

Memory, Adversity, and Gratitude
Delbarton School 2018 Commencement Address
by Brian Regan, '73

Abbot Richard, Trustees, Br. Paul and Colleagues, Class of 2018,
family and friends:

I'd like to speak to the graduates about three things: Memory, Adversity and Gratitude.

Let's start with memory.

Today is the ceremonial climax of your time in a place with a remarkable history. Delbarton takes its name from the estate developed here in the Gilded Age. Banker Luther Kountze chose the location for its amazing beauty and first built a house, Old Main, and later a lovely garden with a pool.

Now, despite what you may think, the providential purpose of that pool was not a senior splash. The owner imagined no such thing.

That said, lessons can be drawn. A passage from novelist Evelyn Waugh is on point. The narrator explains his interest in great houses.

“I have always loved building, holding it to be not only the highest achievement of man but one in which, at the moment of consummation, things were taken out of his hands and perfected without his intention by other means. And I regarded men as mere...short-term lodgers of small importance in the long, fruitful years of their homes.”

Kountze thought Delbarton would be dynastic. But his family sold it in 1925 to Benedictines. The monks took it in their hands, and with others working alongside, are having (as Waugh would say) long, fruitful years here.

Waugh's imagery applies broadly. We are also short-term lodgers on earth. One of Br. Paul's aims was to inspire you to be good stewards of that earth. This hillside Eden certainly plays its part.

I believe, and believe more firmly each time I return, that Delbarton's distinctive character arises from the Benedictine search for faith and learning occurring in a setting of utterly transcendent natural beauty. For me, this is our school's unique genius, in both the ancient and modern sense of genius.

You joined in this, became part of Delbarton's collective memory. That's fantastic. But how well do you know your family's collective memory? Someday, I promise, you will be grateful to know much.

Which is why you should learn, while you can, about your family, and important influences, genetic or otherwise. Here's what I did.

I grew up in an old-fashioned extended family that told and retold tales of old relatives. I started taking notes. I prompted and coaxed, listening closely for what made people tick: gifts,

motivations, virtues, quirks. And, frankly, what did not make them tick: illness and fatal conditions.

It all has value, including what medical and psychological factors leaf out on a family tree. Research is matching those trees with genetics, inheritable conditions, and health.

I wrote in a journal and cherish it. You'll be digital. Just be sure you record what you learn.

Adversity. Since we are in the Abbey Church, I'll begin with a story that a friend tells about a novice monk.

This poor novice was permitted to say only two words a year.

At the end of the first year, the Abbot asked him into his study, blessed him, and said, "What do you have to say, my son?"

The novice said, "Room cold."

The Abbot blessed him and sent him away.

At the end of the second year he summoned him again and asked him what he had to say for himself.

And the novice said, "Bed hard."

The Abbot blessed him.

The novice came back at the end of the third year and said, "I quit."

And the Abbot said,

"Well I'm not a bit surprised. You've done nothing but complain since you got here."

Graduates, sometimes "room cold" and "bed hard." A thousand natural shocks hit us all. They range from disappointment to disaster.

How shall I put it? You will at some point:

Miss the net.

Flub your lines.

Be turned down.

Or find your world turned upside down.

Don't quit! Or as poetic words in our School Hymn have it, "Whatever befall."

You will find unexpected inner resources. And trip, stumble, or fall, examine why. There are often priceless lessons.

Some wisdom about all of this came from one of my teachers here. Father Gerard has a way with words. Several times he said, "Expect the unexpected." The first time, I thought, "This monk is mad." How can you "expect the unexpected?"

But you can. Think about:

- Why many of you applied to more than one college.

- Why money managers hedge. And I don't mean run a hedge fund. I mean really hedge investment positions.

It's also why already gifted athletes obsessively practice foul shots or field goals or tee offs. Or musicians drill and drill hard passages.

Really accomplished performers—athletes, musicians, actors, even preachers and trial lawyers—prepare exhaustively.

More quietly, it's why the artist, the writer, scientist, and surgeon, constantly develop technique.

All work toward perfection—and hope for inspiration—and yet also learn to cheat failure. They succeed because they expect the unexpected.

Finally, gratitude, both today and later.

For you now, as for me years ago—we know we worked hard and accomplished much here, but we know that we didn't arrive at graduation day on our own. Parents wanted this truly wonderful experience for us. And along the way, priests and brothers and lay people, all heroically committed, led us forward. Aren't we lucky?

It's a funny thing about the generosity that is heaped upon us. We can't repay it. We can, and should, express gratitude. But it can't be repaid. So pass it on.

- help a younger person's prospects
- keep up the social outreach
- serve and lead with the values honored here.

A great New England headmaster often told a story, a parable really, that his students never forgot. It goes like this.

“A long time ago, a young prince was making a journey alone on horseback to another kingdom. One night as he crossed a stream he heard a voice call out of the darkness. “Stop, and fill your saddle bags with the sands of this stream.” The prince reined in his horse. He was awed by the voice and wanted to obey, but was impatient to ride on. So all he did was snatch up a handful of sand from the bottom of the stream, put it in his pocket and gallop off.”

“The next morning, out of curiosity, he reached into his pocket. It was filled with diamonds. As the story goes, the prince was both grateful and sorry. Grateful to have taken some sand. And sorry that he had not taken more.”

You will find future diamonds. I'll mention a few I am grateful to have picked up at Delbarton.

When I took music theory we were assigned a magisterial book called simply *Harmony*. I understood so little of it. Yet our teacher, Roy Horton, said keep it forever. Years later I read and studied it again, and the lights went on. The next time—all music was in Technicolor.

My work at the Morgan Library & Museum offered a close look at many treasures, including breathtaking illuminated manuscripts, many of which, I should add, were produced in Benedictine abbeys.

Because I attended splendid liturgies right here and sang Gregorian Chant in the Schola—those manuscripts, even their ancient notation—were open books to me.

The sports program at Delbarton made for strong school spirit. I came also to appreciate how much individual and team success spread the School's name and reputation for excellence.

Longtime teacher John Sanfacon claims that people always return to their first loves, early passionate interests. While at Delbarton, I didn't get it. Then the busy world pushed mine aside. Later, and one by one, they came back with a force of nature. John himself returned to early passions, including gemology. So he knows all about diamonds.

In closing, I'll offer a suggestion, a hope, and a request.

- Check your pockets often.
- I hope you will be happy and successful—"High Kings" always.
- About the request. Please don't linger in that old pool today. You must start this afternoon to ask your parents and grandparents all about your family story. And what you write down will someday sparkle as diamonds.

Thank you.