

Summer Commencement Welcoming Remarks

August 10, 2007 - 7:00 PM

Provost Mark E. Workman

It is my pleasure to extend greetings to the graduates, their families, and friends.

As a professor of English I have long been intrigued by the subject of narrative structure, or how a story moves from its beginning, through its middle, to what, in the most satisfying narratives, seems to be its inevitable end. According to Peter Brooks in his book Reading for the Plot, every story in fact begins in a state of tension and provides some indication, more or less subtle, of what preferred state of affairs would bring that tension to rest. This is as true of a common folktale like Jack and the Beanstalk, which begins with a boy in a state of poverty and ends with that same boy—after astonishing adventures—in possession of vast wealth, as it is of a highly sophisticated novel like Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse, which begins with another boy eager to visit an offshore lighthouse and ends with his arrival there—albeit under radically different circumstances—many years hence.

It is tempting to read our lives like books, especially on occasions like tonight's. Since a graduation marks the completion of a degree, those of you who are about to receive your diplomas certainly have a right to regard this as an occasion signifying a mission accomplished, as a book within mere minutes of finally coming to an end. Reading it thus, your diploma, which is indeed bound like a book, constitutes a last page. But without wishing to detract from your accomplishment, I hope you will not regard it so.

In addition to those of you who are about to graduate, there is another group assembled before me tonight, my esteemed faculty colleagues. Their multi-colored hoods and gowns signify that that they have obtained the most advanced degrees in their fields. And yet, I can attest about all of them that they regard themselves, like the pilgrim Dante, as merely in the midst of their lives' journeys towards knowledge and understanding. As accomplished as they might be as teachers, they are effective largely because each and every one of them is what in German is referred to as an "ewige Student," an eternal student.

If those of you about to graduate mark the inception of tonight's ceremony as the desire for a degree, then that story is indeed about to reach a wonderful conclusion. But, like my faculty colleagues, if you instead mark the inception of your quest for a degree in what I hope is your insatiable

curiosity, your desire for greater comprehension of life's inexhaustible and often enigmatic richness, then I trust you will take well-deserved pleasure in regarding tonight as the termination of a major but not the final chapter in a book which in fact has no end.

Your degrees authorize you to provide answers. But you only will do your education justice if you interrogate those answers, if you seek within their apparent sufficiency whatever in them remains not only obscure, contingent, or unaccounted for, but even what appears to be most certain. If you maintain that attitude, as your degrees suggest you will, then your personal narratives, unlike the folktale that ends happily ever after, will remain just as happily ever unresolved.

I know you are all familiar with our folk wisdom that UNF stands for "You never finish." In my capacity as UNF's chief academic officer, it is my responsibility to reveal the truth to our graduates before they leave UNF for the last time: if, like your faculty mentors, you are the eternal students I hope you are, then it turns out to be no joke that UNF does indeed stand for "You never finish." But that, graduates, is precisely why you should carry your degrees with pride.

I offer you all my most sincere congratulations and best wishes for lives of fulfillment, value, and happiness.

