

Sentinels For The 21st Century

**Graduation Message
2006 Graduation Ceremony
Fontbonne University
6800 Wydown Boulevard
St. Louis, Missouri
May 13, 2006**

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Sentinels For The 21st Century

I. INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the kind introduction.

Graduates, parents, family, friends of graduates, guests, faculty and administrators—good morning! I am pleased to share this signal occasion in your life's journey with you.

I've entitled my message to you "Sentinels for the 21st Century," and within this thematic framework, I'd like to leave you with two thoughts:

Whatever your life's work—

- a. *Be a sentinel for justice, and*
- b. *Cast your bread upon the waters.*

II. SENTINELS FOR THE 21st CENTURY

First, Sentinels for Justice.

The word sentinel has as its root, "to feel, to sense." A sentinel is a person whose purpose is to guard, to "watch over" as it were; to protect.

A sentinel is a sentry; an individual who, having listened and watched, either (a) warns of danger or (b) signals good news. Being a sentinel is also characterized by vigilance, alertness, diligence and a readiness to take prompt action. A sentinel watches or observes closely; is unsleeping.

In historical and biblical context, a sentinel usually was posted a little higher than low ground. In fact, a sentinel was often given an elevated position so as not just to see what was on the ground before him or her, but to be able to gaze far out on the horizon to see what might be approaching.

Thus, the work—historically—of a sentinel was to do two things: (1) gather information through watching (observing), listening, and seeking information; and (2) act by sharing that information with the "proper" authority or other like-minded individual, so to generate a call to action when necessary.

So it is with no stretch of the imagination, that I believe that each of you is a sentinel, and collectively you are a community of sentinels. You can be *Sentinels for Justice in the 21st Century*, those that help ensure:

Sentinels For The 21st Century--Fontbonne University

- justice for families,
- justice for children and communities,
- justice that secures access to education and The Arts,
- justice that secures access to a health care system that routinely offers quality care for all,
- justice for the health and well-being of the nation's people,
- justice that ensures a better environment,
- justice that secures freedom to worship,
- justice that ensures economic well-being,
- justice that ensures freedom.

As you transition *from* the comfort and protection of this community—Fontbonne University, 6800 Wydown Boulevard—to the uncharted waters in a divisive, diverse and constantly changing world, you will be faced with many barriers in your attempt to live a life of a sentinel. And for many reasons.

First, being a sentinel of any kind is—and always has been—hard work, and likely always will be. And given the broad array of emerging and perennial problems and issues you are likely to face on your journey, you cannot assume your work will be easier than those who have journeyed before you—despite the fact that there will exist better tools with which you will be able to engage in your work. *The real issue before you is that there may be far fewer people wanting to join you to do the work of sentinels.*

Second, as a sentinel, every day of your journey you must seek out the good news as well as the warning signs of potential dangers. And, from your elevated vantage point of watching and observing and interpreting, when the time comes, you must either signal the good news or sound the alarm.

As a sentinel for justice, you will have the advantage that comes from a higher education. As such, you should have learned in your time here at Fontbonne, that *intolerance of difference is incompatible with being educated, with scholarship, with the academe, with faith.* By now, you should also have learned that *indifference to the human condition is inconsistent with the legacy of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet*, whose vision, courage, conviction and compassion founded this beloved institution, and still sustains it. The multicultural experiences you have enjoyed via this institution should have provided you a clear message about the value of diversity and a diverse society.

But even so, you will still have to sort through the many dilemmas and conflicts fundamental to the enterprise of affecting social change (because that's what sentinels do!)—so that change leads more often to progress, rather than to chaos and indifference.

Third, a sentinel can't fall asleep on his/her watch. Historically, a “watchman” was a very important person in a community or village: *someone had to watch while the people*

worked, rested, or prayed. Even though there have been profound changes in our world, this fact has not changed: *people still live in families and communities (however defined); and they still need watchmen.*

Fourth, when an alarm is sounded, don't operate as usual. Be ready to take quick action based on the information you have gathered.

The world had undergone constant and profound change since this institution was founded some 83 years ago, and the first students were graduated. In this time, the nation, indeed the world, has been confronted by seismic shifts in public attitudes, challenged by new demographics and exploding technologies, and changed forever by war, terrorism and terrible behaviors from without and within. We ignore this constant changing environment to our peril.

As you begin this new phase of your journey, you must help this institution recognize, renew and sustain its commitment to making connections between knowledge and human action...the result of being sentinels—to improving the very environment for the conduct of life.

It is my hope that all of you have begun to develop an enspirited appreciation for the work you've completed here, as well as that which is before you.

But for the future, why must you be sentinels? Why must you continue this legacy? Well, you might ask yourselves these questions:

- If not me, then who?
- "If I don't continue this legacy, what price will the future exact of me for the current condition of too many of our children and youth? For the decline of communities and community?"
- What will be the impact on future communities for children who are too poorly equipped to either reap the benefits or meet the challenges and responsibilities of *parenthood, brother/sisterhood, citizenship and employment?*
- Do I understand that the consequences of their problems and limitations—and their successes—reach far beyond their personal lives, in fact, they touch my life and that of my family's well-being?
- How can my journey help ensure that more of our youth demonstrate behaviors that suggest they adhere to a code of ethics; that they have an internal monitor—an alarm—a moral compass—that signals when their actions are out-of-sync with their beliefs?

Sentinels For The 21st Century--Fontbonne University

What does the lack of a moral compass among too many children and youth, and even young adults, of all ethnicities, portend for the future of a civil and just society?

- What am I doing to “touch tomorrow today”?

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in racism, racial violence, race hatred and indifference; a resurgence in the kinds of societal problems attendant to points of view that are grounded in the theory and practice of racial superiority. What is your role in slowing this new tide?

We are, and have always been a multicultural society. You will live work, serve, play and pray in a world where the concept of minority will lose its current meaning—statistical, racial, and cultural.

As you leave this place, this day, **DON'T** leave this place! As with your family, friends, and hometown, part of your life's journey now includes Fontbonne University. **Stay connected:** philosophically, professionally, financially, and in spirit and gratitude. As a graduate in your field of study, you have much to look forward to, as many of the emerging careers require the expertise you have begun to acquire.

You are now part of a great legacy—created by the juxtaposition of religion, service and higher education. This legacy of singular research, education, outreach, business and cultural diversity has been fueled by the decades of graduates who have used their training to improve the common good, wherever they were. Their work has not been the work of the “faint of heart, faint of mind, or faint of spirit.” As your degree is conferred this beautiful Missouri day, understand that you are now a part of a unique way of knowing and doing, peculiar to graduates of Fontbonne University.

III. CAST YOUR BREAD UPON THE WATERS

Now to the second thought.

You will find these words in Ecclesiastes 11:1—“Cast thy bread upon the waters: For thou shalt find it after many days.”

Casting bread upon waters means giving the best that you have to give in every situation that you confront, letting your moral compass—your internal monitor—guide your thoughts, words, and actions. Casting you bread upon waters means that you give authentically, ethically, and without hypocrisy.

You see, “casting bread” is symbolic of people—you and I, all of us—and our actions. And “waters” is symbolic of our global society and the many problems that ebb and flow

Sentinels For The 21st Century--Fontbonne University

with it. "Finding it after many days" is symbolic of the times in our lives when good deeds and not-so-good-deeds return to us—in full acknowledgement of earlier actions we've taken, or failed to take.

Your years and experience at Fontbonne University should have taught you a lot about excellence, patience, quiet, consistency, shared vision, trustworthiness, honor, perseverance, persistence, commitment, fortitude, acceptance of others, and looking beyond faults to discern strengths. Make sure your life is purposeful: *you are not expected to live lives of indifference and insignificance. You are expected to engage in activities that transform the lives of others ...and your own life, for the better.*

IV. SUMMARY

To be a sentinel for justice and to knowingly cast bread upon the many deep, wide and rough waters takes:

- courage.
- strength.
- authenticity.
- collective effort.
- faith.
- Hope.
- love.

But watch you must. And cast you must. As you cast your bread upon the waters, be a *21st Century Sentinel for Justice.*

God bless, God speed, and may he hold each of you in the palm of his hands
Journey on, journey well.

Thank you.