

**Lives of Service
Commencement Address
Ripon College, Ripon, Wisconsin
May 16, 2010**

President Joyce, and let me stop there and say what an extraordinary leader he is. I overheard him say to those of us on the platform, “the key is not to cry ‘til the end.” He loves his students. So President Joyce, trustees, faculty and staff, relieved parents, family members, distinguished guests, and most importantly -- the members of the outstanding – and now graduating -- class of 2010. You have earned a degree at an institution that outperforms the nation in its commitment to community service, college graduation rates, and placement in graduate schools and the workforce. President Joyce tells me your job prospects look good – even in a tough economy – so just give him a call if you have any trouble.

It’s truly an honor to stand with one of Ripon’s favorite sons, Father Wally, who gave a moving address last night, and one of Wisconsin’s finest teachers, John Heasley (John, I’d like to take that course on Martian Literature you referenced) in a town that was the birthplace of the Republican Party, a stop on the Underground Railroad to usher slaves to freedom, and home to leaders of the Women’s Suffrage movement. The mission of Ripon College is to prepare students for “socially responsible citizenship.” Not a small mission. Lives of service are in Ripon’s DNA.

I am aware that the saying on your Senior Week Shirts – we came, we saw, we didn’t remember much -- could be the verdict on my commencement speech. So my message today will be challenging and brief.

Twenty-eight years ago, Wayne Meisel and I sat together at our own

college graduation, wearing Senior T-shirts similar to yours under our robes, and listened as Mother Theresa – the Father Wally of our generation -- spoke. I had a lot on my mind that week –celebrations, saying goodbye to roommates and friends, moving out, and wondering what I might do with the rest of my life, other than panic.

As I looked at that tiny woman from India, wrapped in her white and blue robes, and saw the peace and fulfillment she radiated from serving the poor and dying in the ghettos of Calcutta, I remember forgetting my own cares for a moment. I couldn't help but wonder, "Can we really find our own happiness if we lose ourselves in helping others?" Years later, I would discover that we can. Mother Theresa led a life of service.

As you leave college and all that has become familiar to you to pursue your own happiness in life, I want to leave you with two thoughts based on my own experience, and I want to highlight lives of service that affected me. Then I want to leave you to your celebrations.

The first idea may not surprise you: choose a profession that matches your passion; if you are not sure what your passion is, keep pursuing it until you find it. Don't pursue a career for your parents, for money or for status; find what you love and find your mission. You are likely to experience multiple failures and missteps, but persevere, and you will find your place. This advice may sound obvious to you. But given the pressures in life, it's actually difficult to choose this path and stick with it.

I discovered, after many wrong turns, including five years as a Wall Street lawyer and too many failures to recount, that I was built to do something else. I used to see this dark cloud of gloom gathering every Sunday night before going back to work for another week as a lawyer. I remember feeling that my father had practiced law for 40 years

successfully and that law was my expected path. I remember the pressures to make money to support my wife and newborn child in New York City and the allure of going to a prestigious law firm. I achieved those goals, but wasn't happy because I wasn't doing what I was built to do.

So how did I find that passion? After spending time suffering through jobs I didn't like and that didn't fit, I started paying attention to the times in my life when I became absorbed by what I was doing. I thought about whom I admired in life and what it was about their lives that drew me to them. I even thought about what, at the end of my life, I might like to be remembered for – in the eyes of my family and friends – what purpose my life would have served.

I eventually discovered that I was built to work in public service -- that most things in my life pointed to this clear path. Public service took me to unusual places to find fulfillment – to the office of the most junior member of the lower House of Congress for half the pay of my previous job; from a comfortable West Wing office focused on domestic policy to a bunker below the White House on 9/11; from working with non-profits on domestic issues to villages in Madagascar and Rwanda in Africa to help end deaths from malaria. My paths were not predictable and yours may not be either, but in hindsight, every step I took made sense as I learned from my failures and circled toward what I was built to do. Strangely, my career found me.

America's favorite poet spoke eloquently about this alignment of passion with profession. He said, "My object in living is to unite my avocation with my vocation. As my two eyes make one in sight. Only where love and need are one, and the work is play for mortal stakes, is the deed ever really done for heaven and the future's sakes." One last

homework assignment – read Robert Frost’s “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” particularly these lines from it, and apply them to your own life. Think about the times in your life when you connected to something you loved and lost track of everything around you. Start piecing together those moments and see where that leads you. When your work is aligned with your passion, your life will be full. So, let your motto become: We came, we saw, we found our calling.

My second main thought, I hope, will challenge you. It is not enough to align your passion with your profession. Your life’s work cannot and must not be only for the sake of your own comfort. In order for your life to have meaning, you must choose a life of service in some way. I have come across some remarkable people whose lives of service changed my own life.

Consider Ray Chambers, a businessman on Wall Street who did one of the first leveraged buyouts of a company and was now wealthy, but completely unfulfilled. He dedicated the rest of his life to serving others. He mentored a young disadvantaged boy from Newark, New Jersey for 27 years from elementary school to beyond college graduation – someone who might not have made it without Ray’s help. He helped bring five former U.S. Presidents together to engage millions of Americans in volunteer service. When he discovered there was a fully preventable and treatable disease called malaria in Africa that was needlessly killing 1 million people a year, mostly women and children, he organized a new non-profit, Malaria No More, a White House Summit on Malaria, and became United Nations Special Envoy for Malaria, literally mobilizing the world to end malaria deaths by 2015. He made all of these things happen through his will and leadership. Because of Ray’s life, millions of lives on the planet will be

saved. What is your life of service?

Another friend of mine, Bob Nixon, was a famous Hollywood producer of films like *Gorillas in the Mist*. He came to Washington, DC and saw thousands of young people living in neighborhoods within view of the Capitol Building who woke up in the morning and went to bed at night to the sound of gunfire. He also saw they lived on the banks of one of the most polluted rivers in America – the Anacostia. So he organized an effort that brought two endangered species together – the young men and women who live in these violent neighborhoods with the polluted Anacostia River that could use their skills to clean it up. This Earth Conservation Corps of young leaders is cleaning up the river, educating others to help, and bringing the nation’s symbol – the Bald Eagle – back to our nation’s capital. In the process, these young people are discovering that even they – these children who were never told they were worth anything – could change their communities and save their own lives. Thousands of young people who would not have made it beyond their neighborhoods are being given a second chance because of Bob Nixon. His is a life of service.

Your life of service doesn’t have to start when you’re older. It can start now. My friend Wendy Kopp was in college and was concerned about the state of our public schools. She also believed that many in her generation would choose to be teachers in high need areas instead of more lucrative careers if given the chance to make a difference in the lives of children. So she wrote her senior thesis about an initiative that would become “Teach for America.” In the first year, Teach for America deployed 500 talented teachers – teachers like John Heasley and Professor Colucci -- in six low-income communities across the nation. Today, Teach for America engages more than 7,300 teachers and reaches nearly half a

million students every year. Over its life, it has reached 3 million students. Good evidence shows that teachers from Teach for America outperform their counterparts in boosting student achievement. It also has built a pipeline of leaders committed to transforming American education, such as Michelle Rhee, who is leading the charge to reform our public schools in Washington, D.C. These are lives of service.

Why should you serve? You are the Millennials – the most charitable, socially aware, and innovative generation since the Greatest Generation of World War II. Your levels of volunteering are higher, and you have more opportunities to serve your country through programs like Teach for America, Habitat for Humanity, the Harlem Children’s Zone, and programs like Father Wally’s Water Corps, than any previous generation. The challenges your generation faces are significant – from the more than one million young people who drop out of high school every year with no life prospects, to the 15 million children at risk of not reaching productive adulthood; to the more than 33 million Americans in need of a hot meal; and to the more than one million returning veterans whose transitions home could be much better if they were engaged in community service on the home front. And there is poverty and disease and conflict around the world. The needs go on and on and you can help meet them.

Why should you serve? Because we actually owe something to a country that enables us to live in freedom. Service is not only in Ripon’s DNA, it’s in America’s DNA. George Washington gave 50 years of service to his country; John Adams said, “The duty to serve our country ends but with our lives.” A youthful President simply told us to “ask not.” That icon of the Republican Party, Ronald Reagan, recognized that “the spirit of volunteer service flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of

our nation.” After 9/11, President Bush urged us to build upon the gathering momentum of millions of acts of kindness and goodness and decency. President Obama said that, through your service, you can see how your own story connects to the larger American story. Your country is calling you to the community of conscience. You should answer that call.

Why should you serve? Because you will discover that Mother Theresa was right – that as much as those who are suffering need you, you also need them. When the Founding Fathers talked about the pursuit of happiness, these men and women of the Enlightenment weren’t talking about private pleasure and gain, but about the complete and happy life – about what we could do together as active citizens to promote the public happiness. Today we know that when we serve, regions of our brains connected to human happiness are triggered. When we serve, we’re happier; neuroscientists now have the brain scans to prove it. Why should you serve? Because through your service, your life will find meaning, and its purpose, and you will lose your fears and desires in helping others.

A life of service will mean something different for each one of you. We won’t all be Father Wally – Catholic priests dedicating every moment to service – but we can carry the spirit of Father Wally and Mother Theresa with us in what we do. You can be a doctor, but be the kind of doctor who does a mission trip every year, or works at the free clinic two Saturdays a month. You can be a lawyer, but be the kind of lawyer who takes on pro bono cases every year to help the poor and needy. You can be a chef, but be the kind of chef that thinks about how to educate low-income communities on better eating habits to address childhood obesity. You can be a military intelligence officer, but be the kind who reduces armed conflict

and fosters peace. Be the kind of citizen who votes, writes letters to elected officials, runs for office, and attends school board meetings.

And so to the Class of 2010, in addition to we came, we saw, we didn't remember much, let your motto also be we came, we saw, we served

-- and in that service, we transformed our world and our own lives. I can see the new T-Shirts now with your service missions on them. So get outside your zones of comfort; risk failure again and again until you discover your passion and your life's work; find your service mission; and pursue the kind of happiness – the public happiness -- the Founders envisioned.

So, congratulations to you. And to your parents, teachers and friends who helped along the way. I want to end by echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson's words, from The American Scholar, to urge you to follow your own instincts along your journey – “[You] did not yet see, and thousands of young men [and women] as hopeful now crowding to the barriers for the career do not yet see, that, if you plant yourself [firmly] on your instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to you” in both your professions and your lives of service. Thank you and God bless you all.