

Student Lasallian Commencement Address
May 2015
Presented by: Theresa Marten

Good afternoon, members of the Board of Trustees, Br. James, honored guests, faculty, staff, fellow graduates, family, friends, and of course, my grandma. In preparing for this address, I've done my research and studied many commencement speeches on YouTube. Unfortunately, I'm not a famous celebrity, comedian, or even the valedictorian. I'm not even five feet tall. But, I am a proud member of the class of 2015.

Today truly is a celebration. Our perseverance and dedication to our Catholic and Lasallian education is being acknowledged. We are also part of a small percentage, worldwide, of people who can say they are college graduates. With these degrees, we now can get a "real" job officially, move out of our parent's house (eventually), and participate in this life more abundantly. This powerful piece of paper comes with a great responsibility, a personal and social responsibility, calling us to not just act but to act justly.

Coming to Lewis as a freshman, I had big plans. I could not wait to meet my roommates and become instant best friends. I was excited to have deep literary discussions with other English majors and have the freedom to choose what to do and when I wanted. As it probably was for most of us, freshman year didn't turn out exactly as planned. I felt uncomfortable and off balance. I even considered transferring. Looking back, I realized I was afraid. Afraid of being rejected; Afraid to be alone; Afraid to acknowledge I wanted to be a theology major and afraid to be Theresa Marten and all that could mean. I can admit this now, but at the time, it took someone else to point it out before I could unpack the reasons why.

In January of freshman year, I participated in the Busy Person's Retreat. I spent the week meditating and reading scripture for a half hour each day and I was assigned a spiritual companion with whom I met. Br. Bede Baldry didn't say much; however, his intentional presence and pointed questions, forced me to answer my own questions. Those interchanges gave me the courage to say I did want to be a theology major, and that has made all the difference.

Later in that semester, I attended the Koinonia retreat, where I was able to share about my faith journey and my decision to be a theology major. My peers there confirmed that I was making the right choice and their acceptance invited me to learn more about them and how they had come to

their own conclusions. These two retreats were foundational and helped me become involved with various service and ministry opportunities throughout the rest of my time at Lewis.

One of the most profound experiences I've had, happened this past spring break. I lead a group on a service trip to Cleveland, Ohio. We served at Maggie's Place where housing is provided for expectant and new mothers. During the week, we organized, cooked, and even cleaned the bathrooms, but primarily our job was just to be with the moms. We ate, slept, and talked with the moms and staff. Although it was intimidating at first, we developed relationships with the women. Sharing stories and apple recipes, we bonded and celebrated together, especially when a mom started a new job. As college students, we didn't have money or advice on being new a mother, but that wasn't what was required. Our job was to be present, to intentionally and genuinely pay attention, and have real conversations. When we showed interest in their lives and cared, we recognized their dignity and human worth. We became ministers of presence and I learned what it meant to be Lasallian.

All of us at Lewis can understand how effective presence can be, if we just look at our very own, Br. James. Every sports game, play, awards ceremony, or ice cream social, Br. James is there. Can you think of a time when Br. James wasn't at a campus event? His consistent presence and acknowledgement of students, faculty, and staff has been the catalyst of this loving community. Of all my friends who attended other colleges, none of them knew their university president personally. Not only does he have a great sense of humor, but he knows and calls many of us by name. How blessed are we to have a man who takes his vocation so seriously that he goes out of his way to be genuinely present every day?

As we leave Lewis, we are also called in a special way to be present to people in our lives. This is what it means to be Lasallian. As Lasallian graduates, we carry that sense of presence. And so, no matter what our major or specializations, we are all being challenged to care, to listen, to be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are suffering, and always to act justly. It is in our presence to others, particularly those in need, which will honor the degrees we receive today; it is our Lasallian heritage.

Class 2015, Lewis' largest class, this is our challenge: be real, be present, be Lasallian. Congratulations, good luck, and God bless.