

BSC graduation May 25, 2018

Good morning everyone. It is such a pleasure to see you all here today: new graduates, proud family members, other friends and members of the BSC community. My sincere congratulations to the graduates and to the support system that has helped each one of you make it to this point. I know that whereas the Birmingham-Southern faculty is responsible for some of your greatest challenges and darkest nights, we are also part of the support system that has encouraged and guided you along the way. You did it. You hung in there, you kept going, you learned, you got better, and now here you are. We are so proud of you and so pleased to see you ready to take the next steps on the path before you. Everyone, please join me in giving the 2018 graduates a hand.

So if you're graduating from somewhere – anywhere – what you want is to get the graduation ceremony over with as quickly as possible so you can get to the parties and food and people you want to see. If you're the graduation speaker you know that 1) everybody is praying that you'll be brief and 2) there is absolutely nothing you can say that hasn't been said before, and probably better than you could say it. So what I'm going to do today is mostly tell stories. Stories that illustrate what I've learned over the years and that might offer some food for thought for you, once you're done with the post-graduation parties and food and people.

We all accumulate things as we go through life. I'm sure that many of you (and your parents) are dismayed at how much you have accumulated over your years at BSC – things that you now have to move out of your dorm room or apartment. Ending life with more stuff than we had when we started out is normal for most people in our society.

Today, I would like to talk to you about accumulating things other than material possessions. Specifically, I would like to encourage you to spend your life accumulating relationships and experiences.

All of us have relationships that we cherish: with relatives, friends, a sweetie. It's easy to take the good relationships for granted because they're such a natural part of our lives. And most of us feel that our lives would be diminished by the loss of any of our most valued relationships. But it takes work to keep a good relationship strong and vibrant. Through the example of other people, and my own mistakes, I've come to understand some principles that I have found valuable as I think about maintaining healthy relationships:

- First, as my sainted mother used to tell me, you have to be a friend to have a friend. To me, that means be willing to take the initiative in keeping a relationship alive. When I was in my early 30s, two of my dearest friends each had small children. Lots of small children. Their lives were simply too hectic to have time to think about getting together with me. If I hadn't taken the initiative to get us together for lunch or coffee every now and then, we simply never would have seen each other. I was in a place in my life where I had the time and energy to take the lead in keeping our friendship strong; they weren't. On the other hand, I have a good friend in San Antonio whom I rarely see. Yet she is one of the most faithful people I know to stay in touch. I know that that particular friendship will never die because if nothing else, I can count on her not to let go. Sometimes it's frustrating to feel like you're always the one to have to get the party started, but if it's a relationship you value, it's worth it.

- As you think about what it means to be a friend, you are likely to find that you have to make a conscious effort to maintain relationships. Some of your best friends will settle in other parts of the country (or the world!) and you won't have the luxury of the daily visits you've enjoyed for the last several years. You've got to look for ways to keep the bond strong. Each of you will find different ways of doing this: email, phone visits, lots of texting, a guys' fishing trip or, my personal favorite, a girls' weekend in Las Vegas. But if you neglect the relationship, it probably won't survive. Even in romantic relationships. The early months and years of a romance are wonderful, but as the years go on, I guarantee that you and your honeybunch will develop different interests and points of view. This can add a wonderful depth to the relationship, or it can result in two people living together in their own separate worlds. Keep the relationship strong by reminding yourself how important communication and respect are.
- And while we're on the subject of friends, most of us tend to have friends who are in some ways like us. We naturally gravitate toward people we have things in common with. But I encourage you to be open to forming relationships with people who are different from you. Some of my most enjoyable relationships have been with people I never would have envisioned as part of my world. When I lived in South Carolina for a few years, I was part of the small volunteer rescue squad in my town. Once I finished my EMT certification and joined the squad, I was partnered with the one guy on faculty who was also on the squad and about as different from me as anyone could imagine. I quickly learned how little I really knew him. He had had several short stories published and let me read drafts of a

couple that he was working on. He and his wife were craft beer brewers long before it was cool. Despite his fairly crusty exterior, he was one of the most caring and loving people I had ever met. In fact, he told me that he had decided to join the rescue squad because one day, as he looked out his kitchen window, he saw a little kid wipe out on a bike and his hand was shaking so badly he could barely dial 911. So he decided he needed to learn what to do in an emergency. That relationship enriched my life in ways I could not have foretold before we actually became friends. So I would encourage you to seek out relationships with folks who didn't come out of the same mold that you did: folks who don't look like you, who have different political and religious views from yours, who have talents and interests different from yours. I believe you'll not only benefit from it but even find surprising ways in which you're not really that different after all. Or hey, maybe you really ARE that different but you can complement and learn from each other.

- Here's something else I think is important. In your relationships, I hope you will try to conduct yourself in a way that will enable you to look back and have no regrets. I found this particularly meaningful in my relationships with my elderly grandmother and later, my own parents. My grandmother lived to age 98, but when I moved back to Birmingham from South Carolina, I decided that I was going to make time for her on a regular basis, and that when she died, I was not going to be in the position of looking back and wishing I had made an effort to see her more often. My grandmother had a real sweet tooth, and I would go by a local bakery (or frankly, even the local CVS) and get some kind of surprise for

her. She would see me coming up the walk, bag in hand, and say, “Ooooooh, what do you have in that bag?” Or one time in the spring, I loaded her into the car so we could drive around the neighborhood and admire the flowers in bloom. Before taking her back home, we went through the McDonald’s drive-thru and I got her an ice cream cone. It was around 5:00 PM. and I told her, “Now you don’t tell Mom I spoiled your appetite like this.” Nose-deep in ice cream, she replied, “I won’t tell her. I wouldn’t dream of telling her. I’d tell the President but I wouldn’t tell her.”

- Finally, in my advice for accumulating relationships, I would urge you to be forgiving. Nobody’s perfect. Including you. Your friends and family, even your life partner, will do things that make you nuts or perhaps that deeply offend you. I am quite confident that I have offended or irritated people whom I love. And yet...they’re still in my life. They haven’t thrown me overboard. We have all been shown mercy by those in our world and I daresay, in many cases, we didn’t deserve it. It’s so important that we remember that the next time we’re tempted to write someone off.

In addition to accumulating relationships, I hope you will make it a priority to accumulate experiences. The memory of experiences, both good and bad, will bring a smile, remind you of lessons learned, underscore the value of a relationship, encourage you to persevere and highlight what you want to be sure to avoid repeating. The experiences themselves will make you a richer, more nuanced person with more to bring to a relationship. And particularly in the case of a difficult experience, you may not see its value until long after it’s over. But the value will be there if you learn how to find it.

- I believe that one of the most enriching experiences anyone can have is living for a while in a different part of the country or the world. I am actually from Birmingham and all my family has lived here for most of my life. Yet my brother and his wife sent two of their children up north for middle school. The two boys were accepted by the American Boychoir School in Princeton, NJ, and one of my nephews stayed up north to go to high school in CT. I was so thrilled that they had the chance to see another part of the country and meet people from backgrounds very different from their own. I myself spent a year in Mexico after graduating from college. I hardly ever spoke English during the entire year; in fact, I remember being out one day with some new Mexican friends and one of them said to me, “Janie, why don’t you ever say anything?” At that point, I didn’t have quite enough Spanish to be able to explain to them that it took every ounce of my concentration to be able to follow **their** conversation; adding something original myself was going to take brain power I simply didn’t have. Yet I clearly remember the morning I woke up, after having been living with a Mexican family for about six months, and realized that I could say anything I wanted to say and understand anything anyone said to me. And that year in Mexico was the springboard for my seeking a career using my abilities in Spanish. I applaud those of you at BSC who are from distant parts of the country: California, Montana, NJ. I can only imagine the truths you have learned about Southern culture that you never would have suspected. And your presence here has enriched and broadened our community as well. My one warning is that you will find that it’s easier to strike off for parts unknown now than it will be once you

settle into the commitments of a job or a family. So get out there! And those of you from California, Montana, or NJ... on to China! Or Argentina. Or Croatia.

- As you accumulate experiences, use the good china. In other words, don't save something marvelous for later. Later might not come. I remember being in Greece for the first time, blown away by the grandeur of the Parthenon, and I overheard an elderly group of people talking. One of them said, "All my life, I said I would come to Greece one day, and now I'm finally here and I'm too weak to be able to climb up to the Acropolis." If it's within your power to do so, make it happen as soon as you can.
- And while you're making stuff happen, try something new. Challenge yourself. I went to Paris over spring break and being there gave me a new desire to learn French. I can speak some fractured French but it's not very good. In fact, I was in Morocco with a friend several years ago and she was looking for some bubble wrap to protect a souvenir she'd bought for the trip home. We went to a paper store, thinking that was probably our best bet. Not seeing any bubble wrap in sight, I thought I'd use some of the circumlocution skills we try to teach our Spanish students. Bubble wrap, air cushion, right? I asked the shop keeper if they had any *cochon d'aire*. He said no, but he was sure the shop down the street would have it. We got back out on the street and my friend looked at me and said, Air pig? Clearly, I've got a long way to go to bring my French skills up to the level where I won't embarrass myself. But I'm going to try.
- An experience that I imagine many of you have had already is volunteering your time in a variety of ways. Don't stop. Volunteerism benefits both you and the

people you're working for. I was a volunteer docent at the Birmingham Museum of Art for over 25 years. That means I led tours of the collection. I remember one day I was getting dressed and heard an announcement on NPR that the Museum was accepting applications for its new docent class. I thought, HmMMM. I don't actually *know* much about art. This would be a great way for me to learn. And it was! Volunteering at the museum brought me many wonderful new relationships, knowledge and experiences. I know that the experience benefitted me at least as much as it did our visitors to the museum.

- As you are accumulating new experiences after college, don't forget your roots. Keep in touch with a mentor or a favorite professor from high school or college. Go back to that person for advice as you move through life. I have both former mentors and former students whom I now count simply as friends. Don't let go of the people and places that helped shaped your character just because you're now in a different stage of life. If the connection was meaningful to you at one time, keep it alive going forward.

I hope that each of you will live a long, wonderful life filled with meaningful relationships and experiences. Many things in life lie outside our control. Choosing to enrich ourselves and those we care for through well-tended relationships and experiences that foster personal growth is not one of them. Class of 2018, as you celebrate what's next in your lives, keep in touch with BSC so that we may celebrate with you as you accumulate new relationships and experiences. It has been a delight to watch your progress during your years on campus; we look forward to seeing what you will do from here. Thank you.