

Failure to Communicate is NOT an Option

University of Maryland, Department of Communication

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Remarks by Steven Drake

Thank you, Elizabeth. Thank you all, and good afternoon.

Communication graduates, let me begin by congratulating and applauding you, as well as those literally and figuratively behind you: Moms, dads, siblings, grandparents and friends . . . thank you.

Graduates, please also allow me also congratulate and applaud those in front of you – your professors, instructors and faculty at the University of Maryland Department of Communication.

Everybody please give everybody else – and give yourselves -- one more round of applause!

It's truly an honor to have been asked by Dr. Toth and Dr. Waks to be your Commencement speaker today – although as someone who writes speeches for at least part of my living, I will admit to being a bit nervous about writing a speech to be delivered by . . . well, me. So I hope everyone will be gentle and by all means, please do your very best to stay awake.

It's always a treat to come to the Maryland campus. Living about 15 minutes away, I'm pleased to say I'm here pretty regularly – although it's certainly a lot more fun now that football's over and the basketball season has begun! And it's definitely fun and very special to be here for this, your Commencement.

Before I graduated in 1983 with a journalism degree before the Star Wars film franchise was launched in 1977 . . . and way before there was digital media, or social media or computers or cell phones . . . there was a 1967 movie called "Cool Hand Luke."

In the film, the famous, late Paul Newman plays Luke, a decorated war veteran who is sentenced to serve time with a Florida prison chain gang. Luke refuses to respect authority and the established pecking order. As a result, he is knocked around by both his guards his fellow inmates throughout the movie.

At one point, Luke briefly escapes. But he is quickly captured and returned to the chain gang. This prompts the Captain of the chain gang to put Luke in leg chains, knock him to the ground, and deliver a brief but powerful warning speech to the other prisoners that includes one of the most famous movie lines – ranked by the American Film Institute as the 11th most memorable of all time.

With apologies to Strother Martin, who played the Captain, here it is:

What we have here is, failure to communicate.

Why am I quoting this line from an almost 50-year-old movie at your Commencement this afternoon? Because my message is this: failure to communicate might have been an option for Cool Hand Luke – although I suspect it's one he regretted. But failure to communicate is NOT an option for us. And it's especially not an option for you, graduates of one of American higher education's very best communication programs .

As you move forward from today and start your careers, I know that you do so with an understanding of just how powerful and influential good communication can be. You've learned it from the Department's distinguished faculty. You've researched and written about it. And you've put it into practice through all of those class projects and internships. I'm betting you have in your personal lives as well.

You know that good communication can change minds and hearts, and it can produce compromise. It can improve understanding. Good communication can better and perhaps even save lives. It can even change history.

As communicators, we know that there is much more to good communication than speeches. But sometimes it's through speeches and political rhetoric that we can comprehend communication at its most powerful.

When President Ronald Reagan stood in front of the Berlin Wall in 1987, and said "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" it was a major turning point in the Cold War, one that led to the downfall of the Soviet Union.

When President Abraham Lincoln stood at a podium in Gettysburg, PA not long after 8,000 Union and Confederate soldiers had been killed there and said, "We here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." At that moment, a broken nation began to heal itself.

At the height of the Great Depression, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt told the nation during his first inaugural address, "The only thing we have to fear is, fear itself," Americans knew their president had their backs – and that he would do whatever he could to make their lives better.

And on a summer day 52 years ago, about eight miles from where we sit, when Dr. Martin Luther King told thousands before him, “ I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low,” he inspired a nation to pass the Civil Rights Act less than a year later.

My point is this: the knowledge and perspective you take with you as a Communication graduate is important, whether you choose to pursue a career in public relations, politics, law, psychology, counseling, government service or academia.

Excellent communication, and its effective practice, is an essential ingredient to society’s daily operation as well as its long-term fate. Business, government and politics – as well as justice, social change, development, even war and peace – all owe a lot to communication. And we as communicators are obligated to respond.

Here is another reason why failure to communicate is not an option: the abundance of tools at your disposal. Those which allow you to more effectively communicate with the right audiences, at the right time – and which almost instantly can help you know how good a job you’ve done.

Social media platforms, from Facebook and Twitter to Pinterest and FourSquare. Digital media. Email and instant messaging and texting. The infinite ocean of instantaneous information we call the Internet.

In the early 1980's when I graduated from the University of Maryland and started my career as a junior account executive at Ogilvy Public Relations, our idea of targeted distribution was sending junior staffers like me to Capitol Hill to drop off envelopes containing a press release and a media kit to Senate and House staffers – and hope that at least some of them would be opened.

Today, with your computer or your cell phone, you can be a reporter, an editor and a publisher. You can be a poet or an author. You can be a market researcher or a direct marketer. Or you can be a good friend and connect with someone you haven't seen in years. You can reach hundreds of thousands of people, or just one person. Around the corner or around the world. Instantly. And at virtually no cost.

That's pretty powerful, particularly at the fingertips and in the hands of the communicators in this room for whom failure to communicate will not be an option.

That said, I offer a note of caution and a call to arms.

The note of caution is by way of my late 1980's example of press release distribution.

In addition to hand-delivering the press releases, we sent them, by snail mail, to the news media. Which, at any given time, probably consisted of the three television networks, a handful of newspapers, perhaps a few trade magazines.

Today, you may reach, or consume -- or both -- hundreds if not thousands of television outlets, digital media, blogs, online and offline publications. But each one typically has a fraction of the audience and the eyeballs than the old-school media in the old days. Your opportunity to make an impression, and your window to make that impression, are both much narrower than they were in the Dark Ages of the 1980s.

Indeed: Breaking through the clutter and the chatter, the noise and the distractions, can craze even the most battle-hardened communicators – including even, to continue the military analogy – the generals. Which I fully expect all of you will become. Sooner, not later. You're all receiving a promotion today, after all!

How to best meet these challenges? Our communications environment, and the tools we have, are constantly changing. In spite, or perhaps because of those tools, we're expected to work and communicate and react faster and faster every day.

It's more and more difficult to reach our audience, which is more fractured and diverse and dissipated.

Here's my perspective. Which, if it matters, is the perspective of someone who began professionally communicating in the 1980s – OK, hand-delivering media kits to Capitol Hill – and who is communicating on behalf of clients and myself today, 30 years later.

The more complicated it becomes to communicate, the more the fundamentals of effective communication are important. They become essential. And they should be a constant.

That's right: All that OTHER stuff you learned here at Maryland will be increasingly important as you move into your chosen professions and up the ladder.

Stuff like knowing your audience inside and out, and being one step ahead of it. Not to be better or smarter than that audience. But to better serve that audience.

Crafting the right message, and sticking with it. Putting communications strategy front and center. Planning. Evaluating and measuring your communications.

And, with a nod to the retiring Rich Toth, whom I suspect will nod back: whether you're writing a memo to the CEO or a

message to your friend, always practicing good grammar, punctuation, spelling and sentence structure.

Our tools, our opportunities and our means of communication have changed. But the fundamentals have not. And those fundamentals are, if anything, more necessary, and more essential, than ever.

As you go out and become the communication superstars I know you will all be, I hope you will also communicate with your alma mater. I urge you to stay in touch with this Department. Give of your time, your talent and your perspective as a guest lecturer. Become an adjunct faculty member. Or maybe even a commencement speaker.

And yes, when you are able, please consider a financial gift to help communication students behind you become communication superstars who'll work beside you and with you.

Right now, however, you're done with the classes. You're through with the group projects. You've studied your backsides off to do well on final exams. And through it all, you've written until your eyes have blurred and your fingers have ached.

You have all earned this. You have all earned today. And you're ready for tomorrow.

I'm not here today to lecture you. I'm here to remind you that being a communicator is not a job or a profession. Regardless of what you ultimately decide to do, it's a life-long pursuit of excellence. A pursuit that if you're good, you'll never achieve. A discipline that if you're smart, you'll never stop learning. A mindset that if you follow it, will allow you to achieve more than you know, and very possibly, more than you hope. And a philosophy that if you embrace it, has absolutely no room for failure.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of 2015, your failure to communicate is not an option. Your desire to succeed is expected. And your dedication to your skills and your perspective to make a difference, will be embraced by all you touch, throughout your personal and professional networks.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you today. Graduates: Heartfelt congratulations on your past and future achievements.

And to all: season's greetings, Merry Christmas and the happiest of holidays.

Thank you.