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Grads in the Spotlight: Change -- and Constancy

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Change — and Constancy

By Steven Buckingham

Our final moments as students of Furman University . . . It seems incredible, doesn't it? How can it be that four years have already passed?

As I think about the future, I am mindful of my mixed emotions. A part of me is eager to charge into the world, to challenge its harshness, and to sneer proudly in the face of life's adversity. That part of me has unshakeable confidence.

But another part is not as headstrong. Desiring to cling to the friendships, the familiarity and the memories of the past four years, that part desperately wants to stay here. But the passage of time, and my parents who have so graciously paid my tuition, demand that I go. So, go I will. When tomorrow comes I will have no choice, just as all of us graduates will have no choice, but to shed my Furman identity, to change and to move on.

Tonight, we are participating in a change four years in the making. Without a doubt, this is a singular event in our lives. But let us not neglect other vital changes prior to this evening. Think back to who you were four years ago. Are you the same person? Or have you changed quite a bit over the years?

In my own case, even the way I see Furman has changed. When I chose this school, I didn't care about its academic reputation. I never sat in on a class, nor did I ever talk with a professor, graduate or student. To be honest, the educational opportunities weren't so much a priority to me as was the beauty of the campus.

Over time, though, my appreciation for this university has grown profoundly. While parents may complain about the price of Furman's tuition — and believe me, they do — the benefits of a liberal arts education have far outweighed their cost. Where else could a political science major like me not only explore the propensity of nuclear weapons to promote international peace but also understand the basic theoretical and technical mechanics behind those weapons? Where else but at a university like Furman could political science majors graduate knowing anything technical at all? That's not only the mark of an elite university, that's almost a miracle! I may have chosen Furman for style, but I stayed for substance.



Much is changing around us, but much is also staying the same. Like oases in the shifting sands of life, each of us has sources of constancy that provide shelter against life's ceaseless changes. Our professors, who have demonstrated their dedication to our education, have served as one oasis. Were Furman's professors *less* dedicated to teaching, were they *less* committed to the students who seek their guidance, I may never have thought to ask myself, "Who am I and what do I believe?" My answer, inspired by those who inspired me, is this: That we are all endowed by our Creator with a lucid and powerful mind, and that only through the awareness and proper exercise of that mind can we hope to achieve true success. That knowledge, imparted by our instructors, will undoubtedly attend us long after we leave tonight.

In addition to professors, I must also recognize friends and family as another source of constancy. Your role in this graduation cannot be overstated. Were it not for your constant support, we never could have made it here. In my own case, were it not for my family's support, I might not have made it through my first term.

I remember my first test at Furman. It was in Humanities, a course that merges historical and cultural perspectives in Western civilization. At the time of the test, I hadn't yet made the transition from high school study patterns (if I had any) to college ones. As you've probably guessed, I didn't do too well on it.

When I called my parents to tell them of my first collegiate disappointment, I remember that they did not accuse me of

failing to study hard enough. Instead, they consoled me, told me to hang in there and said that they loved me. Before I called them, I was ready to go home. After calling, however, I was determined to make them proud.

Obviously, I did hang in there, and I'm here tonight because of them. So, Mom and Dad, I love you. Thanks for your support, and for affording me this opportunity to make my life better. And to all those who have been there for all of us, thank you for never changing in your commitment to our success.

Parents, professors, family and friends, this graduation ceremony is not reserved exclusively for those of us graduating today. While it is we who have achieved, it is you who have assisted. And through your assistance, you have made our achievement possible. Together, we have borne an equal burden of this educational experience, and now we share in the graduates' success.

It is only fitting, then, that on a day that celebrates scholastic achievement, you share in the rewards. The best reward that can be offered is our gratitude. Please accept that gratitude as the humblest proof of our appreciation, and be content knowing that we are here only because you have been there for us every other day.

So much has changed in these past four years, and things are getting ready to change again. Some of us are off to be soldiers, some to be businessmen and businesswomen, and some, like me, to be students. While we must thank God that Furman has endowed us with an education that will help us succeed in a changing world, we must thank you, our parents and professors, for providing us with constancy amidst a changing world.

Regardless of where our divergent paths may take us in the future, and despite the challenges we may face in the years to come, let us take comfort knowing that not everything does change; that we were all here together — if only for a short time; and that we are all better people for it.

I wish all of us the best of luck.