Maureen Fitzpatrick Key Note graduation speech

By Mina R Raulston

Welcome Everyone,

Ever since I was invited to speak today I’ve been thinking about what I would say. If you had asked me three years ago if I would ever get up in front of people and talk, I would have said no. If you had asked me if I would rather be dead than get up on front of an audience and speak, I would say dead. But here I am today, trying to fully embrace my vulnerability, pushing through the fears of uncertainty, letting myself know that I am alive.

This is a momentous day for me. I’m not exactly certain how I ended up back in school. It just seemed that at this point in my life, I needed to return to school in order to find a job. I returned to college in my late 40's not knowing what major or career path I would choose, but soon after taking classes in the Social Sciences I knew that Social Work was my true calling. I remember listening to Professor Goldberg speak one day and it was as if the heaven opened up and the universe spoke to me that this is what I should be doing. I just knew that in this field of work I could put my life experiences to work with my education and make a difference in the world around me.

It seems that most of society today is out of connection with each other and Social Work is about making connections with others. It is about sharing love and at the same time it is showing the world how we are all worthy of love and belonging. It’s about having the courage to be connected with each other and to show compassion to others. So here I am graduating from Dominican College and going on to Graduate School to get my master’s degree in social work. I’m not yet a social worker by profession, but I’m slowly and thankfully being changed by Him who called me to it.

When I was in 8th grade I wanted to be a nun, a Franciscan nun. They were so cool. They were all under 30 years. They taught us how to play the guitar, to play basketball and to read classics like Little Women. I was always interested in people and innately curious about them. I was extremely compassionate and wanted to help people. I mended relationships by acting as a bridge; I reached out to those who had been shunned, and I always brought people together. Over the years, I have found that many socials workers displayed similar characteristics early in life. Those who have the calling are tolerant and not judgmental. It is not for everyone but when you are called, it becomes a passion.

Some people come to the profession because they have the calling early in life; some get the calling later after they have done other things. I put my calling on hold for a few years. While on hold.. ….God blessed me with three beautiful children.

It is not uncommon for an individual considering a career in social work to be told by skeptics that the work offers little pay and recognition, long hours and overwhelming stress. But an individual who is truly interested in helping others and improving her community one person at a time will not be swayed by the naysayers.

I never tire of helping people. I never give up on the belief that everyone can be helped and lifted up in some way, and that it’s just a matter of finding the right strategy that works for them. There is always something that can be done. I get a lot of gratification from witnessing people’s growth. I see it as joy rather than a job, and I would do it for nothing.

Recently I was studying at a local coffee shop and another customer asked me something that made me ponder my desire to be a social worker. The dialogue went something like this:

Person: “Huh, you are studying to be a social worker?”

Me: “Yep!”

Person: “You know you aren’t going to make any money, you will work long hours, and it’s basically going to ruin your life, right?”

Family members, curious friends, and other random people have shared similar thoughts with me many times since I began studying to be a social worker. These negative remarks may swirl in my mind for a second or two, but they don’t last long.

My passion for social work started a long time ago when Jesus began to influence my life and the way I viewed the world. Jesus’ example and teachings inspire me to go, love people, care for the hurting, the sick, the broken hearted, the widow, and the orphan. I can’t get away from this. I can’t shake the fact that I was made to embrace the messy and the broken, even if it means facing my own fear, hurt, or even selfishness.

I think Jesus’ earthly ministry looked a lot like the work of a social worker. That may be exaggerating a bit, but hear me out. He loved, taught, healed, and cared for people. Social workers today may have a few more things to deal with, like paperwork and court appearances, but the way Jesus lived is reason enough for me to pursue this crazy thing they call social work.

There are various reasons why men and women consider a challenging, rewarding career as a social worker. One reason is helping others make positive changes in their lives. As a social worker, you are able to have a positive impact on the lives of the elderly, the disadvantaged, children, or other individuals in need of guidance and direction in their lives. You will help people find solutions to poverty, divorce, addiction, emotional distress and a plethora of other psychological and social issues. Since social work has the potential to be emotionally draining and stressful with minimal financial rewards, an individual interested in this field tends to make a commitment based on a true desire to help others rather than any notion of climbing a corporate ladder or gaining financial wealth.

Having experienced a tragedy in my own life I am now driven to share my knowledge with others going through similar experiences in order to help them overcome their own traumatic experiences. I have gone through many years of verbal and mental abuse and a host of other issues so that I am now passionate about helping others who have experienced similar tragedy. Through a career in Social Work I will have an outlet in which I can help countless others overcome comparable obstacles.

I know very little about the profession or my future in it at this point, but I do know the basics. People need people to support and love them. Humans are broken, everyone deserves a family, and protecting the innocent is worth living for.

Although today is certainly one of our proudest moments, it is also one filled with feelings of contradiction. On the one hand, it is the successful completion of our undergraduate careers at St. Francis. And yet, as the word commencement indicates, it is also the beginning of something. And whether it’s a first job, a full-time job, the continuation of a previously established career, the entrance into graduate school, or family obligations, the future beckons. Certainly today is a joyous occasion. Our futures are undoubtedly bright yet we’re also saddened at leaving St. Francis and the friends we’ve made here.

As I began my studies at Dominican College I was a much older than most and was quite intimidated by the prospect of being a new college student. This challenge was further compounded by my job as a full time mom with three children. I came to school and there were times during my first year when I doubted whether I would succeed. My feelings of apprehension and self-doubt were gradually replaced with a confidence and a quiet resolve as I became acclimated to the Dominican College community.

The college provided a stimulating, caring, and supportive environment. Unlike many other colleges, St. Francis requires that students take a core of philosophy and religion courses. I admit I was originally skeptical about the usefulness of these courses but I came to appreciate their value as I began critically evaluating the world as a whole, my place in it, and the importance of moral values. I also learned an important lesson from the other students. I never believed that I would have anything in common with a mostly younger student body. I couldn’t have been more wrong. My respect and appreciation for them rapidly increased as I became more aware of the numerous bonds we had in common. Everyone, regardless of age, sex, race, or religion shares concerns about their future and dreams of successes yet to come. My experience was further enriched by the cultural diversity of the other students. I also made several friendships along the way that will hopefully last a lifetime.

Perhaps the best way to express the significance of our collective experiences at Dominican College is with an observation by Louisa May Alcott. The celebrated poet once said and I quote “Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead.” Ms. Alcott was quite right. But I also believe that we are fully capable of realizing our goals and our dreams through dedication, perseverance, and confidence in what we desire and in ourselves. I believe a college education is about building upon our dreams. We go to college to broaden our understanding, to sharpen our skills, and to acquire knowledge. Thus equipped we are ready to take our place as productive members of society. If I can offer you one bit of advice it is this: Never give up, never stop learning; never, ever stop growing. This step today is but the first step of many as you walk toward your plans and dreams. It’s not the end but a beginning. You have overcome so many obstacles to reach this day. Don’t ever let any other obstacle stop you from reaching your dreams and goals.

Returning to college after so many years was like training for an Olympic event. Although it may seem like one-person's effort it couldn't be far from the truth. It comes with the efforts and sacrifices of a coach, assistant coaches and supporters some of whom I’d like to recognize today.

Dr. Paul, where does one being to explain Dr. Paul? When I came to Dominican College his office door was always open to me whenever I needed his advice on research. He proofread my papers and gave me excellent suggestions that always resulted in improved versions of documents. He showed me different ways to approach a research problem. His great personality is cherished by me as well as all his other students. He encouraged me to present my research papers at national and international conferences. The exposure to conferences improved my confidence and inspired me to do more research. Conferences are not just about research but they are also about seeing different places, meeting different people and having some fun as well.

Among the conferences I cherish the most are the Conference at the United Nations in January 2013. He guided me on how to write conference and journal papers, had confidence in me when I doubted myself, and brought out the best in me. More importantly, he inspired me to work hard by being a role model himself. He was always there to meet with me and talk about my ideas, to proofread and mark up my papers and chapters, and to ask me good questions to help me think through my problems. His enthusiasm and abilities are contagious and developed my interest and understanding of the subject. I thank him for his constant encouragement and support throughout my undergraduate studies. He helped me overcome what seemed like hopeless impediments, and put a lot of work into publishing my research. He has taught me to be always persistent, maintain high morals, and look forward to achieving even higher goals. This experience has been extremely valuable to me and I will treasure it for the rest of my life. Without his constant guidance, I could not be standing here today. I feel very fortunate to have had a chance to work with him. It has provided me invaluable experience that I believe has better prepared me for graduate school. Thank you so much for opportunity to conduct research as an undergraduate.

Anna Vorse, thank you will never be enough for all you have done for me. Thank you my little sister, my advisor and friend, for your patience, support, faith, and for always being in my corner. I am so very grateful for your generosity, guidance, and continuous emotional support. You were always there for me whenever I needed advice. You are truly an inspiration for me.

Dr. Judith Carbone is a brilliant, extraordinary, and inspiring professor, mentor, and advisor. She is an amazing and wonderful person. I feel so happy and blessed for the opportunity to take classes and work with her. Thank you for all the learning experiences and invaluable guidance. I appreciate very much all you have done to support me! You are the best!

I would like to thank Professor Bonni Raab, whose confidence in me enabled me to realize my potential. She taught me how to be a Social Worker. She instilled in me that in order to be a Social Worker the most important thing is to thoroughly understand the problem because understanding the problem is half the battle. She was encouraging and compassionate. I never felt judged by her; rather I felt a sense of trust and guidance. Professor Raab helped me reach academic goals I never thought I could reach. I read somewhere, “Some people cross our paths for just a moment in time, however, they leave us with a lifetime impression.” Professor Raab you challenged me to be a better student and better person. I'll always be grateful. There is a lasting impression of knowledge, understanding, and compassion within me that has always been there, only now it is stronger.

I can’t leave here today without expressing my admiration for my fellow seniors in Social Work classes.  We have been together for over two years and I will miss them so much. I love them all like my own girls!  The world we live in will be a better place because they will be Social Workers doing their work!! I want to thank Abby Berjansky for your presence and your friendship. Your effervescent attitude as a member of our Social Work Program made it so much fun.  You are always questioning everything and made me much more aware of our place as Social Workers. I have no doubt that someday you will be a great Social Work on a crusade for the betterment of man kind.

Thank you all for affording me the privilege to address you today and share my heart on the importance of these events, the accomplishments we have made and the journey to meet the hopes and dreams of our futures. I am looking forward to being a great clinician and someday mentor as I was mentored. Thank you, and God Bless.