



Bridgewater State University Commencement Address
Fr. George Winzenburg, S.J., President, Red Cloud Indian School
January 25, 2013

“President Mohler-Faria, Distinguished Trustees, Faculty, Administrators, Staff, Parents, and Graduates: Háu mitákuyapi! Čhaŋtéwaštewa napéčhiyuzape ló.

In the tradition of the Oglala Lakota people among whom I live on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, I say again: Hello my relatives, I greet you with a heartfelt handshake.

Graduates, congratulations for successfully completing your studies and earning a degree from this outstanding university. This is a proud moment for you and your parents and grandparents, and spouses too. Graduates, would you please give your loved ones a round of applause?

I also congratulate you for your community service to advance the public good, and your commitment to “give back” wherever your career will lead you. You bring honor to your families, your faculty, and Bridgewater State University. I wish you the best!

I am excited to be with you this evening and about the emerging partnership between your university and Red Cloud Indian School. Our institutions are 1,860 miles apart, but we share much in common: high academic standards, excellence in teaching, a commitment to social justice, the preparation of students to be leaders in their community, and strategies to advance the economy in the region.

Thank you for the opportunity to explain how our relationship can be mutually fulfilling. It allows me to speak of the Reservation and life lessons it can teach us.

I live in a community whose worldview and lifestyle are centered in four core values: respect, generosity, wisdom, and courage. Imagine how welcoming and tolerant our nation would be if all its citizens embraced the values that have guided, and continue to guide, the Lakota, the Mashpee Wampanoag, and other Native tribes. We have much to learn from indigenous peoples.

I invite all of you to picture the West: yes, the American West. But a quick comment: I lived in Cambridge for three years in the early 1970s. So I know that some of you, as you picture the American West, imagine an uncharted land beyond Route 128! I assure you, people *do* live out there, even beyond the Berkshires, and they like it!

For those of us living in the High Plains of Middle America, the West begins at the Missouri River. In South Dakota, the terrain changes upon crossing the river. The soil east of the Missouri River is fertile and good for farming; west of the river, the soil becomes sandy. Timber is scarce. Water is sacred. Grass is so sparse that ranchers say it takes 30 acres of land to support a cow and a calf.

In West River, as we call it, people of different cultures trace their history to warriors, trappers, or pioneers – hardy, self-reliant men and women who survived the elements. Until three years ago, I lived in a remote area where my closest neighbor was seven miles away. Near my house, I could turn in all directions and see as far as my eye would take me. It reminded me of New England with its sea-faring ships, and the view from the widow’s walk.

Like sailors, Plains people look to the sky and learn to read the banks of clouds. Here is a poem entitled "Ocean and Sky," written by Meg White Face, a young woman who graduated from Red Cloud High School about ten years ago.

"The sky is a copy of the ocean. Only it is upside down. The clouds are the waves that roll and toss about. The deep blue is the water, and all the birds are the fish in the ocean. The sky and the ocean are not different, really. They are quite the same, just in different places. Many people ponder about them both, looking for clues and answers."

Graduates, for hundreds of years, you and your ancestors have looked to the ocean for clues and answers. Lakota have looked to the sky, and the land beneath it.

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is about the size of Connecticut but only a fraction of the area promised to the Lakota by Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868. The Rez, which is close to the Badlands and the Black Hills, is strikingly beautiful land with rolling hills and canyons. It is home to more than 30,000 Lakota. It is also the third poorest county in the United States. Per capita income is about \$6,200.

A former Red Cloud Volunteer, Timothy P. McLaughlin, wrote this description in his introduction to *Walking on Earth & Touching the Sky*, a collection of poetry and prose by Lakota youth at Red Cloud Indian School:

"Life on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is difficult and complex. [Because of poverty] conditions are very harsh. The people struggle with unemployment, poor housing, disease, alcohol and drug abuse, violence, depression, and more. Yet Lakota people are amazingly resilient and spiritually powerful. Among the Lakota, there is a tremendous love for the land, a system of profound cultural ways, a sense of community that often supersedes the struggles, and a capacity for humor as medicine... and...joy."

If you watched the ABC 20/20 program more than a year ago that focused on the Reservation, you met an 8th grader who has faced more obstacles in her young life than I have in all of mine. She embodies the courage of her people. Louise has a Lakota name which means "stands against the wind." She proudly said, "I am strong. I have a lot of power. I will never go down, even when the wind blows strong."

Why have I dwelt on the American West and the Reservation? Because we learn about our selves and others by knowing and reflecting on the *landscape* where we live -- the land we inhabit, the place we call home. For where we pitch our tent influences how we raise our families, pursue our careers, and build relationships. Landscape shapes our lives.

The landscape of southeastern Massachusetts is strikingly beautiful – the forests, the streams, the marshes, and, of course, the ocean. The ocean holds a power over your mind and heart. Its expanse and sheer beauty can calm your heart or stir your emotions. The ocean invites you to notice the physical world around you and to listen to the call within your heart. To know what the ocean teaches, you must quiet yourself from time to time. How can we know and appreciate the landscape of our lives without taking time to be silent?

Here is another poem by a Red Cloud graduate, Tia Catches, called "Silence":

"Silence is the brushing leaves of a cottonwood on a cool spring day with the breeze through the grass. It is the nice damp dew washing pain from my soul. It is the soothing water running through my toes."

Graduates, listening to the ocean of desires in your heart can lead you to gratitude and laughter, and to dreams about the future, and to hope.

A month ago, five Red Cloud High School graduates spent some days calling donors to thank them for supporting our school. Between phone calls they shared stories, laughed, and spoke about college life; the phone-a-thon was like a reunion. Listening to them, I felt grateful and hopeful. Their teachers had prepared them well for college. Autumn is a junior at Dartmouth; Laree, a junior at Marquette; Raven, a sophomore at the University of Oklahoma; Renae, a

freshman at Regis University in Denver; Cherella, a freshman at Fort Lewis College in Colorado. They, and other Red Cloud graduates, including some of last year's callers – Matt, at the University of New Mexico, and David, at the University of Arizona -- put a face on young Native Americans, who sadly are invisible in mainstream America. They are bright and their goal is to return home with a college degree and "give back" to their community.

There are many reasons to attend college. One of them you celebrate today, the attainment of a degree, and with it the confidence of having acquired the intellectual, scientific and technological skills that will carry you into the future.

Another reason to attend college is to develop the habit of reflection. Think for a moment what you were like when you started your studies here and how far you have come intellectually, morally, and spiritually. And how far you would like to go!

Last August, I visited briefly with one of our twenty Red Cloud volunteers. They come from universities all across the country and spend up to three years with us as teachers, mentors, and bus drivers. I asked Kelly how her first day of school had gone teaching religion to kindergarten students. She smiled and said, "Not much religion. We worked on 'walking in a straight line.'"

Your parents would be the first to tell you that we learn in stages, and that one stage builds on another. Ask them about your first steps, and what your college degree means to them.

No one dreams alone; we dream together. No one laughs, cries, celebrates, or grieves alone. We are interconnected. We are family. We are also community. Lakota say, "*We are all related*: humans, four-legged creatures, fish and birds. We look in the Four Directions of north, south, east, and west for clues and answers."

Whatever direction you will take, I urge you: Do not be afraid of differences in people, of fresh ideas, of dreams that stir your heart, of problems that seem intractable, of rugged terrain that complicates your journey. Strive for values that the Lakota cherish: respect, generosity, wisdom, and courage. Feed the persons you will meet on your journey with compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and love.

Graduates, I challenge you to be lifelong learners. Develop the skills you have learned in your studies here, especially critical thinking. Being professional will give you much to "give back" in service of others.

I also challenge you to know your heart. Develop the habit of self-reflection. It will help you to know yourself, and your motivation for giving back. Self-reflection can keep you honest and humble.

In closing, I leave you with an image, as written by Jesuit scholar James Martin, interpreting the work of Fr. Joseph de Guibert from 1964:

"A French Jesuit wrote fifty years ago about the spiritual life and offered an analogy first made in the Middle Ages. A spirituality is like a bridge. Every bridge does pretty much the same thing – gets you from one place to another, sometimes over perilous ground, or a river, or great heights. But they do so in different ways. They might be built of rope, wood, bricks, stone or steel; as arches, cantilevers, or suspension bridges. 'Hence, writes Father de Guibert, 'there will be a series of different types, with each one having its advantages and disadvantages. Each type is adaptable to given terrains and contours and not to others; yet each one in its own way achieves the common purpose – to provide a passage by means of an organic, balanced combination of materials and shapes.'"

Graduates, live the ideals you learned at Bridgewater State University. Be a bridge in the relationships, partnerships, and communities you nurture. Use your professional skills to benefit the public good. Develop the habit of reflection. Be humble and have a generous heart. Close gaps between people of different cultures through respect, generosity, wisdom, and courage. Carry through life the lessons you learned here. Be focused. Stay focused. Be a bridge. Be a bridge. Be a bridge. Congratulations and God bless you.