

**Waynesburg University**  
**Commencement Address**  
**May 7, 2023**  
**Thomas P. Foley**

President Lee, Chair, Trustees, members of the faculty and staff, parents, grandparents, guardians, aunts/uncles, brothers/sisters, teachers/mentors and most importantly graduates—almost!!

I asked some of my nieces and nephews what I should talk about at a college graduation, and they pretty much laughed at me—that I would even ask such a question. And then they let their Uncle Tom know very clearly that the commencement speaker is the least important person at the graduation. And should be.

“They don’t know you, Uncle Tom, you weren’t here the last four years with them, you don’t follow them on Instagram (nor they you!), you weren’t even in their study group, and frankly they really don’t want to know ya at this point. They just want to get that diploma, get all the hugs they have earned, and move on.” Fair enough.

Somebody once said that “graduation speakers are a little bit like the body at an Irish wake—you know they have to be there, but nobody really expects them to say very much.”

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It is my honor to be here with you today. An honor because while I have only to be up here for a few minutes, you graduates and families have been at it for years—all to get to this moment, on this day, to get that diploma, a single sheet which represents so much more than the few Latin words inscribed on it. So, let’s start with the shortest prayer I know—thank you.

**First** thanks to you, President Doug, and your predecessor chancellor Tim Thyreen, two shining stars in the Waynesburg universe—both of whom have contributed personally and mightily to the success of all our independent nonprofit colleges in PA. You all know Doug, not just good at what he does, but good in how he does it. And don’t take my word for all his good qualities—his colleagues in PA know it too—they just elected him future chair of the association of 90-plus colleges in Pennsylvania—unanimously. So people at places like Penn in the East and Carnegie Mellon in the West—who voted him into that position-- know all about Doug Lee, too. Just like they knew all about your friend, my friend, the old ball coach Tim Thyreen. Thank you, Doug, and we thank Tim and remember him fondly on this day.

**Second**, thank you to all your professors, career and student affairs counselors, coaches, and those hardworking men and women that fed you, cleaned up after you, and kept Covid at bay for these past few years. The American historian and journalist Henry Adams wrote two centuries ago that “a teacher affects eternity, they can never tell where their influence stops.” That is so true of *all* the folks I just mentioned—and I hope you pay forward their generosity to you when you become mentors and teachers and influential forces in other people’s lives.

**Finally thank you** to all our parents and guardians, the grandmas and grandpops, aunts and uncles, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, BFFs and BNFs (brand new friends), and for some of you, your children—thanks to all of you for guiding these graduates to this day.

You are the people in their lives who built up their confidence or perhaps knocked it down a few notches, whether it was showing them how to tie a slip knot or how to rig a fishing line, how to catch a fly ball or how to handle a sly insult, how to sing badly in the car with them or how to make the perfect pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving.

We thank you for the roles that each of you played in the lives of these graduates—nudging, prodding, pushing, propelling, cajoling, coaxing, convincing, insisting, resisting, demanding, arm twisting...and sweet talking them.

You came with them today and it wasn't just to drive the car. You accompanied them because you made them, because you love them and because now you are brave enough to really let them go. They say courage is the first virtue and we thank you all for showing it in abundance on this day—the courage to let them walk to the bus that first day of kindergarten and the courage it will take to let them walk away from this hall today—leaving us all just a little bit behind. Graduates, let's give your family, your loved ones the big hand they deserve.

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There is actually a formula for speeches like this—*congratulate* them, *challenge* them, *charge* them going forward. Let's try to do that in ten minutes.

**First, congratulations!!!** You are living proof of the value proposition for higher education, about which there is some cynicism these days in our country.

We live in an age where Americans' trust in just about everything has gone down—partly a casualty of our 24-7 news cycle. And though education is still among the most admired sectors in America, right up there with churches, small business owners and the military—but the trust level in all these institutions has dropped in the last two decades.

But at the end of the day, the initial investment you complete today will still prove to be one of the best investments in your entire life. Ben Franklin couldn't have known how accurate he was when he wrote 250 years ago that "investment in education pays the best dividends." According to repeated analyses by economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, a four-year degree generates an [annual return](#) of 14% over a 40-year career—*annual* return. Your Waynesburg degree will show a rate of return more than twice the rate than if you just put your college money into Dow futures 4 years ago, and 5 times the return for bonds, gold or real estate. If college were a stock, it would be the darling of Wall Street. Bottom line, college grads are 3 and a half times as likely to improve their income and one's "position in life" as those who don't get the chance to go to college.

That economic ROI is especially true here at Waynesburg. Waynesburg ranks highly in all the major indexes—USN&WR, Forbes, the Brookings Institution and The Economist--and gets specific high marks in many of your most popular fields of study, including nursing, education, and business.

The Waynesburg value proposition is clear—you graduates bring tremendous value as economic engines to your family, to your community and to our state and country—long after you leave these grounds. And we thank you for that.

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To be sure, economics is only one important way to measure the value of a Waynesburg education. Our first colleges and universities in this country were founded to ready citizens for the “difficult tasks of collective self-government—reason, deliberation, tolerance”--

Waynesburg’s mission statement talks about “making connections between faith, learning and serving” so that Waynesburg graduates might “faithfully transform their communities and the world.” My goodness, how inspiring is that!!

So it was no surprise to find that Waynesburg is home to a generation of Bonner and Stover Scholars, to the Center for Service Leadership, to the Morris Center for International Studies, to the Stover Center for Constitutional Studies and Moral Leadership and to a network of 50 domestic and international partnerships that have expanded your geographic, educational and spiritual horizons. These are all engagements that speak to another aspect of that value proposition, an aspect even more significant than the economic ROI. You are growing good citizens here, which some argue is the first purpose of education in a democratic society.

This connection to good citizenship is reflected in the data. College grads volunteer twice as often for local causes, donate 3 and a half times as much to local charities, are twice as likely to build a small business in their hometown and 50% more likely to vote. I am going to guess--that given your mission and the range of service opportunities here at Waynesburg—that those numbers are even higher for your graduates.

And so again, we congratulate you and we thank you. You bring tremendous value—ready, willing and able—to your role as citizens, value to your family, to your community and to our state and country.

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That was the *Congrats* part. Now for the *Challenge* part.

American humorist Art Buchwald once gave these two sentences as his complete graduation speech—“We gave you a perfect world. Don’t mess it up.” Really, that’s all he said, and everyone who was there still remembers to this day.

Well, I can’t say that, because we didn’t—give you a perfect world that is. We maybe left you more problems than even my generation—the generation who grew up in the Cold War—inherited. With the info overload that defines the era into which you were born, we have made it even harder for you to develop the three Ds of critical thinking--the ability to decipher, the ability to distinguish and the ability to discern.

You have come of age during two decades of the most intense change this planet has ever known—in all its billions of years reforming itself. This year, there will be 4 exabytes (that’s 4 times 10 to the 19th power) of unique, new information generated in the world--more information than was generated in the past fifty centuries together! Today, the average Waynesburg graduate sitting in front of us has sent or received 250K messages (emails, texts, tweets, instagrams, whatever) in their lifetime. And if you are like our sons, that might be just this decade!

You--the generation of Tiktok, Reddit, Snapchat and Twitter--have grown up in the most complex information environment in the history of the species--what Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa, in her 2021 Nobel Peace Prize lecture, said is like “an atom bomb just exploded in our information ecosystem.” There is more information delivered to your iPhone in an hour than your parents consumed in a week at your age, your grandparents in a year, your great grandparents perhaps in their lifetime.

And make no mistake, developments in the technology of communication are like “tectonic shifts under the very ground on which education rests,” as theologian/lawyer John Sexton put it, in the “fields of knowledge

creation and knowledge dissemination”--where personal opinions don’t exist, only remotely generated algorithms which often just divide people into pre-ordained warring camps.

The info pessimists says that all this technology has created a world

- ✓ Where the internet can be less a resource and more an armament, an on-line “echo chamber” that can weaponize *public* narratives while it transmogrifies *private* images.
- ✓ Where things called memes and bots can misrepresent, misshape and mutate the truth, and then cogenerate and disgorge disinformation, almost instantaneously.
- ✓ Where digital cruelty designed to foment fear and breed hatred generates more views than content that speaks to what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.”

When you hear all that, it sounds pretty grim. But the truth is these problems aren’t exactly new, especially not to you. And the truth is you are ready for this—because you went to a school like Waynesburg.

Certainly, there are a lot of organizations competing to tell you what the truth is. Some of these are profiting off your attention; some of them are playing--to your honest and complicated emotions, to your spheres of content and discontent and sometimes even to your anger. And algorithms tend to calculate *all that* much more simplistically than you feel *all that*, so as to better command your attention.

And that is why I am in awe of all of you. All this “epistemic chaos”--this stuff--doesn’t scare you—it doesn’t scare our sons. It doesn’t scare my nieces and nephews. Because you grew up with this, and being skeptical--of information and even the institutions that produce it--is part of your DNA. You have been building and refining your own internal fact checkers your whole lives—your very own truth meters.

And *how* you learned here at Waynesburg is key to the dependability of those meters.

- ✓ At Waynesburg, you learned about other people, other cultures, other viewpoints during your 50,000 hours a year of volunteer service, spread across 10 states and one foreign country.
- ✓ At Waynesburg, you learned to think critically: to evaluate propositions, to research and validate facts, to listen actively and to ask questions, always ask questions--because there are no bad questions, only good ones that didn’t get asked.
- ✓ And at Waynesburg, you learned to navigate conversations on even the most difficult and uncivil subjects in civil and respectful ways—because that is the Waynesburg way since 1849.

And there is more help on the way. Governments and civic institutions recognize that serving citizens means fighting disinformation. Courses in *information* and *media literacy* are popping up as early as middle schools and *digital literacy* training is already a critical element in workforce training. As one observer put it, “education for veracity” is fast becoming an “indispensable ingredient for all education.”

Perhaps most importantly, the pressure to *get it right*--on social media for example--is overwhelming, from the left, the right, and the middle in this country. Nobody wants Russian bots interfering in our elections, neither side wants the other to have any advantage on the info continuum--so they have self-enforcing incentives to get it right (even if only to keep “the other side” in check).

Permit me one last serious thought on this challenge. As you get bombarded with all this info from all these competing sources, try not to conflate *free* speech with *true* speech. Insist on equal time for truth, but don’t

let that goal get hijacked—in the name of free speech—for every crazy idea, absurd conspiracy theory or false narrative that shows up on your news feed.

Free speech does not mean silencing certain voices, but it also does not require us to listen to every street corner squawker—or to force others to sit and listen, either. Everyone has a voice that deserves a chance to be heard, but you must decide who and what is worthy of your trust and of your time.

In our drive to get every *opinion* equal time, don't forsake your search for what is true, what is accurate, what is really happening. Not what a certain swath of public opinion says is happening, but what you have learned is happening by listening, researching, evaluating, validating, verifying, talking and listening again. These are all skills you have learned here at Waynesburg, in conversations, through interactions, by exchanges with real human beings—not from computer generated algorithms. That is the responsibility and the challenge that comes with your education at this mission-focused school, Waynesburg. That is the price we pay as citizens in a democracy.

Bottom line, you're already teaching us on this side of the rostrum how to deal with this info overload, and we are paying attention. This is all about protecting truth in a digital world. That is your challenge going forward, and we in my generation need you in your generation to keep leading us in this regard. Please don't stop.

So that is your challenge, and it is a big one we know.

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Now, the final piece—the charge.

Every graduation speaker wants to leave you with a lifeboat to help you navigate the stormy seas of everyday life. We want to help you build your own sea-worthy craft, help you find your own North Star.

Sometimes our analog ancestors—our parents, grandparents, the ones who brought us into the world, to this country, to this college are our best teachers—and where we should lo for the charge going forward. Their lessons aren't subject to digital decay or deception; their lessons don't wither over time and their learned truths speak to the best of our shared humanity. Let's try to remember these two charges, these two lessons, whose truth no amount of info or disinformation can ever diminish.

**First, kindness is the universal language.** Even in those rare instances where people don't respond to that "language," it will at least be clear that it is their problem, not yours.

Certainly, *charity* is a form of kindness. You knew that before you came to Waynesburg and you practiced it here with your outstanding record of community service.

Sometimes, *clarity* is a form of kindness too—knowing when to tell someone what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. Your mom and dad know exactly what I am talking about there. The soldier and diplomat Colin Powell once said that "being kind doesn't mean being soft." I think he meant that kindness is not just some coefficient of "nice-ness." Kindness is often just appreciating the fundamental dignity in another person, recognizing that another human being deserves your respect and maybe sometimes helping to bring out the best in them as a result.

It is important to remember, too, that the opposite of kindness is not strength, it is cruelty.

So kindness in all its forms is the universal language. And there is an uncommon shared strength in it. As wartime President Franklin Roosevelt said, “Human kindness has never weakened the stamina or softened the fiber of a free people. A nation does not have to be cruel in order to be tough.” Neither does a person.

**Finally, it’s all about the stories, the ones you tell, the ones you write, the ones you live.** At our son Matt’s college graduation, Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel said that “the universe is not made up of atoms, it is made up of stories.” Well, if he is right--your ancestors brought remarkable stories with them on their journeys. And some of you are just beginning to tell those stories here in America.

We know there are 400 stories--different stories, inspired stories, stories of quiet perseverance and of exuberant (and well-deserved!) celebration--here at this graduation. Some of you are sprinting across the finish line here today with arms held high in triumph, some of you crawled the last few meters—or miles. Different stories, different places, different faces, but today, each of your sagas has the same chapter title: “Graduation Day.” And whether you ran, walked, or crawled, whether you are exhilarated or exhausted, you did it.

We thank each of you for the special story of your family that led you to Waynesburg. We applaud your whole family for having the courage to let you go out and write the next chapter in the story of your family.

So, please accept my congratulations, embrace our challenge and live out the charge we leave you with on this day. Now, go out and work hard, play hard, pray hard. Think hard and think critically. Take some chances along the way. Write your story. And remember the shortest prayer is the two words we started off with today--thank you.