

UMSL COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS – by John C. Vatterott
December 17, 2016

Thank you, Dean Taylor and thank you, Chancellor George. And, congratulations to you, the class of 2016. I am humbled and honored to have been asked to speak to you today.

As I reflect on life since my own graduation, some 50 years ago, I see that many of my plans have not worked out. There have been many times where I fell short of the goal and many times have experienced failure and disappointment. We all fail—this is a part of life. How to respond is up to you.

I have been continually surprised to find that what I initially thought was a defeat in actuality put me on a path towards doing my most meaningful work. And without those failures I would not be speaking to you today.

I hope that by sharing some of my story you can continue to build upon yours, and hopefully frame your defeats and failures to what they should be: a way to connect with your deepest convictions and propel you to do your best work.

I was fortunate to have been raised in a large, supportive family. I was # 9 in a family of 17. Being a middle child with 12 sisters - I learned that one has to be flexible. This is a lesson that has served me well.

My father was very active in social justice and the civil rights movement. He believed, as I do, - in the dignity of all people to “have a seat at the table” and to have the opportunity to achieve success in life.

My parents were faith filled. They believed that there was a purpose in life and that everything we have is a gift and that we...their children...had a responsibility to use our gifts for the greater good. It is this belief that has guided my entire life.

My own career goal was to become a doctor and my first 3 years in college I was on a pre-med tract—until it was pointed out that C’s in biology and D’s in chemistry would not cut it. So I changed my major to psychology and went on to receive a Masters in Guidance and Counseling.

My first job was as a Deputy Juvenile Officer at the St. Louis County Juvenile Court. The second was as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor where I saw the need for good training options for my clients.

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Social work seemed like the right fit for me. But things changed when my boss traveled from Jefferson City with the sole purpose of wanting to give me penmanship lessons. He was unable to read my counseling notes--not a good thing--especially for a counselor.

So after these setbacks I finally decided to strike out on my own and at age 25, armed with a Masters degree, married with 3 children, and not much sense at all, I started a tech school that evolved into Vatterott College.

Looking back, I can say that without those setbacks, not going to medical school, the bad handwriting, the 12 sisters, and all the twists and turns in life I would never have started Vatterott College in the first place and in fact, those experiences contributed to making the business successful.

One of the patterns in my life has been spending a long weekend each year at the White House Jesuit Retreat Center reflecting on how was I doing in terms of my purpose in life. How was I using the gifts that I had been given? In what way am I contributing to the greater good? On such a retreat many years ago, I made the decision to sell my company. It was sold in 2003. I have never looked back. It has given me the freedom to dive deeper into building better communities through education and service and I have had the good fortune of being involved with many different organizations.

Just yesterday, one of those organizations, Boys Hope Girls Hope was featured in the St Louis Post Dispatch. After an extensive search they have named UMSL alum Ashland Tate as the new executive director for the St Louis program. It marks the first time that any of the 18 chapters of Boys Hope Girls Hope will be led by an alumnus of the program.

I would like to give you another example of a UMSL graduate, 2011 MBA, who is making a difference. In Uganda there are over 2 million orphaned children because of the war-torn history. One day in 2007, Fr. George Sssmmonbwe got a "wake up call". He was driving down a busy street in Kampala and was stopped at a red light. A street boy approached him, reached inside his car, grabbed his camera and ran. Instead of getting mad, he made a decision to do something for these children who find themselves on the street begging and stealing in order to survive. He realized that he had no business experience and knew that some of the best schools were in America. UMSL made it possible for him to get his MBA.

He has since started a grade school, called Broader Vision School, to provide a quality grade school education and has developed housing for orphaned, homeless and street children.

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So today UMSL can take great pride in Fr. George and great pride in Ashland Tate. Both are shining examples of the transformative power of education and service.

And today, the UMSL community can take great pride in each of you as you embark on what can be a life-long adventure with immeasurable rewards.

Each and every one of us has a gift and something to contribute.

Each and every one of us has a responsibility to share that gift to benefit others.

Today, I challenge you to find your gift, your purpose in life and let this belief guide you as it has guided me.

Graduates—Congratulations. Go out and make a difference!

Thank you.