

Closing Remarks – Jeff Gourgon

Bon après-midi à tous. Mon nom est Jeff Gourgon. I've just graduated from my undergrad in Conflict Studies, and I wanted to thank you so much for the opportunity to share some closing words, and since I only have a few minutes I think it's best that I jump right in...

To my fellow graduates in the room, let's all raise our right hands. Now, take your right hand and place it over your heart, and then take a minute and see if you can feel anything. Believe it or not, there is a good chance you are feeling your heartbeat, which allows me to say congratulations, you have survived! Despite the terrifying intellectual freefall, some earth shattering spiritual awakenings, copious amounts of caffeine and sleepless nights, you have indeed made it out alive. How about a round of applause for the graduates!

I started my journey at Saint Paul 4 years ago, and I remember reading the university's mission statement and core values and feeling incredibly excited and blessed but also a little skeptical. It all sounded too good to be true, we were a community rooted in alleviating social injustice, a group that defaults to thinking critically about ethics, faith, society and conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and above all else, a university that was human, open and engaged. It was everything I could ask for from a university, so I had to wonder how this was all really going to come together for me... and I must admit, for a while I didn't know where I fit and where I was headed.

I was learning so much about the different ways to be in the world that I was ready to throw in the towel and get back to all of the things I felt I was putting off in light of everything that I was learning. I was discovering the basics of philosophy and idea of people having different conceptual frameworks, the virtue of dependency and our obligation to the other, how resolving conflict is more creating space for dialogue rather than who is right and who is wrong, understanding how our core values shape our identity and how we then fit our identity into the bigger picture. I could go on forever how all of the phenomenal things and paradigms this university has taught us, but my point is that none of this really affected me until the day I had to decide whether I was quitting my degree 2 years early or if I was going to be *all in*. And after a month of deliberation, I decided I was going to be all in. And it was this moment and these following weeks that all of the different parts of me came together for the first time, and I felt the true power this institution has for guiding transformation.

The moment I decided to be all in was also the moment I decided focus on relationship building. I had to decide what it meant to be in a relationship with my university, with my peers, with my part-time job, my parents, my partner and most importantly, with myself. What boundaries do I need to have in place to ensure I get the most out of my university experience? What boundaries do I need to have in place to enjoy my part-time jobs while remaining productive at both school and work? And also, what needs need to be communicated to help me be the best

version of myself? And as I began developing these conscious relationships, I learned that it was Saint Paul that has helped develop the tools for healthy relationship building in the first place.

I may not have a PHD in philosophy or theology under my belt to help share some words of wisdom for the future, but I do feel confident in reminding us graduates to view our lives in the context of relationships. Don't be afraid to be all in. Don't be afraid to develop a healthy relationship with yourself. Dare to ask yourself what you need to feel more connected, and don't hesitate to communicate those needs to others in your life. And for those of us who feel lost figuring out the next step in our journey, give yourself permission to dive into the mystery, and to develop a relationship with our uncertain future. It's okay to feel lost, it's okay to feel uncertain and it's okay not to have all the answers right now. What's important is that you are focusing on knowing and owning your strengths, putting yourself in environment where you're strengths are recognized, and that you continue to learn how best take care of yourself in the process.

Saint Paul has a phenomenal ability provide the tools for critical thinking, and I think it's vital that we don't underestimate the power we have as Saint Paul Alumni to be people who are in relationship with the world, rather than observers, critics or blind followers. Very few things are black and white, one thing or another, right or wrong. Rather, we have been given the tools to understand the world in a more human way, and to understand that context is everything.

My favorite author Brené Brown writes that that, "what we know matters, but who we are matters more." So many of us have had the privilege of studying our disciplines within the context of character development alongside intellect. And because Intellect without integrity is just content, we graduates we have the advantage of humanizing what we know. This is our strength, to be in relationship with ourselves **and** the world is to humanize the experience. And it's when we humanize the world around us that when we become agents of change, and how **we** can continue to guide transformation together.

Thank you for your time this afternoon, and of course a big thank you to everyone who helped bring this afternoon's ceremony together. God bless.