

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS at The Ursuline School Commencement May 20, 2016

By Brigid Catherine Lahiff

Mrs. Davidson, Ms. Killebrew, Mrs. Moore, Mrs. Lynch, Monsignor Keane, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, family, friends, and most importantly, Class of 2016, welcome. I am honored to speak to you all on this special day.

There is a Latin phrase in the opening of Willa Cather's novel, My Ántonia: "Optima dies...prima fugit." Originally found in Vergil's *Georgics*, it means, "The best days are the first to flee," and it prepares the reader for the nostalgic tone of Cather's fictional memoir.

I read My Ántonia for the second time back in October. The first time I read it was in sophomore year, and I don't believe I fully comprehended the novel's meaning. This time around, however, I realized that the novel largely revolves around the profound power of memory and our relationship to the irrevocable past. Cather's choice of epigraph, "The best days are the first to flee," perfectly reflects the themes of the novel as a whole.

As the months have passed and as senior year has come to a close, I have often reflected on that Latin phrase. There is a certain beauty to the image of days or memories flying away into the wind, behind the clouds - they are out of sight but never lost. In a similar way, we are leaving high school in the past and bringing with us to college memories, knowledge, and lifelong friends.

Too often we have dwelled on the negatives of high school (which are in no way unique to Ursuline itself) - too much homework, unnecessarily difficult AP classes, and the ridiculous nature of the college application process, to name a few. Sometimes allowing grades and college acceptances or denials to define our self-worth, we have failed to

cherish the moments that make our time at Ursuline a memorable experience- we have permitted the best days, the best memories to flee from our thoughts in favor of an impending test.

That is why graduation is so important to every one of us. Graduation is more than simply wearing a cap and gown and receiving a diploma. It is a day to recall the memories that have made our years at Ursuline unique and special. It is a day to remember the excitement of Ring Day, the laughs shared with friends, the free food on St. Angela's feast day. It is a day to look back on our time at Ursuline and recognize that from the first day of freshman year to now, we have all grown to become bright, confident women. We have already faced the challenges of the ninth grade interdisciplinary project (to this day, the purpose of that "water project" still eludes me), the annual changes to our precious long homeroom schedule, and the infamous turkey train. Now, I think it is safe to say that we are all ready to face the challenges of college.

Graduation is one of those "best days," that will most certainly flee but will never be lost because it marks a new chapter in all of our lives- a chapter, that requires all of us to draw from the past so that we may move ahead and find success in whatever we pursue. With all the memories made, lessons learned, and friends found at Ursuline, we will not dwell endlessly on a nostalgic past but face the future with hope and confidence.

Next to the doors that lead to the library, there is an inscription dated from 1928. It reads, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good," and comes from 1 Thessalonians in the New Testament. I believe this Bible verse holds special significance to our education at Ursuline and in college. It suggests that as we face new situations and academic challenges, both our faith in God and all the knowledge we have gained from an Ursuline education will

lead us to success, and more importantly, to happiness. The verse also encourages us to be open to new experiences, even to those that test our beliefs- it is then that we may find strength in holding fast to our convictions or accepting new, more valuable truths.

I cannot count the number of times I have passed that inscription either walking out to my car or into the building, desperately hoping in the middle of winter that someone would be strolling by and open the door for me. It has been four years, and finally, perhaps feeling sentimental about my final days at Ursuline, I happened to look more closely and actually read the inscription about a week and a half ago. Reading “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” sent a chill down my spine because I immediately realized that this verse is also the motto of my college, Regent’s Park, one of the many that make up the University of Oxford and the one to which I was randomly allocated during the admissions process.

The fact that this verse is etched outside the doors of the library, my favorite place in Ursuline, and is also the motto of my college is no coincidence. Some may call it fate, destiny, or even luck, but I believe that God has a plan for us all. It is when we open our eyes and see the signs of His plan, as I did in reading the inscription, that we are truly humbled by this higher power. We recognize that everything happens for a reason, the successes and failures, the ups and downs. By having faith in God, learning from our failures, and being empowered by our successes, we can live our lives to the fullest, unafraid to take risks and to pursue our goals both in college and whatever lies after.

“Optima dies...prima fugit”. The best days are the first to flee. Cherish this moment, Class of 2016, and look ahead to the future with hope and confidence. When faced with inevitable struggles, both academic and personal, draw from the memories and lessons of

the past- they may have fled but are never lost. And finally, remember that God will always have an answer- it may not be clear, but He is always there for us, an unwavering and constant presence in all our lives.

Congratulations and good luck, Class of 2016.