

Midyear Commencement Class speaker emphasizes 'Decisions!'

by Contributor - Saturday, December 15, 2012

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/23922/midyear-commencement-class-speaker-emphasizes-decisions/>

James Dovalis, of Appleton, offered the following remarks as the student speaker during the University's 48th Midyear Commencement on Dec. 15, 2012. Dovalis is graduating with a Bachelor of Liberal Education from the Division of Lifelong Learning and Community Engagement.

"Thank you Chancellor Wells, Provost Earns, faculty, friends, family and fellow graduates.

"I'm extremely honored and humbled to have the opportunity to speak with you on this joyful day of celebration.

"We are gathered to recognize this graduating class and to celebrate all of the decisions which have led us to this accomplishment. Soon, each of us will cross this stage and have our name read aloud; signifying that we've completed a significant milestone of a greater journey.

"Graduates, as you cross the stage, think of all of the people who helped to make this possible – many of those people are here today: faculty, family and friends. At some point, take time to thank them for all that they've done.

"Brenda, my beautiful wife, thank you for your unwavering support while I returned to complete this degree. You, along with our two wonderful sons, have made all the necessary sacrifices so that I could return to school. I am grateful for your support of that decision. I love you.

"Each of us has taken a unique path to arrive at this very place. Ultimately, degree completion comes through diligence and perseverance. Some of us accomplished the task in four years time. Some, even less. Others may have taken a bit longer...like 32 and a half years.

"If you haven't noticed yet, I'm a bit older than the traditional college graduate. In fact, I've been informed that I am the oldest Student Commencement Speaker in the history of UW Oshkosh. I'm proof that it's never too late to decide to go back and finish.

"On this occasion, many of us graduates would like some reassurance. Reassurance that all of our hard work will pay off. We want to know "will everything be alright?" As one of my professors often said in class, "that depends."

"Most important decisions were made for you up through your high school years. Then, you became an adult and it was time for you to take the reins, time for you to make the decisions. Making a decision is no easy task. A decision takes thought and effort, it requires clarity and vision. Your decisions ultimately define who you are.

"Paul Harvey tells a story of a man named Alfred. On April 13, 1888, this man began to read the

newspaper and was astonished to stumble upon his own obituary. Naturally, it was a mistake, it was Alfred's brother Ludwig who had died.

"As a result of this error, Alfred was given a rare opportunity – a chance to see how he would be remembered. As he read the obituary, he didn't like what he read. The obituary portrayed him as a monster whose discoveries in explosives had changed the face of war from bullets and bayonets to long-range weapons in a little over two decades.

"You see, our decisions matter. They define who we are, they define how we will each be remembered. So decide carefully.

"Why did it take so long for me to earn my college degree? My problem was that I had made a poor decision. I decided to "go" to college, but I never decided to "finish" college. That is, not until June of last year when I was warmly greeted by a counselor in the Admissions office. That day, he recognized that I truly had a decided heart.

"Stephen Biko was a South African anti-apartheid activist. In September of 1977, Biko's fight for equality cost him his life when he was brutally beaten by police while in custody. There's a powerful lyric in a Peter Gabriel song about Biko and his decisions. It goes like this, "you can blow out a candle...but you can't blow out a fire. Once the flames begin to catch...the wind will blow it higher." The South African government was able to extinguish Biko, the man...but they could not extinguish the movement that he had created. I'm certain that Stephen Biko would be proud to see how this song – and his obituary portrayed his life.

"Now, back to our friend Alfred. Stunned by what he had read in his premature obituary, Alfred decided to change his current image and future legacy. He used his time and the profits from his explosives to create an annual prize...a prize for Peace. Today, few of us connect the creator of that prize to a "monster" of war and death. And that, is just what Alfred Nobel intended.

"Whether today, next month or years from now, graduates, our decisions will culminate into a legacy. What will it say that you did? Who will we say that you were? What difference will we celebrate that you made?

"Well, graduates...it depends!

"Our legacy will be what we make it, one decision at a time – beginning with decisions we make today about how to express gratitude and how to celebrate. As we make decisions in the coming weeks and months, probably some big ones, let us make them intentionally...aware of their contribution to who we are becoming, the legacy we are creating, and the needs that we will meet as college educated citizens.

"Philanthropist and successful businessperson, W. Clement Stone once said, "No matter how carefully you plan your goals, they will never be more than pipe dreams unless you pursue them with gusto." Decide what you want...and then take action!

"I commend each graduate and all who have gathered here today to celebrate with us! Be proud of all that has been accomplished. I'm truly blessed to have had the opportunity to learn with many of

you...and, for that, I'll be eternally grateful.

"Graduating Class, it's December 15, 2012. It's time to decide on our future. Congratulations to us all!"

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