

Commencement Address
Saturday, December 15, 2018
College of Education, College of Nursing, and School of Social Work Graduation Ceremony

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Thrively

Thank you, Chancellor. I'm honored to speak at this graduation and to receive this honorary degree. Even more, I'm delighted to be one of the first to congratulate you, our soon-to-be graduates, your families and your friends here today. Congratulations to each of you!

I've entitled today's remarks "Family, Floors, and Free Will." This title might help you remember at least one of my three main points; it can also help you can track how close I am ending this address. I received my B.A. degree from UMSL in 1971. The university was only eight years old. That year, the honorary doctorate degree recipient was Roy Wilkins, famed civil rights activist and Executive Director of the NAACP.

So, this is quite an honor for my entire family.

Like many of you, I'm the first in the history of our family to earn a four-year degree. Also, like many of you, I paid my own way through college; lived at home during most of my years at UMSL; and commuted to campus: me from Berkeley, Missouri- in a beloved '61 VW bug-with an awesome canvas sunroof.

My twin brother, Tom, became the second in our family to take home an UMSL undergraduate degree and a CPA in 1972—paving the way for him becoming a finance expert out West in the energy industry. Four years later, 15-month-younger brother, Don, became the third in our family to hold an UMSL undergraduate degree and so does his wife, Claudia. Both Don and Claudia went on earn advanced degrees: Don, a PhD from Purdue University; he then returned to UMSL to teach mass communications for 8 years. He and Claudia are now *professors emeriti* at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, both having served as professors at Cape for more than a decade and a half. Oh, yes: Don and Claudia, they met and fell in love at UMSL.

I'm happy each of my brothers, including, a third-brother Jim and his wife, Patty as well as Claudia are here celebrating with us today.

I say all of this to make my first point: **UMSL's tagline says, "We transform lives." We say, "UMSL transforms families!"** I'd love to hear your families' UMSL stories after this ceremony.

Now on to my one piece of advice for you this morning.

I did some research for today's remarks. I asked some folks who had attended recent UMSL graduations: "What's the best advice you've heard at any of these commencements?"

Several mentioned one particularly practical and poignant piece of advice. Another UMSL alum, Tom Hoerr, encouraged last year's College of Education graduates to: **"Learn the name of the person who cleans the floors of your building. [Repeat]**

I'd add: **And—by name—say “Hello” or thank that person whenever you can.** It will show you have real heart. And it will grow that person's heart...and yours.

Also in preparing these remarks, I asked myself: “What's the one book or idea from my time at UMSL that most changed the way I look at the world ever since then?”

A great metaphor came to mind. I first came upon it here as a sophomore. It gave me a resilient and realistic understanding about the role of free will in our lives.

So focusing on this metaphor might be a good way to “put a cap” on our “cap-and-gown” moment together.

The metaphor is from Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, in a chapter entitled “The Mat-Maker.” “Sword-mats,” as they were called in those days on whale-hunting ships, were huge mats of closely woven rope. Their purpose was to help protect the side of a ship...perhaps as you will help and protect you your patients, your students, or your down-and-out families: Huge and important work! Bigger than a whale!

These mats were called “sword-mats” because one of the persons making the mat used the flat end of a sword to help straighten and put in place each strand of rope while the other person wove that strand, called “marline,” through the fixed strands, the vertical ones, placed on a huge frame.

Ishmael, the novel's protagonist and narrator, served up this metaphor. Ishmael's not-so-trustworthy sidekick, Queequeg, manned the sword.

It might help if, just for a moment, you would try to think of yourself as the narrator—as the “I”—in this beautifully written passage.

I was the attendant or page of Queequeg, at the mat. As I kept passing and repassing the rope filling of marline between the long yarns of the warp, using my own hand for the shuttle, and as Queequeg, standing sideways, ever and anon slid his heavy oaken sword between the threads, and idly looking off upon the water, carelessly and unthinkingly drove home every yarn; ...it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time. This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly or crookedly, or strongly or weakly, as the case might be; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance- aye, chance, free will, and necessity – no wise incompatible- all interweaving working together.

Melville doesn't ask us to understand fully these three life-shaping forces—but rather provides a picture to see how they all are interwoven.

UMSL's former Honors College Dean, Dean Bliss, emails hundreds of us a tidbit of history or wisdom in his daily blog. By chance, but certainly with the other two life forces in play, as I was drafting these remarks, he included this oh so important reminder from the current endowed chair at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography: **“The true wealth of a nation consists not in its stored-up gold but in the intellectual and physical strength of its people.”**

In just a few minutes, you will receive a degree from this university that I know will serve you well—as you help build the intellectual, physical, and other strengths of those you serve--whatever fate and chance may hold for you and for them going forward.

True: There are other fine universities in this town with “St. Louis” in their name. However, for whatever influences fate and chance had, you chose the University of Missouri-St. Louis as your university. Today that university becomes your *alma mater*.

It’s the only university that has transformed so many lives and families in this area, nurtured the hearts of so many in this area, and prepared so many for service in and beyond this Gateway.

So: Be proud. Be happy. Make others happy. Serve well.

Thank You!!