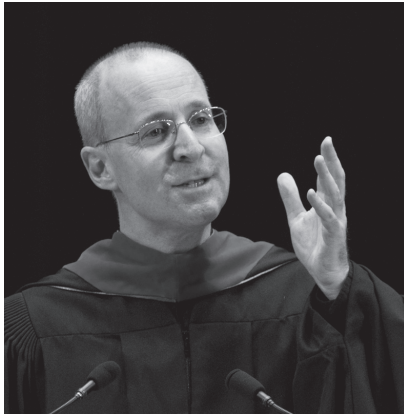


## The Value of Joy, Humor and Laughter

Photograph by Stuart Watson



Rev. James Martin

the late-lamented Doc Watson's pub, which has gone to whatever heaven that dive bars go to. In fact, the last time I was in Irvine Auditorium, as I dimly recall, I was freaking out over an Accounting exam and really high, too.

Happily, today I am neither.

Actually, I used to be on the staff of *Punchbowl*, and the editor during that time, still a good friend, told me I should say, "Happily, today I am only *one* of the two." But then another Penn friend said, "If you say that, President Gutmann will never invite you back!"

But this *is* a religious event so let me begin with a parable: There's an interfaith gathering at Penn, taking place in College Hall, and all the participants—Catholics, Protestant, Jewish, Muslims, Buddhists, even agnostics and atheists—are on lunch break. They go to a food truck on 38th Street—my favorite, which we called Ptomaine Tony's—and they all get food poisoning and die. So they arrive at the gates of heaven, bummed out because, you know, they're dead, but happy because they're in heaven. And St. Peter comes out to take care of business. So he turns to the Protestants and says, "Hey, thanks for all that great work you did in helping people learn the Bible and all those great hymns. So welcome to heaven. Why don't you go to Room Five, but make sure not to look in Room One." Off they go. Then Peter says to the Jewish crowd, "Hey, thanks for keeping the Covenant faithfully, and following all the Commandments that God asked of you. So *Mazel tov!* Welcome to heaven. Go to Room Four, but don't look into Room One." Then he turns to the Muslims and says, "Thanks for all daily prayers and your devout observances of the Quran. Welcome to heaven! Go to Room Three, but make sure not to look into Room One."

Finally, one of the agnostics, who's rather surprised to be there at all, says to St. Peter, "What's in Room *One*?" And St. Peter says, "Oh, that's the Catholics. They think they're the only ones up here."

Now, you're now probably wondering why you're spending your final hours of undergraduate-hood listening to cheesy religion jokes. You're probably thinking that if you're going to go to the baccalaureate address, then at least there should be a point to this talk. Well, that *is* the point. Which is this: My fellow Quakers, Lighten up. Don't take yourself so seriously. Or, since this is the baccalaureate at *Universitas Pennsylvaniaensis*, and I should frame things more elegantly, how about this: Joy, humor and laughter are underappreciated values in the spiritual life and represent an essential element in one's own relationship with God.

It's not clear why humor and laughter have been deemed as inappropriate in so many religious settings. But I'm sure you've all met people who seem to think that being religious means being deadly serious all the time. But, as the saying goes, when you're deadly serious, you're probably seriously dead. In Christian circles these people are known as the "frozen chosen."

There are a host of reasons—sociological, theological and even psychological—why humor is downplayed within religious circles. Take American Christianity, for example.

Many Christians still have a hard time imagining Jesus as someone who laughed and who had—God forbid—fun. But he surely did. Anyone who told clever stories and amusing parables must have had a sense of humor. But why

don't we see this more in the Bible? Why isn't Jesus seen as a funny guy?

Well, one reason is that because we live in a different culture and time we don't "get" some of the intentionally funny parts. Humor, as you know from living in a multicultural environment like Penn, is culture-bound. It often doesn't translate from culture to culture. It is also time-bound. Check out a movie from the 1940s and you'll see that some of the jokes simply fall flat. So if humor is culture-bound and time-bound, imagine how hard it is for 21st-century Americans to appreciate jokes from first-century Palestine. We miss a lot of the inherent humor.

Moreover, we've heard the funny stories so many times that they cease to amuse. In one Gospel story, for example, a fellow named Nathanael is told that the Messiah is from Nazareth. And Nathanael says memorably, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" That's a little dig at Jesus's hometown, which was a real backwater. It's kind of like saying, "Can anything good come from Wharton?" It's a dig. But Christians have heard that story so many times about Nathanael, that they *miss* the humor.

Reaching even further back, the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with good humor, even laughter. When Abraham and Sarah, age 100 and 90 respectively, are visited by three strangers who tell them that Sarah is going to have a baby, Abraham, according to the Book of Genesis, "falls on his face laughing." And when Sarah overhears the news of her superannuated pregnancy, she laughs, as well.

"Why did you laugh?" says God. "I did not laugh," Sarah says. "Yes you did," says God. And when they have a son, they name him Isaac, or in the Hebrew, Yitzakh, which means, "He laughs." Then Sarah says in a wonderful line, "God has brought laughter into my life and all will laugh with me." There's a story at the beginning of the three great monotheistic religions that combines humor and holiness.

Stories about the humor of the Christian saints reaches a far back as the early Roman martyrs. In the third century, St. Lawrence, who was burned to death on a gridiron over hot coals, famously called out to his executioners, "Turn me over and take a bite, I'm done on this side!" (And in flawless Latin, no doubt—perfectly conjugated.) A century later St. Augustine prayed, "O Lord, give me chastity...but not yet." (No comment.) And to give this a more ecumenical twist, there's a whole book of jokes and asides called the *Wit of Martin Luther*. I wonder if he told knock-knock jokes.

Saintly humor continues right up until modern times. The most well-known contemporary example may be Pope John XXIII, who served as pope from 1958-1963. The Italian-born pontiff, who described himself as "just a peasant," had an earthy sense of humor. In the 1940s, when John was still an archbishop and the Vatican ambassador to France, he was at an elegant dinner party in Paris, seated across from a woman wearing a low-cut dress that exposed a lot of cleavage. His secretary turned to him and whispered, "*Quel scandal!*" And John said, "What's the scandal?" And his secretary said, "That woman! Everyone is looking at her!" And John, said, "No one is looking at her. Everyone is looking at *me* to see if *I* am looking at her!"

"Joy is not incidental to the spiritual quest. It is vital." That's not me talking, nor is it Benjamin Franklin. That's the Hasidic Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, writing in the 18th century. And have you ever seen a talk by the Dalai Lama? His lectures are filled with laughter, something anathema to too many serious-minded religious folks today.

Now I'm not advocating a mindless, idiotic happiness. You would be a robot if you weren't sad during times of tragedy or pain or struggle. As the Book of Ecclesiastes said, "There is a time to mourn," (or maybe it was "The Birds"). But Ecclesiastes also says, "There is a time to laugh." In the religious sphere we forget this truth at our peril.

In short, the great spiritual masters from every tradition knew the value of humor and laughter. Let me give you just three brief reasons why.

First, humor is a tool for humility. We can tell jokes about ourselves to deflate our egos, which is a good thing for everyone. Look, you're about to graduate from Penn, an Ivy League school, the best in the country—okay, *one* of the best. Certainly one of the best in West Philadelphia. Kidding: the best in the country! I'm a Penn grad, it's easy to get stuck up. It's just as easy in religious circles. Sometimes on the way out of church people kiss my hand. The other day a woman said to me, "Seeing you celebrate Mass is like seeing Jesus celebrate Mass." I didn't ask her when the last

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time she saw Jesus saying Mass was.

For example, that Catholic joke I told at the beginning is fun to tell. But it reminds me that Catholics need to be careful about assuming they have all the answers to every question. Self-deprecatory jokes remind us not to take ourselves so seriously. They remind us of our essential humanity, what Jesus called our “poverty of spirit.” Our fundamental limitations, our basic humanity, our shared reliance on God. As a Penn grad you’ll probably go on to positions of prominence, and you will be tempted to think you’re better than everyone else: *Don’t*.

We are all human beings, from the guy who cleans up the vomit in the toilets in the Quad on Sunday mornings to that demi-god Denzel Washington. We’re all beloved children of God; none of us better than the others. Laughing at ourselves helps to remind us of that.

A second reason for humor in religious spheres: Humor speaks truth to power. A witty remark is a time-honored way to challenge the pompous and the powerful. Jesus deployed humor in this way, challenging some of the authorities of his time. Humor is a weapon against the arrogance and pride that infects all human beings, and therefore infects religious institutions, because they are made *up* of human beings.

The mother of a friend of mine, for example, was once in the hospital at the same time as a local bishop, who was recovering from some minor surgery. The bishop took it on himself to go from room to room and visit all the patients. He came into my friend’s mother’s room and said to her, “Well, dear I know just how you feel.” And she said, “Really? When was your hysterectomy?” Later they became friends and, years later, he presided at her funeral Mass, where he told that joke on himself. He learned not to take himself with deadly seriousness.

Finally, joy is an important part of our relationship with God. One of the best ways of thinking about our relationship to God is as a friendship. Like any friendship, for example, it requires time. What kind of friend would you be if you never spent any time one-on-one with your friend? That’s what prayer is: one-on-one time with God. Being in relation also requires you to listen—to God’s presence in your daily life and in prayer. It requires you to be willing to deal with rocky times, when you feel that your friend isn’t there for you as much as you’d like. All the things you can say about a good friendship you can say about prayer.

Now, you’re smart Penn grads, so you know where I’m going with this: Any good friendship is leavened with some joy, some humor and a lot of laughter. The same goes for our relationship with God. Consider incorporating lightheartedness into your spiritual life.

After all, the Book of Isaiah, says, “The Lord takes delight in his people.” Can you imagine God *delighting* in you? If that doesn’t work, how about this: How many times have you heard “God loves you”? You think, “Yeah, whatever. That’s just what God *does*.” It’s like wallpaper. But how about this: God *likes* you. That has a different energy to it, doesn’t it? Can you imagine God *liking* you?

And: can you allow yourself to think that the funny or unexpected things that happen to you just *might* be signs of God’s playfulness, especially things that cut you down to size? Can you think of God in a playful way? In one fifth-century Midrash, the rabbis tell the story of God braiding Eve’s hair in the Garden of Eden, like one who would help a bride. It is a charming and even playful image of a loving God.

So, if you’re a religious person, or a spiritual-but-not-religious person, or if you’re a seeker or a doubter or an agnostic or an atheist, here’s some baccalaureate advice: Don’t take yourself so damn seriously. Laugh at yourself. Use some humor to speak truth to power, especially on behalf of the poor and the marginalized. See what happens when you incorporate joy into your spiritual life, and try to locate God’s delight. Overall: be joyful; cultivate a sense of humor and laugh—for God’s sakes.

To that end, I’ll close with, what else, a joke. Why? Well, the better question is why not? So a Catholic priest and a rabbi are en route to an interfaith program at Penn’s Hillel Center and they get into this long discussion about whose job is harder, and they swerve off the road and hit a telephone pole on Chestnut Street and go straight to heaven. So they find themselves standing there in front of the gates of heaven.

The rabbi and priest wait outside for some time, until finally the golden gates open up. Just then a huge choir of angels starts singing and a long red carpet rolls out, all the way up to the foot of the...priest. And the rabbi stands back.

Suddenly there’s a big trumpet blast and out come hundreds of saints: St. Peter, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Joan of Arc, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Teresa of Avila, and on and on. They all greet the priest and say, “Welcome to heaven, Father. Thank you so much for all of your hard work.” Then a long blue carpet rolls out and out comes Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The priest can’t believe his eyes! Mary strides up to the priest, gives him a kiss on his head, and says, “Welcome to heaven. Thank you for being such a good priest.” Finally, there is tremendous organ blast, a long white carpet rolls out and Jesus Christ himself comes out. The priest bursts into tears—he can’t believe it! Jesus comes up to the priest, hugs him and says, “Welcome to heaven! I’m so happy you’re here!” Then there’s another huge trumpet blast, the angels burst into song again, and the whole group hugs the priest and claps him on the back. They all go back into heaven, laughing and singing. The gates close and the rabbi is left standing there, just agog.

So now he’s pretty excited, wondering who’s going to welcome him. Maybe Moses or Aaron. Maybe Miriam. Maybe one of the great Prophets. Maybe one of the great rabbis. Maybe God himself. He starts to gather his thoughts and think about what he might want to say. After a half-hour passes, he starts to get antsy. An hour passes. Two hours pass and he starts to get annoyed. Finally, a little side door opens and a little man, who he doesn’t even *recognize*, but who must be a saint, calls out, “Hey you!”

The rabbi looks around for the carpets, or Moses, or the prophets, or the great rabbi, or somebody, and he walks up to the little saint. The saint says, “Oh yeah, so welcome to heaven.”

And the rabbi says, “Is that it?” And the little saint says, “What do you mean?”

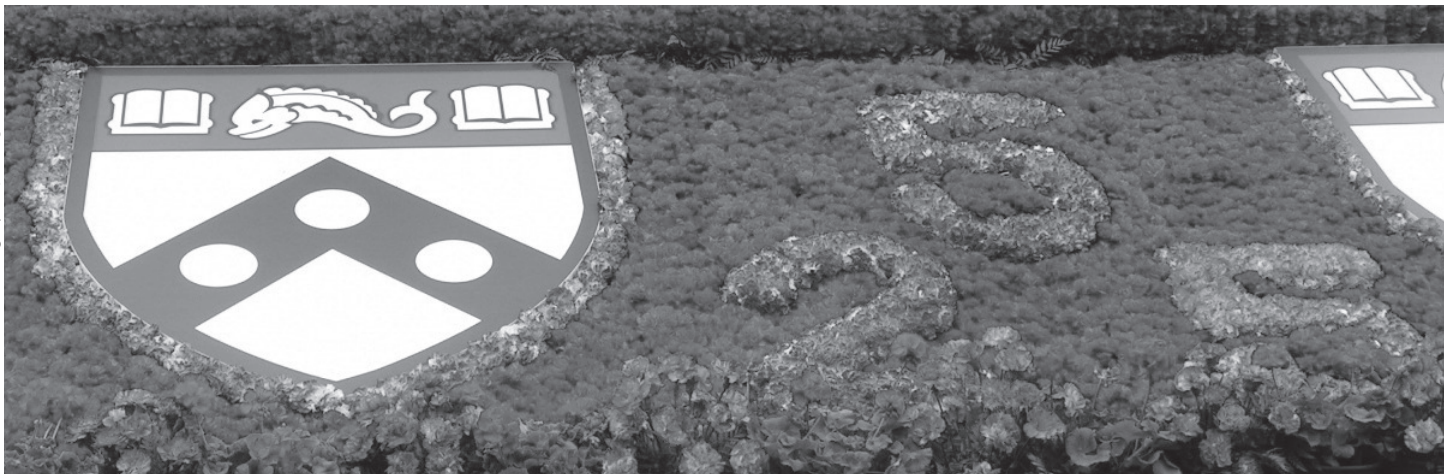
And the rabbi says, “Oh come on! Is that the welcome I get? After working so hard on earth? I mean, the priest gets the carpets and the angels and the trumpets and the saints and Mary and Jesus, and all those nice words, and all I get is this?”

And the little saint says, “Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, you have to remember something. We get rabbis up here *everyday*. We haven’t had a Catholic priest in years.”

Thank you very much.

And: Go Quakers!

Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller



## True Merit

Graduates, family, friends, members of the faculty, Father Martin, and honored guests: Welcome, and congratulations to the great Class of 2011!

Long before John Wayne and Jeff Bridges—or the Duke and the Dude—donned eye patches to star in *True Grit*, Benjamin Franklin thoughtfully defined that plucky quality's close cousin: true merit.

True merit is “an inclination joined with an ability to serve [humankind]” and “the great aim and end of all learning.”

Graduates, you were admitted on signs of true merit. And, over the past four years, I've watched it—and you—grow. We've partied at my home and celebrated Hey Day together on College Green. You inspired me with your energy, filled me with pride, and made me tremendously hopeful about the future. Even at Hey Day when you were—how should I say this?—tastefully decorated.

Semester after semester you excelled in our classrooms and our laboratories. You pursued your extra-curricular interests with equal passion and purpose.

Our football team clinched the Ivy League title for the second straight season. Our women's rowing team brought home the Orange Challenge Cup. No matter the sport, Quakers boosted our school spirit—with the help of our cheerleaders and the Penn Band, of course.

Through Civic House, Fox Leadership, and the Netter Center, you rebuilt homes and refurbished community spaces. You tutored in West Philadelphia and served as Big Sisters and Big Brothers to girls and boys across the city.

Musicians and vocalists among you moved body and soul alike; locavores championed sustainability initiatives. And, together, you relayed for life. You took back the night. You stood up for equal rights. And you raised funds to support our brothers and sisters in Japan.

These are more than demonstrations of talent and acts of kindness. These are magnificent examples of true merit in action. You adopted a more democratic method of electing UA representatives. You launched a new tree planting tradition. You changed our Penn community.

Tomorrow, as you sit with your friends on Franklin Field, you will behold seven diverse models of True Merit: our Honorary Degree recipients. Take to heart their world-changing achievements because each of you has such potential.

If a life on screen appeals to you, look to Oscar winner Denzel Washington, whose remarkable films span the Civil War, Civil Rights, and the distant future.

If journalism is your passion, reflect on the careers of Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, Pulitzer Prize winners who not only open our eyes to oppression and suffering around the world, they also agitate for positive change.

Or, if societal change is your aim, consider Mo Ibrahim, who democratized communications in Africa before transforming his homeland through philanthropy.

True merit, however, doesn't demand that you work in the public eye. Three of our honorees have passionately pursued their interests largely out of the public eye:

For decades, Nobel Laureate Ei-ichi Negishi, a graduate of Penn, worked in a chemistry lab, advancing the development of everything from lifesaving medications to that cell phone you shouldn't be looking at now.

Meanwhile, Penn Professor Renée Fox revolutionized sociology with interdisciplinary studies that expanded our understanding of the complex relationship between people and the practice of medicine.

Our nation and the world need more pioneering scientists like Negishi and more creative researchers like Fox. And, of course, we'd love to give you an honorary degree when you win a Nobel Prize or educate generations of proud Penn Quakers.

Or perhaps you live to write—any Kelly Writers House fans here? Draw inspiration from Joyce Carol Oates, whose stories—be they about beauties, boxers, or the world's most famous blonde—have stretched our wildest imaginations.

The title of one of Oates' books, *Wild Nights!*, is a borrowed bit of a poem by Emily Dickinson, who died 125 years ago today.

Dickinson's life was spent mostly in solitude. Yet her's too was a life of true merit. Her pathbreaking poetry continues to inspire.

As you, members of the great Class of 2011, prepare for your Commencement Day, I offer you a single stanza of Dickinson:

We never know how high we are  
Till we are called to rise;  
And then, if we are true to plan,  
Our statures touch the skies—

Tomorrow, you will be called to rise, from Franklin Field to the challenge of life beyond Penn. Your True Merit will lead you to answer the call. Your Penn spirits will rise. And your statures will touch the skies!

Photograph by Andrew B. Miller



Penn Commencement Address given on Monday, May 16, 2011 by President Amy Gutmann at Franklin Field.

## Four Fundamental Life Lessons from the Movies

Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller



Amy Gutmann

Chairman Cohen, Trustees, honored guests, families, friends, and alumni: Welcome to the 255th commencement of the University of Pennsylvania! Let's hear it for the amazing Class of 2011!

Graduates, you've passed your final exams and handed in your dissertations. You've survived Walnut Walk. But I know you will always remember everyone who helped you arrive at this moment—first and foremost—your parents and families, your professors, and, of course, your Penn friends.

You know that your education doesn't end today. You know there will always be more to explore...always more to discover...always more to learn.

Because I'm a movie buff...because we're inspired by the presence of Denzel Washington...and because the very first Academy Awards ceremony was held on this exact date in 1929, I'm reminded that there's a lot you can learn from the movies. And so...

With all due respect to David Letterman, I'd like to share with you: *The Top Ten Things You can Learn from the Favorite Movies of Penn's President:*

Lesson #10: Early in life, *The Wizard of Oz* taught me that on life's journey brains, heart, and courage come in handy.

Lesson #9: From *Casablanca*, I learned that even if Humphrey Bogart never quite said it, dedicating ourselves to a higher purpose and deep loyalties are values we should always treasure.

Lesson #8: As time goes by, *The Social Network* reminds us that virtual relationships are no substitute for real ones. ...And remember that nerds can get girls, but not if they're also...bleeps.

Lesson #7: *True Grit* teaches us that perseverance pays off.

Lesson #6: *Avatar* teaches us to respect nature—and each other.

Lesson #5: *Titanic* tells us that no ship—strategy or scheme—is unsinkable.

Lesson #4: *E.T.* should remind you to “phone” home.

Lesson #3: *Silence of the Lambs* gave a whole new meaning to having an old friend for dinner.

Lesson #2: *Julie and Julia* reminds us that everything really is better with butter.

And the #1 lesson I've learned from the movies: *The King's Speech* teaches us to judge individuals not by their rank, but by their merit. ...And, even more strikingly, it's not always the case that *what* you say is more important than *how* you say it.

Yes, we can learn a lot of things from the movies. But real lessons—most especially *life lessons*—can't be summed up in a one-liner. That's why today I'd like to share with you four truly fundamental life lessons that the movies have taught me. And these aren't just any movies, they are movies that showcase the amazing City and Commonwealth that Penn calls home.

In the film *Philadelphia*, lawyer—and admitted homophobe—Joe Miller reluctantly takes the case of a man who believes he's been fired because he has AIDS. Miller wins the case. But he also eventually conquers his fear of homosexuality—and challenges his ignorance: touching the dying man's face. In realizing his common humanity with his dying client, Miller enriches and ennobles not only his client's life—but his own.

Miller provides us with *fundamental life lesson number one*: Being

a successful professional isn't as important as being a good person. We all do best when we use our skills and talents to leave our world a little better than when we found it. To do good when we can. To think not just about what we can earn, but also what we can contribute. Because, with all due respect to Rhett Butler in another favorite of mine, *Gone with the Wind*, “Frankly, my dear, [you *do* have to] give a damn.”

If *Philadelphia* taught us to think of others, a much earlier Hollywood hit taught us to be true to ourselves. In the classic film, *The Philadelphia Story*, Katherine Hepburn plays wealthy Main Line socialite, Tracy Haven. She's a head strongwoman, about to marry again when her ex-husband, played by Cary Grant, re-enters her life. The very day of her wedding, Tracy breaks off her engagement with a guy who goes by the book, but whose character is no match for Cary Grant. It then hits her: All the guests have already arrived...the cake is in place...the champagne is chilled.

For a moment, it appears that her sense of decorum—of doing what's expected of her—may triumph. But, in the end, Tracy follows her heart and refuses to walk down the aisle. On the spot, Cary Grant makes his second bid for her hand. She immediately accepts. And it looks like they'll live, not at all perfectly, but happily, ever after.

Although *The Philadelphia Story* is also a great screwball comedy, it offers *fundamental life lesson number two*: If you want the happy ending, don't try to be perfect, but do follow your heart.

You can't listen to what others say you should do...or what society says you must do...or what pessimists say you can't do. In professional as in personal life, if you want to be successful—and truly enjoy your success—you have to pursue what inspires you...what impels you: what you love. Find your dream and follow it, for it's the only path that leads to the stars.

Pursuing a dream is one thing that boxer Rocky Balboa certainly understood. In local film favorite, *Rocky*, there's a great scene where Rocky's trainer tells him that he's always believed that Rocky's effort didn't match his potential. Suddenly, Rocky is handed the opportunity to face the heavyweight champion of the world. Only by giving it everything he has—and then some...by “rising up to the challenge of a lifetime,” is Rocky the bush league boxer able to successfully meet—and nearly beat—the champion.

In Rocky's story we can find *fundamental life lesson number three*: You can't win with half-hearted effort. In order to be sitting here today, you certainly gave it your all during your time at Penn. Continue to do so. Give it your all, and when the opportunity you've dreamed of...“the challenge of a lifetime” comes your way, you'll be ready for it.

When you are ready, even when disaster seems imminent—even when the proverbial train has already left the station and is barreling toward disaster—courage combined with creativity can still save the day.

That's the *fourth fundamental life lesson* made vivid by one of my new favorite films, *Unstoppable*. In *Unstoppable*, an unmanned runaway train—with a deadly cargo of toxic chemicals—is barreling toward Scranton, Pennsylvania. No one knows what to do. Disaster looms. Intrepid engineer Frank Barnes—played by none other than Denzel Washington, of course—is sent to attempt the impossible. He must board the runaway train and stop it. Barnes, and a young co-worker, manage to get onboard—and through a dazzling combination of valor and vision—they're able to save the city, and the day. Like Frank Barnes, if you combine courage with creativity, if you remain determined, then success—however you define it—is unstoppable.

My beloved Class of 2011, you are also unstoppable! Take these four fundamental life lessons to heart. If you do—like all of our extraordinary Honorary Degree recipients—you will enjoy success. You will enjoy happiness. You will enjoy a life of meaning far beyond anything you can yet imagine.

And, if you will permit me, before the credits roll, one more thing. Remember that, when taken together, these four fundamental life lessons reveal one essential truth: By following your heart...by giving it your all...by doing so with creativity and courage, you will not only be happy, you will also be *great*! You will truly be unstoppable!

As you find your next role in life beyond Penn, my fervent and final wish for you is that you will always take great pleasure in what you've learned here, in your families, your friends, your work, your volunteer activities—and, of course, in great films.

It has been my privilege, and great good fortune, to have known all of you. Congratulations, and, to paraphrase film critic Roger Ebert—I'll see you at the movies...and on Locust Walk!

Remarks given Monday, May 16, 2011 by Camille Z. Charles, Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Term Professor in the Social Sciences, Professor of Sociology and Education, Director, Center for Africana Studies, and Incoming Chair of the Faculty Senate.

## Changing the World

Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller



Camille Z. Charles

As Chair of the University of Pennsylvania Faculty Senate, I offer greetings and congratulations on behalf of the nearly 4,000 members of the faculty at this extraordinary university. We are extremely proud of all that you have achieved during your tenure at Penn, leading up to and including this momentous occasion.

This is my first official duty as Chair of the Faculty Senate, and I have been carefully instructed that I have three responsibilities. First, it is tradition to reference our founder, Benjamin Franklin in some way; second, to offer words of wisdom and encouragement as you move out into the world; and third, to keep it short! So, let's get this party started.

Recently, I was asked what makes Penn students so exceptional. I reflected for a moment, trying to appropriately articulate what we know instinctively, and what we as faculty have had the great fortune and opportunity to experience over the last four years as your professors, mentors, advisors, and collaborators. In the tradition of our founder, Benjamin Franklin, you are industrious, entrepreneurial, and committed to service; in fact, the descriptor I chose, with affection and great admiration, is scrappy.

You are disinclined to sit back and wait for things to happen, or to expect that things will be easy; nor are you going to allow obstacles to stand in the way of accomplishing your goals. You are not likely to let doubters detract you from whatever it is that you set out to achieve, whether your goal is academic or civic, personal or public. And, you are committed to helping others, making your world a better place than it was when you arrived. Penn students, Penn *graduates*, make things happen. You create opportunities; you evaluate and improve existing paths when it's called for, and you are unafraid to chart new territory when innovation is required. Equally impressive, you embrace any and all challenges with the full confidence that, ultimately, you will not only persevere, you will succeed. Most importantly, however, you accomplish all of this with compassion, humility, and decency, in service to your communities, be they local, national, or global.

In the spirit of Ben Franklin, you make your education work for you; assisting you in your efforts to make your world—however you conceive of it—a better place. The world has changed a lot since you arrived four years ago, and the challenges you face as you go out into the world are great. But you already know that because you are already actively engaged with the world. What I know for sure, and what all of us who have watched you make the most of your experiences and do great things know for sure, is that you have already begun to change the world and the best is yet to come.

On behalf of the Faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, I thank you for the opportunities you have given us to facilitate and share in your education and for teaching us a few things along the way. You are an inspiration to us all. We congratulate you and all of the family and friends who love and support you. Thank you.

Photograph by Stuart Watson



President Amy Gutmann sat with Ben on the Bench before the procession to Franklin Field. She was joined by the honorary degree recipients (left to right) Ei-ichi Negishi, Renée Fox, Nicholas Kristof, Sheryl WuDunn, Joyce Carol Oates, Trustee Chairman David L. Cohen, Denzel Washington and Mo Ibrahim.

# PENN COMMENCEMENT 2011

*Penn Commencement Address given Monday, May 16, 2011 by Denzel Washington, Academy Award-winning and Tony Award-winning actor and director.*

## Fall Forward

President Gutmann; Provost Price; Board Chair Cohen; fellow honorees; and today's graduates:

I'm honored and grateful for the invitation today.

It's always great to be on the Penn campus. I've been to a lot of basketball games at the Palestra because my son played on the team. Coach didn't give him enough playing time, but we'll talk about that later. No, I'm very pleased with the progress Coach Allen has made and I wish them success in the future.

I'd always get a warm welcome here—except on the few occasions when I'd wear my Yankees cap.

It's like taking your life in your hands. People would say: "We love you Denzel. But you walking around with that hat on... we don't care who you are."

So you'll be happy to see that I'm not wearing my Yankees cap today.

But I am wearing my Yankees socks, my Yankees t-shirt, and my Yankees underwear.

Still, I'll be honest with you: I'm a little nervous. Speaking at a graduation of this magnitude is a little overwhelming.

This is out of my comfort zone.

Dress me up in army fatigues. Throw me on top of a moving train. Ask me to play Malcolm X, Rubin Hurricane Carter, Alonzo from *Train-ing Day*:

I can do all that.

But a commencement speech? It's a very serious affair. Different ballgame. There's literally thousands and thousands of people here.

And for those who say—you're a movie star, millions of people watch you speak all the time...

... Yes, that's technically true. But I'm not actually there in the theater—watching *them* watching *me*.

I'm not there when they cough... or fidget... or pull out their iPhone and text their boyfriend... or scratch their behinds.

From up here: I can see *every single one of you*. And that makes me uncomfortable.

So *please*, don't pull out your iPhone and text your boyfriend until after I'm done.

But if you need to scratch your behinds, go right ahead. I'll understand.

Thinking about the speech, I figured the best way to keep your attention would be to talk about some really, juicy Hollywood stuff.

I thought I could start with me and Russell Crowe getting into some arguments on the set of *American Gangster*...

... but no. You're a group of high-minded intellectuals. You're not interested in that.

Or how about that "private" moment I had with Angelina Jolie half naked in her dressing room backstage at the Oscars?... Who wants to hear about that?

I don't think so. This is an Ivy League school. Angelina Jolie in her dressing room...?

No, this is *Penn*. That stuff wouldn't go over well here. Maybe at Drexel—but not here. I'm in trouble now.

I was back to square one—and feeling the pressure.

So now you're probably thinking—if it was gonna be this difficult, why'd I even accept today's invitation in the first place?

Well, you know my son goes here. That's a good reason. And I always like to check to see how my money's being spent.

And I'm sure there's some parents out there who can relate to what I'm talking about!

And there were other good reasons for me to show up.

Sure, I got an Academy Award... but I never had something called "Magic Meatballs" after waiting in line for half an hour at a food truck.

True, I've talked face-to-face with President Obama... but I never met a guy named "Kweeder" who sings bad cover songs at Smokes on a Tuesday night.

Yes, I've played a detective battling demons... but I've never been to a school in my life where the squirrel population has gone bananas, breaking into the dorm rooms and taking over campus. I think I've even seen some carrying books on the way to class!

So I had to be here. I had to come... even though I was afraid I might make a fool of myself.

In fact... if you really want to know the truth:

I had to come... *exactly because* I might make a fool of myself.

What am I talking about?

Well, here it is:

I've found that nothing in life is worthwhile unless you take risks.

Nothing.

Nelson Mandela said:

"There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that's less than the one you're capable of living."

I'm sure in your experiences—in school... in applying to college... in picking your major... in deciding what you want to do with life—people have told you to make sure you have something to "fall back on."

But I've never understood that concept, having something to fall back on.

If I'm going to fall, I don't want to fall back on anything, except my faith. I want to fall... *forward*.

At least I figure that way I'll see what I'm about to hit.

Fall forward.

Here's what I mean:

Reggie Jackson struck out twenty-six-hundred times in his career—the most in the history of baseball.

But you don't hear about the strikeouts. People remember the home runs.

Fall forward.

Thomas Edison conducted 1,000 failed experiments. Did you know that? I didn't either—because #1,001 was the light bulb.

Fall forward.

Every failed experiment is one step closer to success.

You've got to take risks. And I'm sure you've probably heard that before. But I want to talk about why it's so important.

I've got three reasons—and then you can pick up your iPhones.

First... you *will* fail at some point in your life. Accept it. You will lose. You will embarrass yourself. You will suck at something. There is no doubt about it.

That's probably not a traditional message for a graduation ceremony. But, hey, I'm telling you—embrace it.

Because it's inevitable.

And I should know: In the acting business, you fail all the time.

Early in my career, I auditioned for a part in a Broadway musical. A perfect role for me, I thought—except for the fact that I can't sing.

So I'm in the wings, about to go on stage but the guy in front of me is singing like Pavarotti and I am just shrinking getting smaller and smaller...

So I come out with my little sheet music and it was "Just My Imagination" by the Temptations, that's what I came up with.

So I hand it to the accompanist, and she looks at it and looks at me and looks at the director, so I start to sing and they're not saying anything. I think I must be getting better, so I start getting into it.

But after the first verse, the director cuts me off: "Thank you. Thank you very much, you'll be hearing from me."

The next part of the audition is the acting part. I figure, I can't sing, but I know I can act.

But the guy I was paired with to do the scene couldn't be more overdramatic and over-the-top.

Suffice to say, I didn't get the part.

But here's the thing: I didn't quit. I didn't fall back.

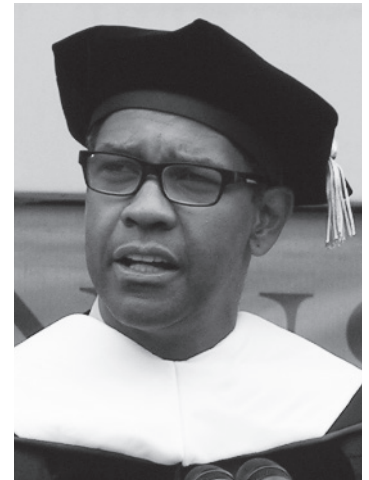
I walked out of there to prepare for the next audition, and the next audition, and the next one. I prayed and I prayed, but I continued to fail, and I failed, and I failed.

But it didn't matter. Because you know what? You hang around a barbershop long enough—sooner or later you will get a haircut.

You will catch a break.

Last year I did a play called *Fences* on Broadway and I won a Tony Award. And I didn't have to sing for it, by the way.

*(continued on next page)*



*Denzel Washington*

Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller

And here's the kicker—it was at the Court Theater, the same theater where I failed that first audition 30 years prior.

The point is, every graduate here today has the training and the talent to succeed.

But do you have guts to fail?

Here's my second point about failure:

If you don't fail... you're not even trying.

My wife told me this expression: "To get something you never had, you have to do something you never did."

Les Brown, a motivational speaker, made an analogy about this.

Imagine you're on your deathbed—and standing around your bed are the ghosts representing your unfilled potential.

The ghosts of the ideas you never acted on. The ghosts of the talents you didn't use.

And they're standing around your bed. Angry. Disappointed. Upset.

"We came to you because you could have brought us to life," they say. "And now we go to the grave together."

So I ask you today: How many ghosts are going to be around your bed when your time comes?

You invested a lot in your education. And people invested in *you*.

And let me tell you, the world needs your talents.

Man, does it ever.

I just got back from four months of filming in South Africa—beautiful country, but there are places with terrible poverty that need help.

And Africa is just the tip of the iceberg.

The Middle East needs your help. Japan needs your help. Alabama and Tennessee need your help. Louisiana needs your help. Philadelphia needs your help.

The world needs a lot—and we need it from you, the young people.

So get out there. Give it everything you've got—whether it's your time, your talent, your prayers, or your treasure.

Because remember this: You'll never see a U-haul behind a hearse.

You can't take it with you. The Ancient Egyptians tried it—and all they got was robbed!

So what are you going to do with what you have? And I'm not talking *how much* you have.

Some of you are business majors. Some of you are theologians, nurses, sociologists. Some of you have money. Some of you have patience. Some have kindness. Some have love. Some of you have the gift of long-suffering.

Whatever it is... what are you going to do with what you have?

Now here's my last point about failure:

Sometimes it's the best way to figure out where you're going.

Your life will never be a straight path.

I began at Fordham University as a pre-med student. That lasted until I took a course called "Cardiac Morphogenesis."

I couldn't pronounce it... and I couldn't pass it.

Then I decided to go pre-law. Then journalism.

With no academic focus, my grades took off in their own direction: down.

My GPA was 1.8 one semester, and the university very politely suggested it might be better to take some time off.

I was 20 years old, at my lowest point.

And then one day—and I remember the exact day: March 27th, 1975—I was helping out in the beauty shop my mother owned in Mount Vernon.

An older woman who belonged to my mother's church, one of the elders of the town, was in there getting her hair done and kept giving me these strange looks.

She finally took the drier off her head and said something to me I'll never forget:

"Young boy," she said. "I have a spiritual prophecy: you are going to travel the world and speak to millions of people."

Like a wise-ass, I'm thinking to myself: "Does she got anything in that crystal ball about me getting back to college in the fall?"

But maybe she was on to something. Because later that summer, while working as a counselor at a YMCA camp in Connecticut, we put on a talent show for the campers.

After the show, another counselor came up to me and asked: "Have you ever thought of acting? You should. You're good at that."

When I got back to Fordham that fall I changed my major once again—for the last time.

And in the years that followed—just as that woman getting her hair done predicted—I *have* traveled the world and I *have* spoken to millions of people through my movies.

Millions who—up 'till today—I couldn't see while I was talking to them. But I *do* see you today. And I'm encouraged by what I see. I'm strengthened by what I see. I love what I see.

Let me conclude with one final point. Many years ago I did this movie called *Philadelphia*. We actually filmed some scenes right here on campus.

*Philadelphia* came out in 1993, when most of you were probably still crawling around in diapers. Some of the professors, too.

But it's a good movie. Rent it on Netflix. I get 23 cents every time you do. Tell your friends, too!

It's about a man, played by Tom Hanks, who's fired from his law firm because he has AIDS.

He wants to sue the firm, but no one's willing to represent him until a homophobic, ambulance-chasing lawyer—played by yours truly—takes on the case.

In a way, if you watch the movie, you'll see everything I'm talking about today.

You'll see what I mean about taking risks or being willing to fail.

Because taking a risk is not just about going for a job.

It's also about knowing what you know and what you don't know. It's about being open to people and ideas.

Over the course of the film, the character I play begins to take risks. He slowly overcomes his fears, and ultimately his heart becomes flooded with love.

And I can't think of a better message as we send you off today.

To not only take risks, but to be open to life.

To accept new views and to be open to new opinions.

To be willing to speak at commencement at one of the country's best universities... even though you're scared stiff.

While it may be frightening, it will also be rewarding.

Because the chances you take... the people you meet... the people you love... the faith that you have—*that's* what's going to define your life.

So... members of the class of 2011: This is your mission:

When you leave the friendly confines of West Philly: Never be discouraged. Never hold back. Give everything you've got.

And when you fall throughout life—and maybe even tonight after a few too many glasses of champagne—*fall forward*.

Congratulations, I love you, God bless you, I respect you.

*Over the years, some movies have been set in Philadelphia, while others actually shot some scenes on Penn's campus, including the following Hollywood productions, documentaries, short films and television series.*

### Feature Films Shot On Campus

*Rocky II* (1979) starring Sylvester Stallone, Talia Shire and Burt Young, directed by Sylvester Stallone (Pennsylvania Hospital).

*Philadelphia* (1993) starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, directed by Jonathan Demme.

*Kimberly* (1999) starring Veronica Alicino and Gabrielle Anwar, directed by Frederic Golchan.

*Unbreakable* (2000) starring Bruce Willis, Samuel L. Jackson and Robin Wright, directed by M. Night Shyamalan.

*Invincible* (2006) starring Mark Wahlberg and Greg Kinnear, directed by Ericson Core.

*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) starring Shia LeBeouf and Megan Fox, directed by Michael Bay.

### Documentaries Filmed On Campus

*Ambulance Corps Drill*, silent film (1899)

*Hail Columbia* (1935)

*N Is a Number: A Portrait of Paul Erdos* (1993)

*The Palestra: Cathedral of Basketball* (2007)

### Other

#### Short Films:

*Back to the Machine* (2002), *The Gossip Show* (2002)

#### TV Series:

*CEO Exchange* (2000)

# 255th Penn Commencement

Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller



Co-drum majors Robin Acker, N'12, and Tom Hensle, C'12, led the Penn Band from Locust Walk to Franklin Field where they played near the entrance.

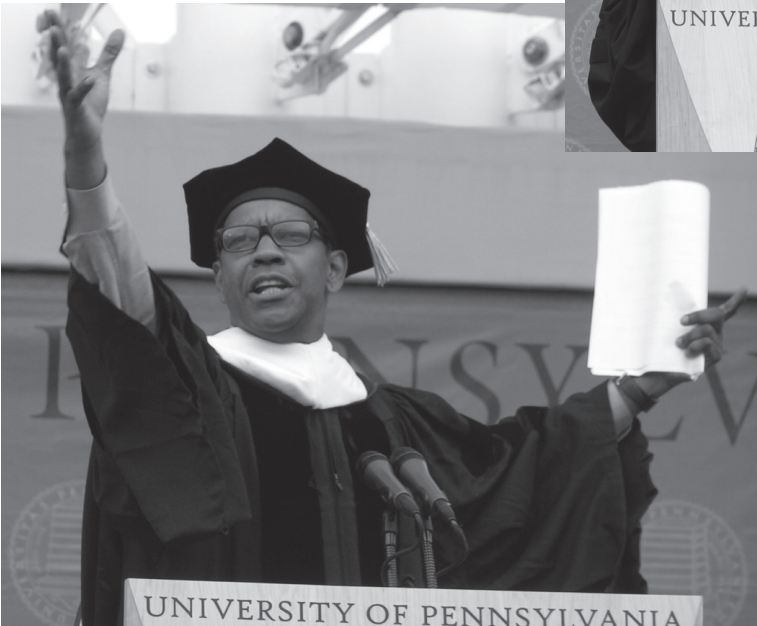
Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller



The bagpipers led the Penn Commencement Procession along Locust Walk.

Photograph by Andrew B. Miller

Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller



The Chaplain, Rev. Charles Howard, gave the Invocation before Greetings from the Senate Chair and later the Dismissal after the Closing Remarks.



Secretary of the University Leslie Kruhly with the University mace, the symbol of authority of the University of Pennsylvania.

Photograph by Andrew B. Miller

Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller



Commencement Speaker Denzel Washington entertained the crowd at Franklin Field during Penn's 255th Commencement on Monday, May 16, 2011.

Photograph by Marguerite F. Miller



Ali-Reza Mirsajadi, C'11, sang The National Anthem after Board of Trustee Chair David L. Cohen's Opening Proclamation, and then led the singing of The Red and Blue before the Recessional which was accompanied by music from the Westminster Brass.

Photograph by Andrew B. Miller



See Almanac's website for Almanac's Commencement slideshows, and Penn's webcast of the 2011 Commencement.