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Butler University Baccalaureate Faculty Address, May 6, 2016

Dr. Brent A. R. Hege

Please allow me to add my greetings to the gathered students, faculty, staff, parents, family, friends, and especially to the class of 2016. Congratulations on a job well done! I'm particularly grateful to the senior class for the honor of addressing you all this afternoon.

Today we are participating in the grand old tradition of the baccalaureate service. When I was thinking of what to say to you all today, fully aware that very few of you graduates will remember anything that is said to you this weekend by any of the number of people who will be talking at you before you can finally walk across that stage to receive your diploma and then head out to a nice dinner and a well-deserved cocktail or two, I went to my old standby of etymology. Being a lover of words, I thought it might be interesting to reflect on the meaning of the words we use for this weekend. Perhaps there's something interesting and memorable in the word "baccalaureate" (whence we get the "bachelor" in "bachelor's degree") that I could use as a springboard for my comments. So I took a look at a few dictionaries and etymology resources to learn more. Here's what I found:

Baccalaureate: from the Medieval Latin *baccalarius*, "vassal farmer, adult serf without a landholding," one who helps or tends a *baccalaria*, a "field or land in the lord's demesne" (according to old French sources, perhaps from an alteration of *vacca* "a cow" and originally "grazing land"). Or from Latin *baculum* "a stick," because the squire would practice with a staff, not a sword. Perhaps several independent words have become confused in form.

OK. That's not very helpful, is it?

Then I thought about the words "graduation" and "degree," but that immediately made me nervous because that's taking me into science territory, and, while I love science and appreciate all of the amazing work my colleagues in the sciences do every day here at Butler, let's just say that for me, as a theologian, to take us down that path... Well, we'd be venturing pretty far outside my wheelhouse.

Now I was starting to panic just a little bit. What am I going to say to these people? I'm excited to have this honor of addressing you all this afternoon, but I'm also becoming a bit terrified that I'll be standing up here with nothing at all to say. I felt excitement and terror all at once.

And then it hit me. That is probably exactly what you graduates (and probably your families, too) are feeling right now: excitement and terror, all at once. It just so happens that this is very much in my wheelhouse as a theologian, so I want to share a few thoughts on excitement and terror because, after all, what is life itself but something that both excites us and terrifies us, often at the very same time?

I have to admit, I didn't come up with this all on my own. Almost one hundred years ago, in the darkest days of World War I, a German Lutheran theologian named Rudolf Otto wrote a groundbreaking book called *The Idea of the Holy* in which he suggested that not only life but the divine reality itself can be characterized as what he called in Latin *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Translated into English we can say that the divine reality is a mystery that is at once terrifying and fascinating, attractive, exciting.

If you're honest with yourself, isn't that how you're feeling right now? Aren't you both excited and terrified of what's waiting for you outside this Butler bubble? You've spent several years of your life – in many ways the most important years of your life – on a journey of discovery, experimentation, and growth. You've been pushed and prodded and challenged. You've had your share of failures and you've also had your share of successes. (I'm assuming, since you're all sitting here right now, that on balance you've had more of the latter than the former!) You've made friendships that will last a lifetime and you've had experiences that have profoundly shaped your sense of yourself and your way of understanding and living in the world. You've come to the end of a long journey.

At the same time, though, you might have realized that so much of the last several years has been preparation for something else. That's why we call what happens tomorrow "commencement," because it's more than the end of this journey; it's the beginning of a much longer journey, and you can't see the destination from here. That's exciting, but it's also terrifying.

Some of you might lean more toward the excitement end of that spectrum, and others might be leaning more toward the terror end, but we're all living and moving somewhere between the two (and I hate to break it to you, but that doesn't stop after graduation!). That's because to be human is to live in this tension between excitement and terror. The world – life itself – is both exciting and terrifying. Each of us will experience great joys and great sadness. We will know exhilarating triumphs and we will know profound loss. *C'est la vie*, my friends. *C'est la vie*.

What matters – what *really* matters – is how we deal with that. My one great hope as a representative of the faculty is that we have given you the resources to deal with life in all its terror and its fascination. Yes, we've taught you a lot of information and you've done projects, written papers, taken exams, and met all of the requirements to earn a degree from this institution. But if all we've done is give you information, then I'm afraid we've failed you. What is far more important, in my estimation at least, is that we prepared you to live self-reflective, creative, engaging, meaningful, impactful lives wherever you find yourself. That we've given you the tools to understand yourself, the world, and your place in it. That we've invited you to admire and appreciate the world in all its frail, tragic, awesome, beautiful splendor. That we've sparked a passion in you to live a life of purpose.

So what would that look like, exactly? How would we like you to embrace life in all its terror and fascination? I want to suggest that there are four traits, or virtues, that will serve each of us particularly well as we make our way through the world. These virtues are humility, courage, love, and joy.

The terror of the world is all too real. Many of us have already experienced that directly, but anyone who follows the news knows that the world is a broken, tragic place. Dealing with that reality requires us to have courage, the capacity to face reality and to take a stand for something, to say “no” to a world that is indifferent to the cries of the suffering and that tempts us only to care about ourselves. It requires us to fight the good fight for the sake of all that is good, and true, and beautiful.

But we must never forget that we never know the whole story, that the world is too big and too complex for us to understand it all. Knowing answers is important, but we must never forget that the really important questions don’t have easy answers. As the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel put it in his wonderful novel, *The Town beyond the Wall* (and he knew a thing or two about terror and fascination), “It isn’t easy to live always under a question mark. But who says that the essential question has an answer? The essence of [humanity] is to be a question, and the essence of the question is to be without answer.” How we live into that realization says a lot about our character, and I’m suggesting that the virtues required to make the most of this reality are the humility to accept the unknowability of things and the courage to live a life of meaning and passion all the same.

At the same time – *the same time* – the world is a marvelous, beautiful, wonderful place. It is a gift to be alive in this magnificent world, and we ought never to forget that, either. The virtues required to deal with life’s terrors should open new vistas of insight and appreciation, so that when we face the terrifying world we find that we are face-to-face with a powerfully attractive, exciting, fascinating mystery. In their own unique ways, each of the world’s religious traditions invites us to see the world in this way. We are not called to ignore the terror of the world, but to face it with humility and courage. We will find, more often than not, that it is in the facing of terror that we discover reserves of strength and commitment that we never knew we had. We will find deep

reservoirs of love precisely when we live for others and fight to make the world a better place for us all, when we take the vulnerable but necessary step of gratefully receiving and genuinely giving love. As the author of the first epistle of John reminds us, “Perfect love casts out fear.” May we all be perfectly fearless lovers of the world in all its terrifying and fascinating mystery.

Those of you who had me for FYS all those years ago know that I can’t go more than a few minutes without mentioning Paul Tillich, and today is no different. Tillich knew what it was like to face life’s terrors. He was a German chaplain in the trenches of World War I and he was forced to flee Germany for the United States when the Nazis came to power, watching helplessly as his beloved homeland succumbed to its worst impulses and descended into the darkest depths of chaos. But what he found even after all of this suffering and despair was joy. As he put it in one of his sermons,

Eternal joy is not to be reached by living on the surface. It is rather attained by breaking through the surface, by penetrating the deep things of ourselves, of our world, and of God. The moment in which we reach the last depth of our lives is the moment in which we can experience the joy that has eternity within it, the hope that cannot be destroyed, and the truth on which life and death are built. For in the depth is truth; and in the depth is hope; and in the depth is joy. (Tillich, “The Depth of Existence”)

My hope for each one of you is that you will take what you have learned here at Butler out into this terrifying and fascinating world in all humility and all courage, that you will discover within yourselves deep wells of love, that, when you reach the end of your journey begun here today, you will at last know true joy.

Thank you, and congratulations to the class of 2016.