University of Dallas Senior Convocation Address 2014
Evan Hierholzer

President Keefe, Provost Berry, Deans, Faculty, Staff, Friends and fellow classmates of the class of 2014,

The University of Dallas valedictorian of 2010 once wrote, quote—"Do not begin or end your speech with a quotation" — end quote. I hope that in disregarding that advice, albeit in a playful manner, I have actually endorsed its principle—namely, that one must intensely strive for originality, since clichés, which should be avoided like the plague, are the name of the game when it comes to speeches like this. In any case, though I may not deliver a rousing, inspirational, or even humorous convocation address, I can at least vouch for its originality. I did not plagiarize, as I did with my senior novel project, and I have the English Department’s coversheet to confirm the fact.

In all seriousness, though, I am honored to speak to you today, although I confess that when I heard that both Fr. Maguire and I had been chosen by the class, I began wondering if one of the primary voting criterion was height of the hairline. Regardless, I am pleased and happy that I have the opportunity to both reminisce with my class and thank those who have made our educational career what it has been for the last four years. I hope this speech, which is for you, is half as original and creative as you are, the members of the class of 2014.

Before I begin, I would like to offer a disclaimer. I have to in order to maintain good conscience. I know in middle school and high school, when I had to attend graduations of family members or friends, I always resented valedictorians and their self-congratulatory, patronizing speeches which they offered. It always struck me as being offensive that a twenty-two year old actually thought he or she had something meaningful to offer to a room or stadium filled with people twice their age, with twice as much heart-wrenching years of life under their belt. How dare you act as if you are deigning to offer us your pearls of wisdom? Well, now I find myself in their position, and I am very conscious of my younger self condemning me as I stand here today. All that being said, let it be known, that I hope you will take whatever I have to say with patience, and an understanding that I am 22 and not a sage.

I came to the University of Dallas four years ago in the Fall of 2010 with long hair and a long beard. I looked like either a homeless man or Jesus depending on who you ask, and one of my classmates actually believed that Ricky Jackson, my roommate, was inexplicably housing a vagrant in his room in second floor Madonna. Shortly after I arrived, I began meeting interesting people and reading interesting books, and acclimating to Aramark cuisine and, more often than not, Pringles and Takis obtained from PDK.
It was in Rome that I truly began to appreciate, not only my education, but also those with whom I was sharing it. Friendships solidified and memories were cemented. I can still see familiar figures on the Rome campus, each performing a characteristic activity: Gunter Barber, smoking a cigar on the porch, Christian Walker hurling a Frisbee, CJ Davies rushing out of class to beat me and my suitemates to our own bathroom, a caravan of UDers returning through the narrow Italian streets from the TOP or Eurospar with loads of two-euro bottles of wine and Haribo gummy products transported lovingly in carry-on luggage and backpacks.

Rome was a special time, and I spent it with a special group of people. Returning from Rome and reuniting with our Fall Rome counterparts was also a delight.

Many of us have changed since freshman year. I myself did not experience the freshman fifteen, but I have attained the less talked about senior twenty. More importantly, though, I have seen this class develop in love for each other and in maturity. I know so many of you who have already secured jobs, who are enrolled in graduate programs, who are engaged and have already set a date. And to those of you have done none of those things, you are the independent types, about whom I have no doubts. You will find a place, and from what I have seen, you will do great things.

In speaking about the class of 2014, I want to refrain from glorifying it and idealizing it into an unparalleled group of witty, charming, savvy geniuses, but I also do not want to downplay our class’s strengths and frankly astonishing pool of talent. This class, you, seniors, are a blessed, talented, and surprisingly diverse group of people. On the level of personality, we have such sunny, unbounded, optimistic characters like a Jack Bredemann, but we also have those brooding melancholics, like an Ivanna Bond or a Kelsey Clary. Moreover we have such talent in such a broad range of disciplines. I have friends who have accomplished so much and done so well in business, in history, in biology, chemistry and all of the sciences. We have some who create beautiful art, be it visual, musical or dramatic, and others who have spent so much time giving to others, teaching children, and serving those in need. I am utterly convinced that no major here has it easy, that a significant amount is demanded from everyone, and I am likewise convinced that the class of 2014 has met the challenge and succeeded.

And we have succeeded in large part because of the faculty. On behalf of the entire class, I want to thank each and every professor, from the bottom of our hearts. We have learned so much from you, both inside and outside of the classroom. It is so evident to me that you professors really care about your students and sincerely wish for their success. That love has been tough sometimes. You have pushed us, but we thank you for that. It would not have been education if you had not tested our limits and forced us past boundaries with which we had limited ourselves. I cannot say enough in gratitude for your time, your care, your intelligence, and your grace. Thank you.
If I have anything more meaningful to say today, it is that I wish the best for this class. With the education that we have received, and the talents we possess, we, I believe, are particularly susceptible to arrogance, snobbery and elitism. I am grateful that I have not seen much of this in our class, but if I am to urge anything today, it is that we wholeheartedly embrace humility and kindness, even as we celebrate intellectual achievement. Good education for a thoughtful, kind person constitutes a beautiful adornment. Good education in a small and petty person is repugnant and pitiable. It is my hope that we, the class of 2014, may, while wielding the wisdom of serpents, yet retain the innocence of doves.

In this vein, it has been striking to me, in the past couple of weeks, these final weeks of my undergraduate career, what some of my professors have chosen to focus on. Two English professors, whom I greatly respect and esteem, have, after teaching classes that emphasized close analysis, focused logic, and precise writing, in the end pleaded with us students, asking us never to give up our first love—that is, the enjoyment of the literature for what it is, the pleasure we derive in the simple experience of taking it in, of reading a poem, of enjoying language itself. There is a truth in this which we can lose sight of too easily.

I am reminded of anecdotes about two saints who did not fall prey to intellectual pride, but rather recognized the beauty of divine simplicity. One is the story of Aquinas, who, at the end of his life had seen a revelation which caused him to say, "Such things have been revealed to me that all that I have written seems to me as so much straw." There is an ultimate value, a beauty in this utter simplicity of faith, which transcends all the learning of this world, and which eschews the kind of callous cynicism, and spirit of hypercriticism which I too often see infecting me and others around me. In a similar manner, it is said that the beloved apostle, John, at the end of his career, and nearing the end of his life began preaching only one sermon, and though short, it was sufficient. John, the author of that subtle gospel of high Christology, would say simply, "Little children, love one another."

Class of 2014, we have learned so much, and we have learned so well, but I hope that we never lose sight of the primacy of acting in simple love toward others. Let us be true, let us be kind, let us be humble, let us appreciate what we have been given, and let us use it in the service of others. I love you, I know I will miss you, and I wish each and every one of you the absolute best of luck in the future. Thank you.