

Sr. Margaret Carney, O.S.F., S.T.D.
Duquesne University Commencement Speech
The Next “Greatest Generation”

May 7, 2010

President Dougherty, Members of the Board, Sr. Patricia Daly, Dr. Darling-Hammond distinguished faculty and members of the Class of 2010:

In 1998 senior NBC news analyst, Tom Brokaw, authored a powerful book describing the way in which the generation of your great-grandparents—came to deserve our country’s enduring gratitude. Here is the way he described their bravery:

At a time in their lives when their days and nights should have been filled with innocent adventure, love and the lessons of the workaday world, they were fighting in the most primitive conditions possible across the bloodied landscape of France, Belgium, Italy, Austria, and the coral islands of the Pacific. They answer the call to save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled...They faced great odds and a late start, but they did not protest. They succeeded on every front. They won the war; they saved the world. They came home to joyous and short-lived celebrations and immediately began the task of rebuilding their lives and the world they wanted. They married in record numbers and gave birth to another distinctive generation, the Baby Boomers. A grateful nation made it possible for more of them to attend college than any society had every educated, anywhere. They gave the world new science, literature, art, industry, and economic strength unparalleled in the long curve of history. (xix,xx)

To his book and to his subject, Brokaw gave the name, *The Greatest Generation*.

It is a title that evokes emotions of patriotism and filial respect. This, after all is the story of my parent’s generation, of my father—graduate of Holy Ghost Prep and Duquesne. My happy life is the result of their great devotion to country and to their Catholic creed. However, the title also frustrates me. It implies that succeeding generations are relegated to second class dreams and anemic ambitions. It is not a title I want to recommend to you this evening because it does not serve you to accept this implied status as second place people in the contests of a new century.

In fact, I want to recommend to you a conviction that generations of greatness are needed in many critical times and I see no reason to shrink from the fact that now, this time, calls for a generation of courage and competence. So I stand before you as one who intends to nominate you, the Class of 2010, as the next great generation—and the first of this new century. This nomination is the result of my own careful, daily observation of your willingness to forge a future full of hope—in spite of the institutional failures surrounding you on every side.

That “greatest generation”—the matriarchs and patriarchs of your families—knew who and the enemies of truth, freedom and goodness were and they knew just where to find them. They waged their battles on fields and high seas with clearly marked latitude and longitude. Winning was measurable, even when the measure included the heartbreak of hundreds left behind in poppy-strewn cemeteries across the face of Europe. Your battle will not be against an “enemy” who is “over there”, but against the collapse of institutions that exist right here, institutions of finance, government, religion, culture that have—in recent years-- violated the trust of their members on a massive scale. Institutions can be bearers of sinful injustice. We are seeing this in chilling clarity daily. But institutions can also be bearers of grace, of hope

and health for society. The choice belongs to the makers and moderators and stakeholders. The choice is yours and mine. Let's look briefly at two major institutions that shape our lives.

First, the Nation

Last year a journalist from *The Buffalo News* asked to meet with me. His partner in investigative reporting was one of our journalism graduates. They had a collection of important papers to donate to our new special collections library. When I learned what the nature of the collection was, I was chilled and my stomach lurched. The collection consisted of the papers and tapes of their interview with Timothy McVeigh, the man who bombed the Murrah Building in OK City 15 years ago killing 168 men, women and children and injuring 500 more. Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck appeared last month on the 15th anniversary of the bombing in an MSNBC documentary.

Making the decision to accept these papers was not easy. Our journalism faculty was eager to acquire them but our alumni and trustees were hesitant—to put it mildly. In order to work through my own ambivalence, I spent time with Lou Michel and the book he co-authored: *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Tragedy at Oklahoma City*. I learned what these two reporters asked a fundamental question on behalf of all of us: How could a man, born of a decent family in western New York, a soldier who was trained to protect and defend his country, be so filled with hatred of his government that he could murder innocent people? The hours they spent with McVeigh at the “Supermax” prison in Colorado drained them. In order to find some respite from the psychic strain of the interviews, they often went to a local monastery to restore their spiritual balance before heading back to another meeting with McVeigh. These conversations forced me to reflect that the magnitude of McVeigh's deed is so stunning that most of us simply stop at the expression of numbing horror. We resist probing the depths of this kind of hatred. And our inability—perhaps our unwillingness —may result in an ironic contribution to its recurrence.

What Michel and Herbeck learned was that McVeigh had a maniacal hatred of the government. His was the rage of a man unhinged. But he was not born that way. It was a hatred that developed over time, motivated by individual experiences that gradually turned him inside out. His distorted suspicion of authority, his increasing disdain for the government, his outrage at bungled attacks on cults and militias was shared by many. It was not until the days immediately preceding the bombing that his accomplice, Terry Nichols, tried to distance himself from Tim's pathological plan. It is easy—and very tempting—to put a Tim McVeigh on a scale of total “otherness” that allows us to feel we have nothing in common with him.

But wait a minute.....

Are we paying enough attention some of the blogs, mean-spirited commentary and dark comedy that has become commonplace in our endless channels of 24/7 media. Ours is a civil and cultural commitment to freedom of expression and freedom from censorship. I sincerely believe, however, that protection of those freedoms is rooted in the ancient monastic virtue of discretion. It is rooted in recognition that it is possible for an obsession about liberty that is not seasoned with discretion-- with ethical sensitivity --will morph into a paralysis of judgment, will result in a failure to act when a moral scruple must be voiced, when outrageous tactics must be denounced. When that happens, the capacity for corrective action is muted. Sometimes it is suffocated altogether in a vise of apathy or political correctness.

There is, at this moment, in our public discourse a tolerance of demeaning treatment of individuals, of tactics aimed at demolishing reputations on *any* grounds, of humiliating entire families with damning revelations. In such a climate, drawing decent people into races for public office is increasingly difficult. Recent months have seen several members of congress give up their places, wearied by the polarization

and personal attacks. The recent physical assaults on offices and homes of members of Congress who voted for the Health Care Reform should spark serious concern. In such a climate we risk dismantling the fine arts of consensus building, forging compromise for the common good, respecting conscientious differences and finally, to providing legal havens for conscientious objectors? What happens to a country's soul when sticks, stones and spittle replace argument, arbitration and disciplined advocacy?

What can you do?

Your commencement is your invitation to take up the work of restoring a political culture that does not confuse debate with demagoguery. The degrees you will carry away this weekend contain the affirmation that your education here has given you credentials you need to succeed.

As evidence of my confidence I look at the work you did in covering the G-20 summit here in Pittsburgh last September. Jess Eagle, Mary Jacquell, Brian Tierney, Katelyn Malongowski and Noah Brode—along with Professors Patterson and Woytek—you —along with DU media representatives--were in the center of a powerful event. You had thrilling experiences of being able to broadcast the work of world leaders and simultaneously record the dissent of marginalized protestors. You had the chance of a lifetime this past September. My hope is that it inspires a lifetime of knowing that we have to take a chance on the trustworthiness of political leaders. We have to weigh and work with their intentions and aspirations. Destructive political methods and despairing motives must be countered with intellectual depth and attention to the fundamental Judeo-Christian code enshrined the Golden Rule. You have already shown your ability to do this. You have seen it embodied in your president. And I take this moment to congratulate you, President Dougherty for the awards he received this year: The Tree of Life Award from the National Jewish Fund and the Nelson Mandela Leadership and Diversity Award from the Afrika Yetu organization. These awards mirror the goals of Duquesne for a citizenship that is global in concept and achievement and local in action and inspiration.

Second — the Church

Several months ago, the "Grey Lady," the New York Times, carried a story of sexual misconduct by a priest of the Franciscan order in a mid-western parish twenty years ago. Before long, the reporters from CNN reached our campus seeking interviews with a friar who structured the settlements the order created with the victim. Over the next several days, controversial interviews took place that revived old wounds on all sides. While this set of circumstances brought right into my office the tensions of dealing with the scandals of sexual abuse and misconduct in the church, a larger story was brewing and has now become almost a daily feature.

We have seen new revelations rock countries in Europe who once smugly thought that this problem was a purely American aberration.

We have seen cases from the USA revisited with accusations of papal cover-up. Reporters clearly hope to draw the pope into public comment and some hope to draw him into a court. What has been clear in these recent months of revived outrage at clerical abuse and episcopal ineptitude is that this issue has and will continue to purify the institutional church for decades to come. It will also continue to petrify the church's leaders and lawyers for decades to come. But does this mean that for decades to come, *our* experience of church membership must be that of being publicly shamed?

(This is an important question for those of you who are members of the Catholic Church. And those of you who are not need to engage us with honest concern and tough questions for in so doing you will help us come to terms with our damnably difficult issues.) As new waves of revelations emerge, many wring their

hands and lament that it is simply “over.” The scoundrels already outnumber the saints. The holiness of Mother Teresa will pale when set beside the sins of Fr. Marciel, infamous founder of the Legionnaires of Christ.

Retreat to the catacombs looks more and more appealing. Is there nothing for you to do? Is there nothing that anchors our hope? Is there no hope of a next generation that will heal this wound?

Our own American bishops have answered those questions with clarity and with comprehensive, even draconian, measures in the Dallas accords of 2001. Another perspective has emerged in recent weeks> It is a focus on what liberation theologians would call “the church from below”—the church where the people are empowered to claim their baptismal rights to act, to lead, to protest, to celebrate. Stories of plucky nuns and priests—sacrificing themselves for the poor—take center stage. Experts like James Martin, S.J., Hans Kung, offer strong words of rebuke to bishops and please not to abandon the call to real penance and reform. Right now, appeals to tradition, law and theological refinements, appear too many as luxuries we cannot afford. People seek—in the fire of betrayal and loss—proof hope is not mocked.

Last Sunday, in Point Breeze, a neighborhood about five miles away from here, the pastor—whose name is Father Edward Bryce, celebrated his 50th anniversary. For twenty-two years he’s led the people of St. Bede’s Church there. The celebration was upbeat. Glorious choral music lifted spirits. The testimony of colleagues and the rabbi of Temple Sinai in Squirrel Hill were moving. But the most amazing thing of that jubilee celebration was the fact that eight African priests—all graduates of Duquesne—were there to celebrate, too. For the past 14 years our *alma mater* provided generous scholarships to these religious and St. Bede parish provided room, board and friendship. As a result of this partnership, the people of St. Bede’s have now adopted a Kenyan orphanage. This has given a Pittsburgh parish a vital link to the role Catholic institutional power in east Africa. And Duquesne is the root of this global clerical “rainbow connection.”

The congregants gave a standing ovation for Fr. Ed Bryce and those African brothers last Sunday. For those magical moments, the thunder of loving applause helped us all to realize that the scandals are not the whole story. For those moments we were assured that in this church of fallen men and women there are also the noble Spiritan values of international solidarity through education and service. We are a long way from the Spiritan founders of 1878, but—in a deeper sense-- we are proudly standing right where they started: In a place and a power that connects people from Monongahela and Mombasa, from New Castle and Nairobi, from Point Breeze and Port-au-Prince. There will be a day when the remedy for the pain and humiliation of the Church’s victim and perpetrator will be found in the generosity and self-sacrifice of the fearless faithful. And, my dear graduate, I believe that will be *your* day of coming of age to make incarnate the motto of our school: The Spirit will give us Life.

The Greatest Generation was called to battle. You are called to rebuilding and reforming. I leave you with the words of the British playwright, Christopher Fry, words that blazoned themselves on my heart one day in a classroom in Rockwell Hall. They have been strength to me a hundred times. I offer them to you tonight, to you, the next great generation:

Thank God our times are now, when wrong comes up to face us everywhere, never to leave us till we take the longest stride of soul man [woman] ever took. Affairs are now soul size. The enterprise is exploration into God.

Thank you.

Sources:

Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck: *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh & the Tragedy at Oklahoma City*. New York: Avod Books, 2002.

Tom Brokaw: *The Greatest Generation*. New York: Random House, 1998.