“TGIM: Thank God, It's Monday!”

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Dreaming when Dawn’s left hand was in the sky
I heard a voice within the tavern cry,
“Awake, my little ones, and fill the cup
Before life's liquor in the cup be dry.”

Omar Khayyam

President Guerrero—regents and faculty, and parents and friends—and GRADUATES! God bless you all—“The long and the short and the tall!” I am honored to be here to celebrate this distinctive rite of passage with you. It is a grand day!

That was a fulsome introduction for which I am properly grateful. But Dr. Guerrero failed to say that I am an actor of modest talents but amazing diversity. In truth, I have played the prestigious role of teacher and professor of English for forty-six treasured years, most of them here at SFA—and loved them all. And I had a terrific script! But the play was over too soon. The weeks passed too fast, and semesters ended before my classes had finished the literary trip from Beowulf to Virginia Wolfe. I seldom said, “Thank God, it's Friday.” My song was ever “Thank God, it's Monday, and time—a whole week—is before us, not behind us.” Which, by the way, is the theme of this morning's commencement address: “Thank God, it's Monday, and our time is before us!”

You have been thrice blessed here at Stephen F. Austin State University and are now a part of a grand and glorious history and ancient and revered traditions. You have seen the elephant and heard the owl among the stately pines, and remember the glories of its past. Beatniks and Hippies once roamed these hallowed grounds, with long stringy locks and exploding Afros that would have put earlier generations into total shock. Then there was a time when SFA was awash with panty raids. It was told that during one panty raid a young lady made a ringer with her unmentionables on the dean of men's pipe—who was there to quell the disturbance, you understand. I remember when the Phantom Lifter prowled the Liberal Arts stairwells hoisting the skirts of unsuspecting coeds. And equally bizarre, when a sophomore lad of dubious mentality would spring out of purple garbage cans and seize girls' feet and kiss them passionately. When Chester the Ghost first appeared in the Fine Arts building. When “Kiss and Tackle” was a popular mixer game for incoming freshmen. When SFA made national headlines for its streakers, and one naked motorcycle rider got a ticket because he wasn't wearing a helmet. These heavy happenings are the hallowed history of your university's last fifty years, and they are now a part of the fabric of your own past on this campus. You and your own peculiar peccadillos will also soon become a piece of the gossip and history of SFA.
As I stated earlier, but I'm sure you've forgotten by now, the text of this Saturday morning's sermonette is “TGIM: Thank God, it's Monday!” You will notice that it is TGIM, not TGIF. I'm not here to celebrate the Friday of your educational life so that you can depart these halls of ivy and whip out to the Annex for a wild party. I am here to tell you that the Monday of your professional lives is just beginning and that you have a great long week ahead to do all those worthy deeds that you studied so hard for—to be rich and famous. And you had better thank God that it is Monday because life gets to Friday uncommonly fast.

On this triumphant day, you get our standard commencement address —It's always the same graduation speech, just a different presenter.—a reminder of your three major responsibilities and obligations: to your university, to yourself, and to life itself.

First, your obligation to SFA: I know that you can't wait to shake the dust of SFA from your blue suede shoes, but time heals all wounds (or wounds all heels), and you will eventually become loyal alumni. And one thing that you must always keep in mind is that nobody knows this university as well as you do. You are SFA's presenter. The way that outsiders will learn about SFA is through you, its students—how you act, what you do, how well you do your job—Is your reading, writing, and arithmetic on a university level? Are you an educated person? You are the bearers of the reputation of this school, and what people think of SFA will be a reflection of what they think about you. — How's that for a burden of responsibility to lay on unsuspecting graduates whose parents are sitting proudly in the stands! Now you are responsible not only for yourselves and your families' good name, but you also have to promote the reputation of Stephen F. Austin State University.

Secondly, your obligation to yourself: You are responsible for yourself, and nobody outside of yourself will care how your parents or your teachers or "the establishment" treated you when you were growing up. You are the one who makes your life happen. Even though you are genetically programmed in too many ways to discuss in this lecture, you are not a puppet manipulated by some supernatural external or internal force. Don't blame the gods for the course of your life. You are the one who decides what choices you make in response to all the chances and challenges you meet. You are the one who makes you what you become. — A generation or so ago (Perhaps your parents' generation?) we had students who with wringing hands and woeful wails, wasted life's precious time wondering who they were, searching for their true selves in constant identity crises. “Who am I really?” they implored. I would send these soul searchers to the pragmatic Aristotle, who 2500 years ago said simply that a person is only what he or she does. Socially, you can be a son or daughter, brother or sister, parent—a multitude of persons in one hide. However, if you pass the bar you become a lawyer. That is your “true self.” If you build a house you are a carpenter; if you build a good house you are a good carpenter. If you steal a car and lie about it, you are a thief and a liar. If you write a novel, you are an author. Man has made himself for millennia, and on this professional Monday morning you have made yourselves college graduates and have begun the process of making yourselves into teachers or preachers or timber cruisers or whatever other of the world's workers you decide to become. There is another responsibility— and this is a formidable challenge: Try to make yourself into somebody you enjoy living with. Life is more fun if you spend it with a friend.
Speaking of making one's self, do you remember my mentioning The Phantom Lifter of the Liberal Arts Building? The Lifter hoisted one skirt too many. The young lady he accosted this time—the liftee—grabbed him firmly by the arm and delivered a stern lecture on his deviant behavior as she dragged him to the office of a behavioral psychologist. He was chastened. The young lady in question has now “made herself” into the vice-chancellor at the University of North Carolina. — We also had a young lady who worked her way through college as a campus hooker. I'm sorry I can't report on what she made of herself.

Thirdly, your obligation to life: I do sincerely hope for all of you that you have chosen to prepare for a job or career where you will be blessed and not damned by the Mondays in your lives. I hope that you will go to work daily with the excitement of all the challenges of your profession. Life—and your work in it—is the most exciting trip you will ever make. And never forget that it is one way! Life offers the greatest adventures that the mind of man can conceive—to fly, to sail, to climb to the top of Everest, or dive the Barrier Reefs. To feel the freedom and the strength and the knowledge to do and learn all those things you dreamed of doing in your kidhood—but your mama wouldn't let you.

I charge you to fling yourself out into life's Monday's midst for the exhilarating surprise of seeing what will happen and of enjoying the wonderful excitement of it. Because there is going to be that time when the week is over, and the lump of clay that is tucked into the bowels of the earth with such metallic pomp and satin finery will never dance again—or sing sweet songs or kiss sweet lips or drink sweet wine—or read a Tom Clancy novel—or make a Harley-Davidson go ninety miles an hour!

Monday comes only once a week, and the days that follow are brief as a birthday candle, so soon blown out. At the end of your life's long week I promise you that you will not bewail the things that you did; you will groan and mourn those things that you didn't do. Hell is real. Hell is realizing that you waited too late to learn to fly a plane or pick a guitar or tell special persons that you loved them. — At this stage—if I could have pulled it off—I would have had Tim McGraw come in and sing his “Live Like You Were Dying:” Because it's time “to go sky diving, to go Rocky Mountain climbing, to go 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Manchu!”

So thank God, Graduates of 2005, it's still Monday—and the race is on!

Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines!

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