

May 2007 Commencement
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Thank you. Good morning, Father Wild, trustees, faculty and administrators, my fellow honorees, proud parents and families. And congratulations, members of the Class of 2007.

That lovely introduction was a kind of way saying I am now out of a job.

I know what some of you must be thinking. You're thinking: [ital] I [end ital] went to Marquette. [ital] I'm [end ital] unemployed. Why aren't [ital] I [end ital] giving the commencement address? And you have a point.

When Father Wild asked me to deliver this address, I thought I would literally be delivering it, to someone more dignified than I, who would then read it to you. When he mentioned DHL, I said, "Sure, DHL or UPS, I'll get it there." Then he explained that DHL was a Doctor of Humane Letters and that I would be getting one. And I thought, this must be some kind of a clerical error. After all, he is a cleric.

But I am grateful beyond words for this honor. Nineteen years ago, my commencement speaker was the honorable William H. Rehnquist, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. And while I don't remember what he said that day, I do vividly recall being inspired by his example, and I vowed then and there that I too would pursue a career that allowed me to spend all day in a robe.

And so I became a writer. Writing is a solitary existence, hours on end spent alone in a room. Many days, I have no reason to put on pants.

Today, for instance.

But I hope you will not infer a lack of seriousness from my lack of pants. Another man who seldom wore pants - Gandhi - was asked what he thought of Western civilization. He replied, "I think it would be a great idea."

And to this day, civilization too often remains just that - an elusive goal, a great idea, one that all of you are now charged with making a reality.

Iraq. The environment. Disease and genocide in Africa. All of these issues now seem insoluble, just as apartheid and the Cold War did when I arrived at Marquette. But have faith: By the time I graduated, they were already becoming memories. I wish I could claim some causal connection, but alas, no. I did not bring down the Berlin Wall as my summer job. No, on my summer job, I worked at a Tom Thumb convenience store and wondered what would become of my life, and if that life would involve Slurpees. Standing behind the counter in a red smock, I envied the hot dogs as they rode all day on that little hot dog Ferris wheel.

But the point remains: You mustn't think the world's problems can't be solved, and you mustn't think that you - you, individually - are not the one to solve them. You are.

Believe me: If I stand here today receiving a doctor of letters, you will all be getting Nobels. As a sophomore, I remember sprinting from the old Amigo's at 16th and Wells back to my room at Tower with a bagful of Mexican food when I got caught in a Biblical downpour. The bag - already translucent with grease - split open and all the food fell into a filthy puddle in the parking lot of Cobeen, and I stood there staring forlornly at the nacho chips and chalupas adrift on the water, a tortilla flotilla.

What did I do next? Exactly what all of you would have done: I gathered it up, brought it to my room, put it all on my radiator to dry. And then I ate it. For the rest of the year, my room smelled like 10,000 Taco Bells. Imagine sleeping inside a rolled up chimichanga or living inside the deep-fryer of a Chi-Chi's restaurant and you get some idea. It smelled so bad that at the end of the year, my roommate, driven to madness, committed an act so strange, so depraved, so irrational that it still defies belief: He transferred to Madison.

All of which is to say I am not a person who would presume to advise you on how to solve the world's problems.

Except to repeat that they can be solved and that you are the ones to solve them.

Right now some of you are asking yourself how can I SAVE Western Civ when I slept through Western Civ?

Well, here's a parable on the wonderful unpredictability of life: A few years ago I played a round of golf with the esteemed governor of my home state. Jesse The Body Ventura spent most of his adult life as a professional wrestler - like me, he made an honest if undignified living in his underwear - and he sometimes supplemented his wrestling income by working as stage security for concerts. He was one of those guys in the yellow shirts who throw you off the stage when you try to bumrush Bono.

At the old Met Center in my hometown of Bloomington, Minnesota, Ventura worked two Rolling Stones concerts. Twenty years later, when the Stones were playing in St. Paul, Governor Ventura invited them to the Governor's mansion. And they accepted. When the governor mentioned that he twice served as the Stones' bodyguard in Bloomington, Keith Richards, wearing a silk kimono, stirred to life and said: "Let me get this straight. You bodyguarded us 20 years ago and now you're the gov'nor?"

"That's right," Ventura replied.

And Keith Richards shook his head and said, "Flippin' hell. Great country, mate." Only I'm pretty sure he didn't say flippin'.

And though Richards was recently in the news for allegedly trying to snort his father's ashes, I believe he is wise on this count: You still can be what you want to be in this flippin' great country of ours.

In high school, I watched Minnesota Twins games on the TV in my basement and wrote stories about them on my mother's Royal typewriter and dreamed that I was writing those stories for Sports Illustrated. Then I'd throw the stories away in case, God forbid, somebody should read them.

Three years after I graduated from Marquette, the Twins won the World Series in Minneapolis and I wrote the cover story for Sports Illustrated in that same basement. Only now I had 20 million readers.

When my wife, Rebecca, was a little girl, her mother told her she could be anything she wanted to be when she grew up. Rebecca said, "I want to play in the NFL." Her mom said, "Well, anything but that." So Rebecca wrote to Boston Celtics president Red Auerbach and said she was going to be the first woman to play in the NBA.

And guess what? Rebecca went on to win a national basketball championship in college, won an Olympic gold medal, helped found the women's National Basketball Association and - best of all - played one-on-one against Big Bird on Sesame Street, demonstrating that there are "two Os in Lobo." Her college jersey now hangs in the Basketball Hall of Fame and her Olympic jersey hangs in the Smithsonian, right next to Dorothy's ruby slippers from "The Wizard of Oz." Follow the yellow-brick road, indeed.

So the question is: What do you want to be? Or, if I may put it more grandly, what do you want the world to be? Don't tell me. Show me. You're out of school now: Show-and-tell is over. When your life is graded, show will count for a lot more than tell.

For my commencement, my mom and dad drove over from the Twin Cities and stayed in a Howard Johnson's near here. Three years later, my mother was gone. And soon after, come to think of it, so was the Howard Johnson's. When my mom called me in New York in the summer of 1991 to say she was dying, she said - just before hanging up the phone - "I love you." And I remember thinking, 'Well, of course you do.'

A few months later, I flew home for her funeral and my dad met me in the driveway and he said, "I love you." In both cases, never were three words more unnecessary. My parents' love was obvious and demonstrated daily. Ours was not the kind of family who ended every phone conversation with, "I love you," "I love you, too," "I love you more," "No, I love you more, don't forget to pick up bread . . ."

If love is blind, it is certainly entitled to be mute. And in our family it was at the very least tongue-tied. I didn't need to hear that my parents loved me, for I saw and felt - still see and feel - my parents' love every day.

This doesn't mean they liked me. On graduation day of 1988, my father gave me a set of soft-sided luggage and what he calls The Golden Handshake, a ceremonial photo-op, in which he shook my hand in front of Gesu and absolved himself of any further financial responsibility in my life. He did it with all my siblings and the message was not a subtle one: Get the hell out of here. And yet, even then, he hedged his bet. My parents didn't ship my belongings to New York City until nine months after I started at Sports Illustrated, just in case I needed to come home.

So: You want the world to be a more loving place? Easy: Be more loving. My father didn't know his own father, but he raised five happy children who are now raising twelve happy children and so he gave 17 people a better start in life than he had. There is no higher calling in life than making the world better for one person, and he has done it for 17. He's made the world a less happy place for a lot of people, too. But I assure you, every one of those telemarketers had it coming.

Gandhi said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." I recently saw that on a bumper sticker in Connecticut. It was on a car belching black exhaust and consuming gas at three-and-a-half bucks a gallon. But let's overlook those minor details and concentrate on the sentiment: Be the Change.

Last year, I met a 68-year-old blind man in New Jersey named Ed Lucas, whose wife left him when their two children were very young, and Ed raised the boys on his own, taking them to the movies every Saturday afternoon at the Loews in Jersey City. Every Saturday, Ed sat there in the dark, listening to the movies. One day, after an eternity of music, he asked the boys if the movie was ever gonna start. His son Chris said: "Dad, the movie started an hour ago." It was the Disney musical "Fantasia."

The blind man taking his kids to the movies is as good a definition of parental love as I have ever heard.

So be the change. Don't leave it to our leaders to solve our problems. I've met our leaders and they're very much like you. Or, more sobering still, they're very much like me.

A few years ago, I was at a private party at the NBA All-Star Game in Atlanta when President Clinton walked into the room. My now-wife had met him on several occasions and so he greeted her warmly and she introduced me as her fiancée and President Clinton said to me, "You're getting married. That's great. If I could just give you one piece of marital advice . . ." And I thought, 'This is fantastic. I'm getting marital advice from President Clinton.' But he said to have as many kids as we can because they'll take care of us in our old age, and I took that to heart.

Then a photographer asked to take a picture and I glommed onto one side of the president and Rebecca on to the other and the picture was taken. Then the photographer gestured for me to move out of the frame. Clinton's Secret Service man, God bless him, said 'Don't worry,

that happens to me all time.' And I assure you, it happens to me all the time, too. Someone will come up and recognize my 6'4" wife and, I assume, me and ask if it's all right to take a picture and I smile and say, "Sure," and just as I'm about to say "Cheese" the guy will hand me the camera and put his arm around my wife.

One time, I was asked to stay in the frame. At O'Hare, a man asked to take a picture of Rebecca and I instinctively stepped out of the frame and he said, "No, no, you stay in there too, Andre Agassi."

I met the current President Bush in the White House. I had just come from the Kentucky Derby and had red clay from the Churchill Downs track all over my dress shoes and so I left muddy footprints all over the West Wing carpeting. It looked like an Arthur Murray dance chart. President Bush called me "Mr. Sports Illustrated," because he couldn't remember my name, even though it was on a card in front of me. And he recalled having just come from Ohio State, where he said he had enjoyed speaking to the - he couldn't think of the name for all of you - and finally he said he enjoyed meeting the . . . the . . . "the GRADUATORS." After our interview, he asked me if I thought Barry Bonds was on steroids.

I wrote about all of this. And when I left Sports Illustrated two months ago, the President - five years after our meeting - sent me a handwritten letter that I found tied to our mailbox post because the door to our mailbox doesn't close. The letter began, "Dear Mr. Sports Illustrated, I read your final column in your literary home of 19 years. Like many who enjoy your work, I'll miss your humor, style and compassion. Please don't worry about the mud in the West Wing. After a lot of scrubbing, I have finally cleaned the mess. I enjoyed meeting you. I wish you all the best in your next venture. Sincerely, George Bush. P.S., Good luck, STEVE." That is to say, I do too know your name.

So, those making the history of our age - for better or worse - aren't all that different from you and me. They take their pants off one leg at a time and read Sports Illustrated in the bathroom. There is no reason why you can't make the history of your age.

Had I known at 21 what I know now about authority and the trappings of power and what we traditionally think of as "success," I'd have been much less intimidated about going out there into the so-called real world.

So relax. As Marquette graduates you are extraordinarily well-positioned to make it in this world and to make this world a better place. I didn't yet realize this when I graduated and immediately moved to New York City. At LaGuardia airport, a helpful stranger - without my even asking - silently took my soft-sided luggage off the baggage carousel and brought it to his car, an unlicensed gypsy cab; when he charged me 40 bucks for a 20 dollar fare into Manhattan I asked if that included tip and he said - I will never forget this - he said, "A tip would be nice."

On one of my first days in a cubicle at Sports Illustrated, a co-worker offered to get sandwiches at a deli across the street and I ordered what I had eaten since first grade: Bologna and American cheese with mayo on white bread. And my colleagues - many of whom would become friends - howled with laughter. And I thought, not for the first time, "What am I doing here? Who do I think I am? I'm an impostor in this East Coast, establishment, Ivy League world."

But I gradually gained confidence. It helped to demystify this world that I had three roommates from Yale who weren't exactly brain surgeons and thought Minneapolis, Indianapolis and Milwaukee were pretty much all the same interchangeable place, which they frequently conflated as Mindianapolis.

And it helped that I'd sometimes see my Marquette contemporary Chris Farley in black Chuck Taylor hightops and zebra-striped Zubaz sweat-pants in the communion line at St. Patrick's Cathedral, after he'd become a star on Saturday Night Live. And that was inspiring, to see another Midwesterner from Marquette making his way in a very public occupation.

He possessed one of the most attractive qualities a human being can have: He could laugh at himself. I took myself too seriously when I was your age; I don't anymore. You'll discover all too quickly - if you haven't already - that you're not a larger-than-life phenomenon, that life is a larger-than-YOU phenomenon. My first wedding present was addressed - not as a joke - to Rebecca and Steve Lobo. I saved the mailing label to remind me of who I am. If I wore britches, I would never get too big for them.

So I gradually became less worried by what the world thought of me, and more comfortable, and more confident, in my place in that world. Who did I think I was, this Midwestern hayseed who called soda "pop,"

asked for Wonder bread in a New York deli and had so much faith in his fellow man that he eagerly surrendered his valuables to the first person he ever saw at LaGuardia?

I'll tell you who I was, who I am, who we are: We are Marquette.

Don't ever forget it. I know you won't. You've been raised too well and are - it's official now - too well-educated.

Last week, my wife and I got a new TV and we lay the empty box it came in on its side in the yard for our two-year-old daughter to play in. Our daughter, Siobhan, graciously invited me into that box and we lay there on our stomachs for a long time staring out at our garden. And I got to thinking.

Now, one of the many pieces of bad advice you'll get in life is "Think outside the box." Let me tell you: Sometimes it pays to think inside a box. And so my daughter and I lay in that box and gazed out at the dozens upon dozens of tulips my wife planted in rows last fall. They bloomed this month, tilting ever so slightly toward the sun. And I thought how remarkable it is that in nature, life wants to grow towards the light.

Now I'm looking out at another crop of spring perennials - you graduates; you gradulators - and I see row upon row of you in the sublime beauty of your youth. And my only wish for you is just that: That you will keep growing towards the light.

I know you will. Congratulations and thank you all.