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Graduation Brunch Remarks

I want to begin by extending a very warm welcome to all the parents, grandparents, siblings, friends – and special friends – who are here today. It is wonderful to have you join us for this event.

Just the other day, I was telling some of my colleagues that this graduation brunch is one of my favorite rituals here at Notre Dame.

Not only are the excitement and pride in the air contagious, it's also fun for faculty and staff to see where our students came from:

Who raised them and nurtured them?

Who did they turn to when they wanted to share the thrill of learning something new or the disappointment of a less than stellar performance?

Who is supporting them in their quest to become the person they dream of being?

As sociologists, we see individual experiences and personalities as intricately connected to external forces, including the social networks that students are embedded in.

Therefore, as talented and bright and studious as our graduates this year are, we know that their support systems – their families and friends – played an important role in the success that they're celebrating this weekend. So you all should remember that this weekend is ultimately about you, too, and we're very happy to have you here.

To the graduating students, I offer heartfelt congratulations. You did it.

On Sunday, as you bask – and, if it's anything like the last few years, as you bake – in the Indiana sun during graduation, I hope you'll cherish the moment.

Not only did you see very little of that sun in the four years that you've been here... ☺

...but that graduation ceremony is the culmination of countless hours of hard work and the beginning of a grand adventure – an adventure that will be enriched by your background in sociology.

That's what I want to talk about today: the unique gifts that sociology will bring to your future.

First, though, so that we're all on the same page, I want to introduce some of the guests to sociology and the idea of the sociological imagination.

Who knows, maybe even the students can use a brief primer, too, after the celebrations of the past week.

Don't be embarrassed if you sat here, enjoying our brunch and clapping at the accolades and cheering on the students, all the while wondering what it is we're celebrating and what exactly your granddaughter or brother or fiancé studied all these years. I've been a sociologist for 20 years now and my parents are still a little fuzzy about what I do. It has never dampened their pride in my accomplishments.

So what is sociology?

Sociology is the study of human society. Sociologists are interested in what people do and why they do it, the patterns of social life.

Maybe that just sounds like common sense. We're all interested in people, right? We can all look around and see what they do.

Well, Sociology is much more than that.

Sociology is a science, with rigorous methods – meaning that statements we make about the social world must be arrived at through rules of evidence and observation.

To truly understand the world around them, sociologists have to question what has been taken for granted. They have to reconsider their assumptions, and – as we say in sociology – make the familiar strange.

Take, for example, the old relationship adage, "Opposites attract." You think of Jack Spratt – who could eat no fat – and his wife who ate no lean. Good girls like bad boys. Anna Nicole Smith married a much wealthier, and much older, man. This idea becomes a taken-for-granted reality, and influences the way that you experience and evaluate your own preferences and relationships.

But a sociologist understands that the idea of opposites attracting is an assumption, and one that can be tested empirically.

In fact, sociological research finds that the pattern is closer to “birds of a feather flock together.”

Similarities along dimensions like race, education, religion, social class, and even shared interests like tennis or traveling are much more common than differences among romantic partners and friends.

Sociologists have explanations for this. We tend to live near people who are like us, and therefore go to school and college with similar others. We are more likely to meet romantic partners through family and friends and at places like school and work than at a bar or a nightclub. When fostering relationships, we tend to engage in joint activities, so it’s unlikely that a tennis fanatic will keep dating someone who doesn’t like sports.

These contextual forces shape the very individual choices we make about dating and marriage – choices that non-sociologists see as spontaneous and based exclusively on personal preferences.

In other words, sociology offers a unique – and sometimes disconcerting – perspective. We call it the sociological imagination. It’s an ability to see the larger social context in which we live and to use it to give meaning to and to understand individual experiences.

Over time, you students might forget the specifics of sociology – the contribution Max Weber made to our understanding of economics or the high school graduation rates of various racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. or the distinction between folkways and mores (it’s okay, that’s what Wikipedia is for) – but I doubt that you will lose your curiosity about the social world or your ability to think critically about the complex connection between individuals, groups, institutions and culture. I encourage you to forever be a student of social life.

You don’t need to become a professional sociologist to do this – although Alexa and Elexis might [after graduate studies in sociology]. As Peter Berger, a prominent scholar in the field said, “sociologist” isn’t so much a professional role as it is a quality of one’s being.

Embrace this quality. Nurture your inner-sociologist. You can do this by connecting sociology to your careers, your relationships, and the way you navigate the world. It is easy to do. Sociology is everywhere.

And, armed with the sociological imagination, you will become better medical professionals, teachers, analysts, advocates, parents, and more.

Sociology has a long history of improving the lives of people.

Sociology was pivotal in the testimony and evidence in Brown versus the Board of Education, the Supreme Court decision that desegregated schools. Head Start, one of the longest-running programs targeting poverty, relied on sociological research on the importance of pre-school experiences on subsequent social and educational outcomes.

Michelle Obama is an example of someone who uses sociology to make a difference.

As most of our students know thanks to posters in the Flanner elevators, the first lady was a sociology major at Princeton. She drew on this background as she developed the University of Chicago's first community service program. Knowing who needed help, the kind of help they needed, and the benefits of volunteering for both recipients and helpers, she significantly increased volunteerism to vulnerable populations who desperately needed services.

She still uses sociology today. Her Let's Move campaign depends, in large part, on her efforts – and ability – to take a holistic approach that considers the multiple factors contributing to obesity. She realized that she couldn't just preach to create change. She needed to approach the problem from multiple angles. Therefore her campaign is committed to giving parents the support they need, providing healthier food in schools, helping American kids to be more physically active, and making healthy, affordable food available in every part of our country.

Like her, you too will be better prepared to make a difference because of your sociological imagination. With the sociological perspective, sociology majors become better medical professionals, teachers, analysts, advocates, and more.

For example, students who are going into medicine – as doctors, nurses, or physician assistants – will be better able to communicate with and understand their patients.

Combining what she learned in her classes and internships, as a doctor, Elizabeth will be attuned to the significance of culture in individuals' lifestyle choices and their trust of medicine.

As a nurse with a background in sociology, Julie will be conscious of bias and discrimination and their effects on both people's health and medical treatment.

Lauren will be able to make the most of her career as a physician's assistant and best reach her patients by using her knowledge about perceptions to assert her similarity to a doctor in some cases or differences from a traditional physician in others.

This is not just fluff from me, your resident sociology-lover. The MCAT recently decided to include a social science portion, and medical schools are actively recruiting students with backgrounds in sociology, psychology, and anthropology because they see students like you as more well-rounded and more culturally-competent than those with a strictly science-focused background.

We have a number of students who are going into teaching through both the Alliance for Catholic Education and Teach for America. These graduates – Caroline, Jessica, Jaime, Crystal and others – will be more effective teachers because they understand the other forces at play in children’s lives.

Because of your background in sociology, you will realize the sources and implications of a disconnect between aspirations, expectations, and achievement. Furthermore, because you are cued in to how social class influences student experiences, you future teachers can work to combat the deleterious consequences that poverty and low parental education might have on the kids in your schools and classrooms. In other words, with backgrounds in sociology, you will not only recognize the issues but have the tools to address them.

Students in other careers will benefit as well. A number of students are going in to business – as brand managers, merchandizers, analysts, and more. You folks will outshine any business school peers by being able to consider the perspectives and preferences of a wide swath of people and the role of media, technology, and images in social life.

The same is true of Meghan’s future in public health. Sociology will help you move beyond medicine to consider the role of the public in public health.

Sociology is particularly evident as an influence in students’ decision to choose service. Whether working at a children’s home in South Africa or as a mentor in Chicago or Denver, your background in sociology – the ability to understand the complex nature of the human experience and social life – will not only enrich your experiences but ensure that you have a lasting impact on the communities you work in.

Like Melanie, I worked as a domestic violence advocate. I was much more effective with sociology under my belt, understanding that I couldn’t be a savior, but had to work within social constraints to help victims realize both their strength and potential.

The beautiful thing about your future plans is that each one is different. Each transcript has a different collection of classes, each of you has different values, and you will all have different experiences.

But one thing unites those experiences and therefore unites all of you. You all share that sociological perspective. You'll use it in different ways, but it will always be with you. It will connect you to others in sometimes surprising ways.

My best friend and I met when our kids were young. She worked as a case manager for child services and I was a stay-at-home mom who was getting ready to start graduate school. For some reason, we immediately hit it off at playgroup. Despite very different life experiences, circumstances, and parenting strategies, we just seemed to see things the same way. It wasn't until months into our friendship that we started talking about what we had studied in college. She told me that she, too, had majored in sociology. No wonder I loved her! "Birds of a feather" is a time-tested adage, and you'll find yourself noticing other sociologists throughout your lives and feel a sense of connection with them.

To close, I realize that there is a lot you have learned over the last four years that you'll leave here. You memorized these facts for a test or typed them into a paper, only to have them magically disappear after you turned in the exam or assignment. The sociological imagination is not such a thing. It might have been a concept that you only talked explicitly about in a handful – if that – of your classes, but trust me when I tell you that every bit of the major's curriculum nurtured this perspective and your curiosity about the social world.

Trust in it, trust in yourself. It will make the journey that much more rewarding.

Good luck to you all, and bright blessings.

Thank you.