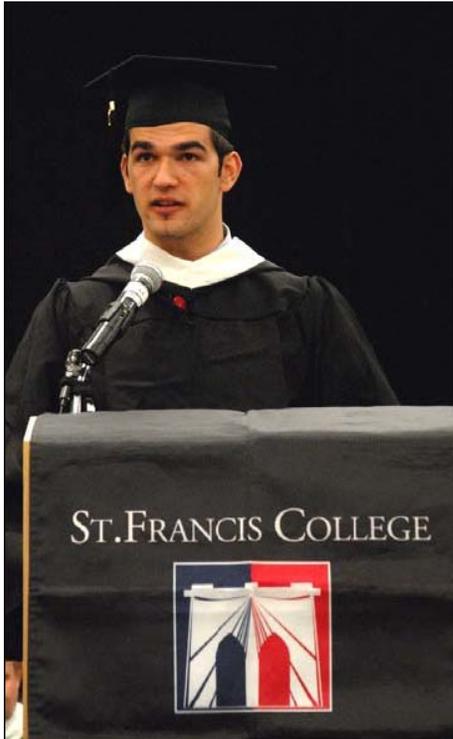


Andrija Vrdoljak's 2007 Valedictorian Speech



Good morning everyone,

“...every sorrow which you pluck out from the thoughts and feelings of a fellow creature shall be replaced by beautiful flowers of peace and joy in the sanctuary of your soul.”

Members of the Board of Trustees, President Macchiarola, Distinguished Guests, dear Members of the Faculty & Administration, Fellow Graduates, Parents, Alumni and Friends.

I believe that everyone in this room knows superman. Well, we had our own here at St. Francis, and this person has helped soooo many students, including myself. His name is Malcolm Gordon and I would like to dedicate my speech today to him.

I stand in front of you today having this great honor of delivering a commencement speech. Asked to prepare it I sat down one evening to write down all the things I absolutely cannot leave out and people I have to thank, and, several hours later, I had a 14 page paper and a list of 132 names. This seemed like a little problem since Dean Houlihan

asked me to prepare a 10 minute speech. I don't think I can read that fast (especially not in english🇺🇸).

Therefore I decided to simply reflect shortly on our past several years here at St. Francis and ESPECIALLY on what are we taking with us from here. What is that St. Francis changed in us and who are we today. We are all certainly very different people than we were 4 years ago.

Each Year people from over 70 different countries come together here at St. Francis, this small college of Big Dreams in the heart of Brooklyn Heights. They come to New York City, itself a school of international and cultural studies, a laboratory of co-existence and a model of tolerance.

We also formed our little laboratory here at St. Francis, and we succeeded fully. I was first introduced to this laboratory through our water polo team. Don't worry, water polo players don't push any horses into the pool, we do all the swimming.

I played this sport since I was eight, but now I found myself on a team with people from nine different countries and nine different cultures.

Through the sport normal conversation goes far beyond dialogue itself and creates friendships among teammates whose nations might have hated each other for years. My team, my Water Polo team at St. Francis College was the final step to my complete certainty that dialogue and understanding can break through every ignorance. My team is a living model of an international community perfectly functioning. People from the Middle East and South America, from the Eastern Europe and Staten Island, from the Caribbean and Russia, on this team are more than teammates, they are lifelong friends sharing wins and losses, books and apartments and more than anything culture and understanding. This is what we find here at St. Francis College, and we find it through sport teams, through different clubs, through a chat in cafeteria, and even through simply sitting in the class.

The very purpose and goal of liberal arts education is to provoke questions, open eyes, and by doing it creating a good citizen. And by this I don't simply mean a citizen of our neighborhood, or our city or country, but a global citizen, a humanist.

St. Francis has taught us that the education is not in answers but in questions and that education is a basic human right and should **not** be a privilege. St. Francis has taught us to connect and not divide, that each individual is the whole world and that human life is sacred.

St. Francis has taught us that diversity is to be cherished and admired, and most importantly it has taught us to build bridges, and not walls, and that "suffering anywhere concerns people everywhere". St. Francis has taught us that peace is the only option and that it is in giving that we receive. In the words of president Truman: "The responsibility of great states is to serve and not to dominate the peoples of the world". And in the same manner that the responsibility of strong people is to serve and not to dominate the weaker. St. Francis has taught us that each one of us can make a difference.

And I believe into what St. Francis has taught us, and I believe that each one of us will make a difference. No matter what you do in your life to make a living, and no matter what becomes your profession, I believe that one thing will always remain with all of us: the belief in building bridges and embracing differences.

Now please allow me to thank several people.

First I would like to thank You my fellow graduates, all of You. Each one of you, together with all the other people at the college, create this warm, philanthropic, and all accepting community. St. Francis is indeed a place where absolutely no one can feel excluded. In the words of Dr. Sorrentino: "it's like Cheers, it's the place where everybody knows your name".

I would like to thank a person who led me through my years here at the college and whom I see as "the professor" as an ideal, in a Platonic sense, Dr. Francis Greene, a true humanist and a Renaissance man. Hours of our conversations shaped my life as a student here at St. Francis, but also as a student of human being, culture, arts, and all things

human. I am sure that each one of you had your own Dr. Greene here at the college. I thank Dr. Paddy Quick for teaching us that economics is much more than a dismal science, for constantly making us reexamine the dogmatic truths around us and showing us what a true social scientist and humanist is. I also wish to thank Dr. Garcia and Dr. Tabrizi, and all the other professors and administrators at the college who irreversibly influenced and changed our lives.

Finally, I would like to thank our water polo team, my water polo team, for being the greatest group of people to grow up with and to share moments of greatest happiness and deepest sorrow. Thank You COACH Carl, you went soooo far to get all of us here. I wouldn't be surprised if the next St. Francis water polo recruit comes from Alaska. Without you all of this would never exist.

Please allow me to thank my family now. My father and my brother traveled from Europe to be with us today. Since my father does not speak english please allow me to address them in our native tongue, Croatian. Tata, Tvrle, would you please stand up. Steta sto nam nema cijele bande danas ovdje. hvala vam legende moje sto ste uvijek vjerovali u mene I sto ste uvijek najveca podrška, zbog vas sam to sto jesam, uspijeh svakoga od nas je uspijeh svih nas, cijele obitelji. I just thanked my family for making me who I am today and for their immeasurable trust and support. You may be seated.

Our superman, Malcolm Gordon, about whom I talked to you about at the very beginning of this speech, had passed away in the fall of 2005, but many many people will never forget him. St. Francis once said: "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words". Malcolm was one of the very few who did not need words. If each one of us manages to become this kind of superman for only one single person we will make this world a much better place.

I would like to leave you with this last thought that I believe encompasses the whole essence of our education. And I quote:

"Create all the happiness you are able to create; remove all the misery you are able to remove. Every day will allow you, --will invite you to add something to the pleasure of others, --or to diminish something of their pains. And for every grain of enjoyment you pluck in the heart of another, you shall find a harvest in your own heart, --while every sorrow which you pluck out from the thoughts and feelings of a fellow creature shall be replaced by beautiful flowers of peace and joy in the sanctuary of your soul." (Jeremy Bentham)

When I came to this country 4 years ago, one of the first things I learned from my English professor was the real meaning of the so often used expression goodbye, and I learned that it actually means "God be with You". And now, with full understanding, I say to you all:

Goodbye, Thank You All, Congratulations, and Good Luck!!!!