

## Summer 2008 Commencement Remarks

Mark E. Workman, Provost

As UNF's chief academic officer it is my responsibility on behalf of my faculty colleagues to stand between our imminent graduates and their diplomas while I subject them to what might be the final lecture of their academic careers.

It will be genuine, but fortunately it also will be brief. Here it is.

As someone who was born on an island—in my case Staten Island, the least populous and certainly the least urbane of New York City's five boroughs—I always have been alert to allusions to isolated bodies of land. Two such allusions that come to mind, in part because they are directly contradictory of each other, are the bathetic refrain “I am a rock, I am an island” from the 1960s song by Simon and Garfunkel, and the more enduring if less hummable line from John Donne's seventeenth-century Meditation, “No man is an island, entire unto itself.” Simon and Garfunkel would have us believe that, since “a rock feels no pain, and an island never cries,” it is possible to separate oneself entirely from humanity. Donne's meditation seems to be making the very opposite, and to me the far more credible claim, that the concept of the individual is untenable independent of the social web of which he or she is a part. Let me make Donne's point differently. Most of us tend to think of identity as something that we possess, as the self which is uniquely our own. What is obscured

by this way of thinking is that identity is not a function of individual possession but of social relationship. We are either more or less identical to or more or less different from someone else. It is out of this triangulation between those whom we are similar to and those we are different from that our identities are constituted.

As long as we associate primarily with people who look and act like we do ourselves, it is easy to fall back into the complacent delusion that our identities are internal, natural, and proprietary. It is far more challenging to sustain this delusion when we engage with people who are more than superficially different from ourselves. Part of the purpose of a university in fact resides precisely in the opportunity it provides, within an environment of civility, to engage with difference. Such engagement dislodges us from our tacit assumptions and uncontested beliefs and renders us vulnerable to radically alternative perspectives. It is across such boundaries of difference, I would argue, that real learning occurs, and thus the more fully a university embraces complexity the more fully it can carry out its mission to educate those who study within it.

Another implication of Donne's assertion that "No man is an island, entire unto itself" is that when we act, as we all do all of the time, we unavoidably also act upon. In other words, just as we are constituted of our relationships with others, so too do we affect others. Once again, a vital purpose of a university is to provide its members with opportunities to act upon one another and the community in which they reside

in ways that are mutually beneficial and enlightening. Both purposes of the university—to provide opportunities for real learning and for socially responsible interaction—are now enshrined in UNF’s new mission statement which attests that “The University of North Florida fosters the intellectual and cultural growth and civic awareness of its students, preparing them to make significant contributions to their communities in the region and beyond.”

I would like to draw my comments together and to a close by recommending to you that you will be best able to make the kinds of intellectual and civic contributions imagined in the university’s mission statement if you go forward with the implications of Donne’s meditation firmly in mind. If we are who we are in part by virtue of who we are not, if we learn from difference more than we learn from redundancy, and if we truly wish to make responsible social contributions requiring a sympathetic understanding of others, then we must always remain vigilantly alert to the seductive illusion of self-sufficiency. You can do so, I would suggest, by frequently chanting the UNF mantra, U Never Finish. For while you may have finished your degrees, if you commit yourselves to thinking of your education as never finished then I am confident that, wherever your journeys in life may take you, you always will find yourselves finishing first in the kind of performances that matter most.

On behalf of my faculty colleagues I congratulate you on your significant accomplishments and wish you success in whatever lies ahead.