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Questions for when Something is Beginning [Commencement Address]

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Questions for when Something is Beginning

Fontbonne University December 2023 Commencement Address

Dr. Blattner, members of the Board of Trustees, my faculty colleagues, graduates and your families. It is my deepest privilege to speak to you tonight.

I will always smile—and probably tear up—when Pomp and Circumstance is played because it is the sound of Commencement. We call this ceremony “commencement”—which means to begin. To step in. To start anew. It reminds me that: Something is ending. Something is beginning. And for a few minutes tonight, we get to stand in that liminal, between, place where both are true at the same time.

Graduates--tonight, Pomp and Circumstance was played for you, and I hope that you feel important, and exhilarated, and proud, and beloved. And maybe . . . a bit wistful. I do. Because unlike the many other commencements I've attended in this gymnasium, this time I'm coming with you—and some my colleagues are, too. I'm taking a deep breath and stepping into the uncertain future. But also? I'm not *entirely* ready to leave this place and these people. Perhaps you feel the same.

Commencement speeches are supposed to send you out into your brilliant futures with profound words of wisdom. However, I think that questions often serve us better, so tonight I'm offering some questions. I hope that asking yourself these questions can help point you in the right direction maybe even help you to “order your steps” when you've moved beyond Fontbonne.

The first question that I hope that you ask often is *What is going on here?* The world is complex and often confusing and, let's admit it, there are a lot of unreliable narrators out there. But curiosity will always be your friend. I hope that curiosity is a habit for you now. I hope that you've had your mind blown in a psychology or science class, come to understand that history is rarely comfortable, and that health care systems and technology have bias built in. That math is beautiful—but that counting is hard. That AI can assemble words but that only *you* can do the thinking. You take with you so much knowledge—use it and your curiosity to continue to ask “what is going on here?” and to not accept the easy answers.

To figure out “what is going on here,” you'll need to also ask Question #2: *Who is not here. Whose voice is not being represented.* Understanding the complicated challenges we face today can be daunting and even burdensome. AND, you are armed with keen, hard-earned insight and critical thinking skills, and have hearts armored by the Sisters of St. Joseph who remind us in their creed and in their deed that we are *deeply obligated* to each other, *without* distinction. And this world needs you to do your part where you can with what you have, so part of your obligation to your community and your world is asking “who should be here that isn't,” and working toward figuring out what to do about it.

Question #3 is Who am I in this and what do I bring? In the most literal sense—you were the college Covid generation. You found your way to university during an historic pandemic and largely started your experience in individual spaces on Zoom or sat in classrooms six feet apart—checking in on the desk with your phone. Do you remember that? And you made it here—to graduation. You blazed your own trail because you had no choice. Along the way, you changed teaching and learning and (sometimes painfully) made us better teachers.

Your individual presence as a Griffin also mattered. Your fellow students and professors learned from you as you did from them. You have been prepared to *find a job but more importantly to build a life* through your course work, leadership programs, student activities, athletic teams, campus ministry, resident assistant work, commuting while taking care of family members, and studying, working, living, and laughing with many people who do not look, think, eat or pray like you. You bring much to this world—take time to consider what your particular talents and abilities can bring to bear.

The last question I'll remind you to ask is: *To whom can I turn?* When you make that list, I hope that you include the people you've known at Fontbonne. I've long told my graduating students that we *belong* to each other now. I will *always* say, when I see them, "*that's one of mine!*" I will never not be proud--as I am of you and also of my colleagues whose work here is testament to the fact that hard work, relationships, and social justice form the foundation for transformative education. And you should also consider us *yours*. Because you are. So find us when you need us –and even when you don't, because that's what people who belong to each other do.

It matters that we have been here now, together, doing this work.

So, as you can see and feel--Something is ending. Something is beginning. This liminal space lasts but a minute and it's time to go. Take good questions and the best of yourself, your experiences, and each other with you.

May peace be with you all as we all commence.

Heather M. Norton, Ph.D.
December 8, 2023