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Commencement 2012: Putting Out Into the Deep

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Put Out Into the Deep

My Last Commencement Speech

Philip W. Eaton, SPU President

June 9, 2012

On June 9, 2012, SPU President Philip Eaton delivered the Commencement address at Seattle Pacific University's 2012 Commencement. His Commencement address is being reprinted here in three parts.

I want to thank Dr. Congdon for these kind words of introduction. I also want to thank the faculty and the Board of Trustees for the huge honor of this new honorary degree. I am finally an official alum of SPU. I can now wear all my alumni gear, legally. So thank you. And thank you all for the support and encouragement and friendship you have given to Sharon and me throughout these beautiful years. We are profoundly grateful.

And to all of the graduates this afternoon, I want you to know I am graduating with you today. This is it for me, my last time to speak to you or any audience as the president of Seattle Pacific University. We will step off this stage this afternoon, all of us, as new graduates of one of the leading Christian universities in the world, and we will step into an entirely new chapter for our lives.

As I began to consider what I might say to you this afternoon, I thought about the Gettysburg Address. Did you know the Gettysburg Address was delivered in 1863 by the great orator Edward Everett? He spoke to 15,000 people that day, and he spoke for two hours! And nobody remembers a word he said.

Actually, the president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, was invited only to "offer a few appropriate remarks." He spoke for three minutes, 272 words, and he shaped forever the deep American commitment that all men and women are created equal.

So which speech would you like to hear from me this afternoon: my two-hour speech or my three-minute speech? I'm not sure about three minutes, but part of my theme today is to keep things brief when it comes to what really matter in life.

As I prepare to step into a new chapter in my life, the biggest question for me right now is "Who am I?" It's an identity question. And I suspect that's the biggest question for you at this moment, isn't it? No longer a student, now what? And I am asking, no longer the president, now what?

You may be on your way to becoming a doctor, scientist, teacher, pastor, engineer, therapist, entrepreneur, theologian. Of course my advice is to be the best you can be for any one of these choices—but *through it all, we've got to continue to ask what kind of person we want to be.* That's the identity question.

Last week David Brooks, in his *New York Times* column, said that people in our culture today lack a “vocabulary of moral evaluation.” In other words, we lack a meaningful language of identity, *apart from, or in addition to*, the language of career?

One of the towering figures of influence in my life was one of my undergraduate literature professors. His name was Dr. Clem Simpson. We never called him Clem, by the way. He was always Dr. Simpson. I just heard yesterday that no one calls Dr. Spina, Frank, ever. I know we would never have considered calling Dr. Simpson Clem Dawg, either.

In any case, Dr. Simpson told a story about a moment in his life as a young faculty member at Wheaton College. He was feeling pushed to decide these very identity questions we are talking about: Who was he, apart from being a professor of literature? What did he really believe?

And so he took a whole day off and went into Chicago and took a seat in the Newberry Library, determined that he would not leave until he had discovered his own language of identity. He started writing, pages and pages, and then he found himself scratching things out. And then on into the evening, when he finally felt he had finished his task, he discovered there were only three short paragraphs: “Just three short paragraphs,” he said, “but I would give up my job, almost anything, before I would violate any part of these three short paragraphs.”

And so as we think about identity this afternoon, my first advice is to follow Dr. Simpson: Keep it short. Maybe just three paragraphs. Take some time somewhere after this celebration, get some good coffee at Starbucks, and think about all you’ve read and studied, think about all you have heard from people along the way, your professors and friends and pastors, and then write something down. The question is one of identity: Just who are you as you walk off this stage?

Put Out Into the Deep, part 2

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Steve Jobs, the founder and driving energy behind Apple, did just this very thing [develop his own language of identity] **for the graduates at Stafford a few years ago.**

Your time is limited, [he said], so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma – which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And, most important, have the courage to follow your

heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

How does that sound to you? Some of it good, I know. But isn't this the culture's familiar language of identity, and so much of it is so breathtakingly self-focused? Steve Jobs wants us to know, "It's all about me. It's all about my inner voice. The source of my identity is my heart alone." We all admire what Steve Jobs accomplished, to be sure, but really, is he right that "everything else is secondary" to my "inner voice"?

We've got to do better than that, don't we? But where do we turn for a better, deeper language of identity?

Maybe our passage from Luke 5, read so beautifully by Pastor Dahlstrom, can help get us started on the three short paragraphs we might write about who we are. You will recall from our passage in Luke that Jesus approaches some fishermen washing their nets. They had been out all night fishing and had nothing to show for their work. We can imagine their frustration and weariness. Not a way to spend the night, they were thinking. Not a way to spend one's life.

And Jesus steps into this scene and begins to talk to them about a radically different way of fishing. He says: "Follow me and put out into the deep." And so these experienced, skeptical fishermen put out into the deep, and their boats nearly tipped over with an abundant catch. And they were amazed, Luke tells us.

Maybe this is the way to frame our three short paragraphs on identity. When we think it is all about me, we are fishing in the shallows. When we fish in the shallows, we politicize our organizations, we play power games, we indulge in ego trips, we use the tools of manipulation, using others for our own gain. We get to thinking the pursuit of status and prestige and power are the core of our identity.

And so that's a starting point: Stop fishing in the shallows. Put out into the deep. But what then might our lives look like, fishing in the deep?

The first thing I might say, the first of my three short paragraphs, might go something like this: Remember that the world is exquisitely beautiful and profoundly interesting. And so cultivate curiosity, always. Be selective, but read all the good books you can get your hands on. Keep up with things. Experience art and music. Engage this culture, enjoy its energy, challenge its presuppositions. This is living in the deep.

The great Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins says: "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." That's a radical statement in our culture. He also says: "There lives the dearest freshness deep down things." And so I say to you: Continue to tap into that deep freshness that is our world.

Put Out Into the Deep, part 3

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My second paragraph gets a bit more complicated: Sometimes this beautiful, interesting world will veer off into ugliness and meanness, pain and sorrow and loss. Putting out into the deep calls us into the troubling mystery of human suffering. Sorry, but that's part of the picture. That suffering sometimes will be our own. Sometimes that suffering will be among our friends or family. Sometimes we will glimpse that suffering in the midst of poverty or disease somewhere around the world. The world shines brightly, but sometimes the darkness obscures the light.

And so what do we do with this suffering and sorrow?

Well, I don't know for sure, but sometimes it helps to say encouraging things to people. Remember to say thank you as often as you can. Be grateful. It also helps to hold someone's hand when they are hurting. And don't play power games in other people's lives — it is always destructive. Be honest, be transparent, don't be secretive, don't assume that your title automatically gives you power. It doesn't. Stay humble. And always, to quote my dear friend Skip Li, remember the poor.

Remember the light will shine in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. Putting out into the deep calls us to a life of hope, even on the other side of darkness.

Finally, my third short paragraph has something to do with joy: Let your life be defined by joy and gladness and gratitude. This is a big deal to me, one of those identity things I've discovered from friends like John Perkins. And when we discover that deep joy, we want to "gleam it around," as the black writer Zora Neal Hurston says, we want to "show the world our shine."

Listen to the way the great poet Jeremiah talks about living a life defined by joy:

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
 and they *shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord,*
 over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
 and over the young of the flock and the herd;
 their life shall become like a watered garden,
 and they shall never languish again.
 Then shall the women rejoice in the dance,
 and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy,
 I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

What an expansive vision of human flourishing. As I step off this stage and into the rest of my life, I want to be “radiant over the goodness of the Lord.” That’s what it means to live in the deep. I would like to participate in God’s big work of turning “mourning into joy,” the work of bringing comfort and gladness, instead of sorrow, into people’s lives, into the organizations we serve, into our communities.

Some of this will be hard work: We’ve got to build good schools for all the children; we’ve got to heal the sick and comfort the lonely; we’ve got to create companies that feel like communities of grace; we’ve got to create safe neighborhoods and strong families. That’s what Jeremiah is talking about. And that’s what putting out into the deep means.

And so I say, God bless each one of you as you step into an exciting new chapter in your lives. In the days ahead, go get some good coffee, and sit down and write your three paragraphs. And as you do think hard about what it means to follow Jesus and put out into the deep. That’s what I plan to do.

And then remember this: If we can do this, if we can get this identity thing right, I am convinced we can change the world. Living in the deep will engage our shallow culture. Living in the deep will make the world a better place for all of God’s children.

That’s what we’ve been talking about all these years, isn’t it?

May God bless each one of you. I love you. I will miss you.