure. Or instead, will civilization descend into a dark dystopian world dominated by power, privilege, greed, cruelty, and immorality.

Certainly, there is ample reason for concern. But I am determined to be optimistic. For many reasons. A major one is what I see when I look out at all of you gathered here this afternoon. St. Francis College is a special place. Its marvelous Franciscan tradition calls upon you—calls upon all of us—to build a better world. I consider myself a Franciscan from birth because I was born on the Feast Day of St. Francis and for that reason Francis is my confirmation name.¹ Almost 44 years ago the prayer of St. Francis was part of our wedding vows: “Lord, make us an instrument of your peace, where there is hatred let us sow love. . . “

¹ I much prefer “Francis” to the honorary Yiddish name my wife’s family has bestowed upon me: “Nudnik”.

And I also feel a deep connection to your college, and was privileged to be good friends with your late president, **Brendan Dugan**. A painting of Assisi that was a gift from him hangs in my office today.

You are blessed to be led today by **Dr. Miguel Martinez-Saenz**, a true champion of the Franciscan values of service and compassion. Of course, my friend, the one and only **Father Brian Jordan**, a true son of Brooklyn, is a source of infinite inspiration—and running tips. I was honored to write the forward to Father Jordan's compelling book, *The Heroic Priesthood of Father William B. Farrell 1867-1930: Fighting Anti-Catholicism, Waterfront Gangsterism, and Government Corruption in New York*². That's quite a title. And it is quite a book. Father Farrell was a gutsy priest who fought on behalf of poor families in Brooklyn and stood up to corruption. He was a real Brooklyn hero and someone whose example can motivate us today as we continue to fight the world's good fights.

So, because of those who lead this College so ably, and knowing of the talent, knowledge, aspirations, and character of its students, I am confident you are superbly equipped and motivated to make a positive difference for our communities, our city, our nation, and our world.

Out of the winter of our discontent—and a spring that often has felt much more like endless winter, change is in the air, and you should be part of it.

² *The Heroic Priesthood of Father William B. Farrell 1867-1930: Fighting Anti-Catholicism, Waterfront Gangsterism, and Government Corruption in New York*, by Brian Jordan, Edwin Mellen Press (June 30, 2017).

Now, it may not have escaped the attention of the accomplished, honored students present that there are a few years separating us. I confess and ask for forgiveness when I tell you that I sometimes fail to understand what makes you tick.³ You must admit at times you're a little weird: You take pictures of your food, you text people sitting next to you and you pay people to "distress" and rip your jeans. I am getting so "big" I just have to bend over and that happens for free. But what I do know about you is that you are passionate about making the world a better place. You want your life's work to be worthwhile and to matter in a good sense. My message to you students of St. Francis College is straightforward: **You are needed to be heroes, to be teachers, and to be civil.**

This is a time begging for new heroes. In the words of a song from a hit Broadway musical you may have heard of: "History Has Its Eyes on You."⁴

This is your time. This is your opportunity to step up and take on responsibility for the imperfect world in which we live, and that your children will, in turn, inherit. You can remind us of the classic qualities of the heroes we long have admired, such as selflessness, courage, modesty, respect, and adherence to core principles. Those

³ Actor Steve Buscemi memorably created an image of someone pretending to be part of an unfamiliar community, someone trying too hard to fit in. In the last episode of the hit television program, "30 Rock", Buscemi dressed youthfully, wearing a baseball cap backwards and holding a skateboard, greeted a group of teenagers with "How do you do, fellow kids?" a patently absurdly hilarious phrase that became a popular meme for both the self-aware and a put-down of those who are not.

⁴ "History Has Its Eyes on You," *Hamilton*, lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda.

virtues include the ideals of the Duns Scotus Honor Society pledge: Vision, innocence, responsibility and service.

We recently have seen how people themselves can mobilize, focus attention, raise awareness, and change perceptions. One only need look at how citizens have organized to take back control of their lives and regain their inalienable rights through recent movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Time's Up. Like these initiatives, the Parkland Strong movement of high school students once again "woke us."⁵ This megatrend is building, but outcomes are far from certain. They are but the tip of the iceberg of causes begging for action — from climate change to world health, from poverty to oppression and violence, from bigotry to intolerance.

Without doubt there is plenty of work to be done. When you think about it, it is almost heroic getting involved at all when you consider the magnitude and intractable nature of these problems. So, it may help to consider Sir Edmund Burke's observation that the biggest mistake one can make is to do nothing, because one believes they can do only a little.

Then again, you students have a lot going for you to beat the odds. You have the innate empathy, the blessed impatience and energy of youth to drive you forward. You are determined and fearless about taking on the well-heeled, formidable redoubts of the status quo and the tired, cynical complacency of your elders. Most of all, you genuinely

⁵ See Nicholas W. Allard, "Florida's Student-Survivors: The New Face of Law and Lobbying in America", The Hill, <<http://thehill.com/opinion/civil-rights/375933-floridas-student-survivors-the-new-face-of-law-and-lobbying-in-america>>.

want to make the world a better place. Go for it. Stay woke. Your elders are cheering you on. And we will follow.

You are also needed to teach. All of us, young and not so young, witnessing the grand forced civics lesson brought daily to us by ripped-from-the-headlines news, are engaged in a teaching moment that links generations with a mutual chance to learn from one another. It is not easy for movements seeking disruptive change or innovative solutions to succeed against determined, entrenched, self-perpetuating beliefs and interests, like the gun lobby. You are well-prepared to educate others how to harness their collective power effectively, how to persevere, and what needs to be done to turn ambition into reality.

It is very common to hear about millennials' and Zs great interest in networks and mentors. Usually, that interest is characterized as "careerist" and "self-centered," and focused on what a network or mentor can do for you. But you can defy that stereotype. You can be uncommon. You can be a catalyst that strengthens and helps networks effectively advance in common purpose against stubborn self-perpetuating adversaries. You can teach people how together their dreams can become reality.⁶

⁶ Recent studies including the work of Niall Ferguson have explored the historical elements of successful and unsuccessful networks, and the Oxford Internet Institutes new findings including work by Dr. Grant Block and Dr. Elizabeth Debois, assistant professor of the University of Ottawa, rebut the popular notion that digital media exacerbates partisan polarization.

Finally, we all must strive ceaselessly to be Civil. By that I mean being “Civil” in the true sense of the word in both our public and private lives.⁷ Civility has come to be synonymous with “courtesy” and “good manners,” not raising our voices in argument as though we are on a cable news panel. Yet, the Latin root word for civility, *civis*, means much more, because it literally means being a “citizen.” To be civil is literally to engage in a deeply important activity. It is to behave conscientiously, fulfilling the duties of a free citizen by committing oneself to speech and action, duly sensitive to the needs of your fellow citizens.⁸

For example, for starters, at the very least, we can vote, and encourage others to vote. Elections matter. Enough said.

I have no doubt that the people of St. Francis College will continue to lead the way forward, as they have for more than 150 years. At the forefront, you are sure to meet the students and graduates of Brooklyn Law School, who are using the power of their legal educations to make a positive difference. I only wish, selfishly, to live long enough to see how you make the future better for my six grandchildren, and their children. Even though on more than a few days I am filled with sadness and concern about the state of affairs in our crazy world, I am again both optimistic and confident you will succeed. First, with respect to the United States, I constantly am in awe of our brilliantly engineered self-correcting, cantilevered system of limited democratic self-government.

⁷ Bard College, Professor Daniel Mendelson, “James Madison, the Classics, Civility and Cell Phones,” James Madison Medical Lecture, Princeton University (Feb. 24, 2018).

⁸ *Id.* Mendelsohn also points out that the root word of “idiot”, comes from the Latin “Idiotês: A person who acts in public as if they were still in private.” A pretty good description of a lot of mobile phone users.

That gives me faith that we will eventually, if not soon, awake from our new national nightmares. Second, I have confidence in the power of people to overcome even the most intractable problems. An oyster produces a pearl, something new and beautiful, responding to the unwanted irritation of a piece of grit or sand. Much more impressively, people throughout our country and in countries everywhere, are paying attention and getting involved and pushing for alternatives to division, inequality, abandonment of law, autocracy, intolerance, hate and violence.⁹

Be heroes who we can hang lanterns over to lead and guide us. Be teachers to show us how to achieve our worthy goals. And engage in efforts to benefit more than yourself, in other words, be civil.

In the spirit of St. Francis: Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.¹⁰

⁹ See generally, E.J. Dionne, Jr., Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann *One Nation After Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not Yet Deported*. See also Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann, *It's Even Worse Than it Was* (2016 update), which itself is the sequel to Norman Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann, *The Broken Branch* (2006), followed by *It's Even Worse than it Looks* (2012); Sheryll Cashin, *Loving: Interracial Intimacy in America and the Threat to White Supremacists* (2016), arguing that racial harmony will come from the emergence of a coalition of culturally dexterous whites and people of color. Ralph Nader, *Breaking Through Power* (2016), offers a blueprint for how citizens can break through wealth and power and improve democracy.

¹⁰ For those checking the advance text of these remarks against delivery, this note contains the “outtakes”, that is some of the less scripted comments, most of which were made at the start before I began the more formal keynote.

“What a special and gracious introduction Linda [Werbel]. Thank you! My mother would believe it. But my wife Marla obviously is amused. As President Martinez-Saenz just noted, that big laugh from the red head in the front row, when Linda said I was “even better in person”, was from my wife. Linda, my mother and I thank you. I cannot remember a nicer, more generous introduction.”

“It is a privilege and great pleasure to be here on this special day with so many enormously talented honorees and award winners. Carol [Decina], who presented on behalf of National Grid, mentioned the leadership of Bob Catel. At Brooklyn Law we know Bob Catel well. He is not only an emeritus member of our Board of Trustees where he

served with great distinction for many years and a founding donor of our Center for Urban Business Entrepreneurship [CUBE], he is also passionate about providing transformational educational opportunities through the incredible Don Bosco Cristo Rey program. Our experience at Brooklyn Law School with the Cristo Rey interns who work with us has been spectacular. As I have said before, when those marvelous high school students are with us, they make us better at our jobs as we strive to set good examples for them. This program I recommend this program to any of you who can support it.

Father Jordan and your president both spoke to you about the uses of time. As I intend to do as well. A small miracle of coincidental coordination. You heard President Martinez-Saenz ask how long it will be before he is no longer introduced as the “new” President. When I ask my friend of many years the same question, Rabbi Aaron Raskin of Congregation B’nai Avraham two blocks away on Remsen Street he explained, “You are always the new President until you leave, then you are the old President. So, Miguel, we wish you many successful years as St. Francis College’s new President.

As I stand here, I must confess I am fighting against one of the deadly sins: envy. I am talking about that voice -- that incredible presence and deep voice of your President Miguel Martinez-Saenz. Well, there’s only one word for it . . . COOL. . . He is like the Barry White of academics. You know, like Barry White’s deep, deep voiced love songs – it doesn’t matter what words he uses, it’s -- cool. You know like [slowly with deep voice leaning into the mike] “Chic - -ken Nooo-dle Sooooooop.”

Father Brian Jordan, my dear friend, read to you passages from Ecclesiastes about time. I am glad that he read them, and did not try to sing those words, like “the Byrds” once did in their 1965 hit song “Turn! Turn! Turn!”. I heard Father Jordan singing the Star Spangled Banner behind me earlier. Father, keep reading scripture. And, it was a little surprising when at the end of the anthem, he muttered, “play ball.” If he had kept reading he would have come to the passage in Ecclesiastes about the eternal cycle of life, conveyed in the beautiful biblical metaphor of the external cycle of water – from the clouds to the mountain tops, down through the rivers to the sea, and then back up to the clouds. Next, in Ecclesiastes 1:9 he would have come to the words of the prophet: “There is no new thing under the sun.” This all ties together with all of the messages you honorees are hearing today. Use your time on earth to good purpose, remember that all you accomplish is thanks to the legacy of those who proceeded you and will be continued by generations after you; and finally, throughout the never ending change over time, there is continuity, and your life’s work should be to keep what is good and to change what needs to be better.”

Before I turn to my assignment as keynoter, I must note that it is quite daunting to be the caboose on such a spectacular program. The achievements of all of the students are incredibly impressive. I hope that all of you will consider law school. Valerie, if you received any more awards, you might face a monopoly investigation – bravo. Alexander, I am sure you will be a terrific lawyer. Frankly, I will try not to be anticlimactic. I have been in this situation before. Once, when I was the after-dinner speaker at my Oxford College, I learned just before I was to begin, that the great Kris Kristofferson was going to sing before I spoke. Talk about being anticlimactic. Well, on that occasion I was able to joke that Kristofferson was my warm up act. I do not believe it is possible to get away with that quip today.”