

A Different Graduation

My eighteen year old niece and godchild, Malia, graduated from high school this year. During my retirement, I have had the opportunity of spending time with her from taking her to music lessons or the local town before she got her driver's license. That time spent with her has been both insightful and invaluable. I did not have this opportunity with her two older siblings.

On a Sunday afternoon, I joined her as she drove home from a two hour music lesson. We began to talk about her plans for college more in-depth. I knew she wanted to study for a Bachelor of Science degree, with a speciality of working in the field of phlebotomy. She had worked in a lab for two weeks during a mini-internship. The head of the lab was a very good family friend. Working there, kindled her enthusiasm for the field. I asked her, "Are you interested in this field because you admire this family friend and what he does or does the study of human bloods and its analysis as well as the interaction with people attract you to this kind of work?"

As she drove along, I began to wonder what could a seventy year old nephew and godfather say to someone whose world was beginning to unfold before her. Maybe, hidden beneath this full crop of well-earned grey hair, there might be some wisdom.

I began to tell her how, in my own life, its tapestry was woven together, not always with the silken threads I might have planned; but, nonetheless, woven together with a pattern and thread count that was more important than that of my choosing. I told her about some of the assignments I had as a priest; how they were not of my choosing but were the most appropriate and necessary at the time.

We talked about our trip to Galway that afternoon; how we could have taken different routes to get there; but the important thing was to get to the destination.

"I want you to come to my graduation and I want to get a picture with my godfather." Of course, I had no choice but to oblige. I asked her what was going to happen at her graduation and she told me that it included a Mass in the Irish language. (She went to an all-Irish high school). She also mentioned that she would be playing the piano for the Mass, I asked her if there might be any speeches during the graduation and she said that the only speech would be the homily. I was relieved.

My experience with high school graduations included two hour sessions of Salutatorian and Valedictorian speeches and homilies to impeccably dressed family members amid the pomp and circumstance of moves choreographed to the minutest detail. Of course, all the speeches were full of promises, challenges, gratitude, sadness; all grammatically correct because of the red pen of the English teacher and all peppered with quotations from eminent scholars, wise gurus and enlightened thinkers.

Graduation day arrived. Malia's family home resembled a beauty parlour. Cars ferried hair stylists and makeup artists to do a makeover on her. She had already put in highlights in her hair. Red lipstick matched her dress; black eye shadow accentuated her facial features and, of course, Sarah Hansen arrived to put on a tan in a bottle. While all this was happening, she informed everyone that the graduation was a formal attire. Since retiring, I only wear a formal attire when I am joined by the C & E extras for Mass, otherwise, it is casual dress. As I was leaving the traveling beauty parlour, Malia turned to me and said, "Michael, Thank God, you are a man." I left with a chuckle and an air of satisfaction.

Uniform-less graduates marched in. Young women showed maturity in their dress codes and make-up while young men felt awkward in suits and ties they hadn't worn since their Confirmation many years earlier.

There were no salutatorian or valedictorian addresses. There were no caps and gowns or turning tassels. There were no scholarships announced. There were no diplomas handed out. After all the government, not the school, would set the final exams three weeks later. The parting words from the principal was, "I will see you on Monday for school again." Following that reminder of still unfinished business, both graduates and teachers sat down to a meal and some imbibing in a local thatched house pub.

As I came home from the ceremony, I wondered how many of these graduates ever heard of Ralph Waldo Emerson or the implications of his now famous quote: "What lies behind us, and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us."