

## Commencement Address

Bill Safstrom

# The 55<sup>th</sup> Graduating Class of Bellevue Christian High School

Thursday, June 18, 2009

Parents and friends of BCS, faculty members, and seniors, thank you for asking me to speak at your graduation. I count it a great privilege and an honor. Tonight I'll only remind you of what you've already learned, and encourage you to continue doing what you've already begun. Over the last four years, your teachers and I have consistently tried tell you and each other the Truth – not just the facts, but the Truth Himself, Jesus Christ who created all the facts and gives them meaning. And we've tried to live the Truth in relationship with you – always prayerfully and often in fear and trembling – trusting God to help us. I am sure we frustrated you at times. I pray our time together planted some seeds from which your Biblical worldview and mine will continue to grow if we nurture it. Your teachers and I believe in you – in the future God has planned for you and in your potential to transform your world if you trust in Him and DO the truth that you believe.

Let me begin with a foolish story. Used to be, you could drive a short distance out of Salem, Oregon, to where the Little Santiam River thunders maybe fifty feet over a rock cliff. So . . . they have a fish ladder. But summertime water levels are much lower, leaving calm pools to swim in and flat rocks to lie on in the sun. You could easily wade over to the cave-like lower opening of the fish ladder, . . . but you wouldn't be able to see more than ten feet into the blackness. You could also climb up the river bank above the falls and wade out to the top of the fish ladder. Now, the top of the fish ladder is a twenty foot deep concrete vault covered by a metal grate. I suppose the grate prevents people from falling in but if you climbed up onto the grate and looked down you would see that it doesn't keep everything out during the spring floods so, even in summer, the water in the vault is mostly covered by floating driftwood. That's why the fish enter at the bottom of the vault through a vertical 18 inch by 30 inch rectangular opening. Then it's a straight shot for them across the bottom to a similar, but horizontal, opening on the other side of the vault. From there the fish swim up and out through an iron gate held shut

with a chain and they continue up river. A person could never swim against the current up that ladder in any season. However, from the top, if the chain were loose enough for you to squeeze through that gate, and if someone dared you to do it, you could take a deep breath and dive down about 15 feet to look through that 18 inch by 30 inch opening. The sunlight streaming through it from the other side would make it look fairly inviting. Now, all that river water trying to squeeze through such a small opening creates tremendous backpressure, so you'd have to swim harder and harder the closer you got to the opening until you got to within about . . . . a foot of it. Then, all of a sudden, and Mr. Perkins could explain this phenomenon to you, you would be sucked through that opening before you realized it. After you rose to the surface and had time to take a breath, surrounded by little pieces of driftwood, you would realize that you couldn't go back and you couldn't tread water forever either. Looking down through the crystal clear water, the next opening would be pitch black because, of course, it leads into a tunnel through the solid rock.

Well, here you are, graduates, treading water among the driftwood. Actually, it just seems like the people sitting on either side of you are floating effortlessly and that you are the only one who has to work to keep your head above water. They feel the same. Now that high school is finally over and you can catch your breath, you can clearly see that sunlit opening in the past you can never return to. And those robes must be getting hot so you can't stay here. Your only choice is that scary black opening to the future Shakespeare called, "the undiscovered country."

So, before you enter that tunnel, please accept three tips from one who cares about you and has swum the fish ladder before.

**First, Keep Perspective.** It can be dark in that tunnel. As this is the 55<sup>th</sup> graduating class of Bellevue Christian High School, I got to thinking about how your experience in 2009 might differ from that of our first BCS graduates in 1955. The BCS mission statement says this is a rapidly changing world. What's changing?

In 1955 the first Japanese transistor radio was produced allowing teenagers mobile access to the music of their choice. Now most of you have i-pods to do a little more of the same thing.

In 1955 stiletto heels were the hot fashion item for women. Marilyn Monroe said women were indebted to the man who invented them. Some of you apparently still think so.

The 5 members in the BCS class of 1955 might have enjoyed JRR Tolkein's "The Lord of the Rings" published in that year. You've all seen the film version of "The Lord of the Rings." A couple of students were watching it just last week at lunch on a laptop in the hall.

Back then, on The Day The Earth Stood Still, Clatoo brought a dire warning that proliferation of nuclear weapons into space threatened the rest of the universe. Fortunately Patricia Neal had the linguistic skills to say, "Gort, Clatoo barada nicto" and save the earth from annihilation.

In this year's remake of The Day The Earth Stood Still, Clatoo brings a different warning that our wasteful and uncaring lifestyle threatens the earth with environmental and ecological destruction. Unfortunately, no one has the language skills any longer to speak to Gort.

In 1955, South Korea was experiencing a nervous peace after 3 years of war. Across the Demilitarized Zone they faced the Communist North Korean forces of Kim Il Sung. Today, his son, Kim Jong Il, leads North Korea and is testing intercontinental missiles and again threatening military action.

In 1955 Iran was in turmoil following a violent coup with massive protests. The nationalist, Islamic government of Mossadegh was ousted to make Iranian oil more accessible to the west and diminish the Soviet Union's presumed influence. Last week, Iran's disputed election may have returned the reactionary, anti-Western, Islamic government of Achmadinijad to power, disenfranchising the supporters of the more moderate Islamist candidate, Moussavi. And massive street protests continue this week. Sometimes the major events we see in the news do not represent transformational change.

But sometimes they do. Back then, Dr. Al Greene and other missionaries had been forced to leave China when the communists came to power. Now the Christian church in China is growing so rapidly that China will soon have the largest Christian population of any nation on earth. The Chinese church wants to increase the number of missionaries they are sending out to 100,000, more than all western countries combined.

In 1955 Bill Haley and the Comets were singing "***Rock Around The Clock***" and parents hated it and Bill spent time cultivating the kiss curl on his forehead that girls loved. Today Shakira is singing "***Hips Don't Lie***" and parents hate it but, having received financial aid to attend a

Catholic school in Baranquilla where students were expected to tutor kids in poor neighborhoods, today she uses her money and influence to build elementary schools in her native Colombia to give other poor children a future, and raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education for the health of Latin America. Keep perspective. Don't be distracted by changeable events. Stay focused on creating transforming change.

In 1955, those from the dominant race and culture in the US didn't give much attention or respect to minority groups. They didn't have to. In your lifetime, there will be no majority race or culture in the US. All Americans will be a minority Americans. And as the demographic center of the Christian church moves south to Africa, Latin America and Asia, the majority of your brothers and sisters in Christ will look different from most of you and speak different languages. You will face challenges and opportunities your parents did not. If you are a Christian, your work is to transform the world by living out the Gospel – by participating in Christ's ministry of reconciliation. To transform relationships that have been broken by injustice, pride and a lack of mercy, what does the Lord require of you but that you enter into relationship by doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with your God.

**Second, Stay Connected.** It can be lonely in that tunnel. The Apostle Paul urged us in his letter to the Ephesians to put on the full armor of God, including the shield of faith. But Paul had no conception of the knight in shining armor that we sometimes envision – standing alone looking glorious and invincible in armor displaying his individual style. That image certainly appeals to the American fascination with individualism but it isn't Biblical, nor is it realistic. Nobody succeeds for long without helping and receiving help from others. The only military image available to the Apostle Paul was the Roman legionnaire. What Paul actually wrote was, you-all take up the shield of faith – as a centurian might have commanded his troops. I think he may have been remembering the time Roman soldiers saved his life. Forty religious fanatics had taken an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul, thinking that he had brought a non-Jew into the Jerusalem Temple. But, Paul was escorted to safety behind a solid wall of two hundred Roman shields. Holding those rectangular shields tightly together at the same height and angle allowed Roman soldiers to protect each other – and Paul. So, a Roman soldier also had to pay attention to the position of his neighbor's shield and make sure he was turning or stopping when his neighbor was. Roman shields weren't meant to display individuality. They were

designed to fit together without gaps and provide mutual protection for an entire phalanx of troops. A soldier knew that letting his shield droop would expose his neighbor's side to attack – and if his neighbor fell, his own side would be exposed. The shield of faith is a symbol of mutual support and accountability. The point of maintaining a strong faith isn't just for your own protection. It's so you can watch out for and protect those around you – your friends, co-workers, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the person you marry, and your children. You will need their support in return. Surround yourself with people you can trust to link their shields of faith with yours, to look out for you and hold you accountable in the faith. \_

**Third, Be Persistent.** It can be tiring in that tunnel. Creating anything of lasting value takes time – as Eugene Peterson says, discipleship is a long obedience in the same direction. So, plan on that and keep the faith. At BCS you have been told that 'why' you learn is more important than 'what' you learn. God has entrusted to you some remarkable gifts and you are leaving high school with plenty of skills and knowledge. But, remember those gifts, skills and knowledge belong to Him. God is expecting you to invest them wisely for Him – to offer them back to Him in worship and to your neighbor in service. When you serve “the least of these my brothers,” Jesus says you are serving Him. The BCS school hymn we heard again tonight says, “Riches I heed not nor man's empty praise.” You should work hard and invest your talents wisely, but not because you are worried about your own success. Don't be a day trader. Stick to God's investment advice and He will not disappoint you. To paraphrase your class motto, it only counts when it is hard to do. Or as Paul says, tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out within in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. That – God's love – is your only means of transforming the world.

Ok. I shouldn't leave you treading water too long. If you swam hard down to that small black vertical opening and got close enough, quickly turning your body sideways to avoid getting scraped as you were sucked through, when you came up for air in the tunnel you wouldn't be able to see your hand in front of your face. That fish ladder is essentially a 120 foot tunnel bored at an downward angle through the solid rock, divided by four foot high wooden walls into a series of stair step pools. You would have to feel your way over to the first wall and hoist yourself over. In fact, as you swam and climbed down from pool to pool, you wouldn't see a

glimmer of light until you were thirty feet from the bottom because the tunnel makes a sharp turn at the end. Then when you got back to your sunbathing friends they might ask where you'd been. As your eyes adjusted to the bright sunshine you could tell them, but they wouldn't really 'understand' what you had experienced in facing the unknown with doubts and a racing heart, why you did it, what you had learned about yourself, how you could feel foolish and triumphant at the same time or how your perspective on life had changed. Seniors, I trust your journey will be much more worthwhile than swimming a fish ladder, but it may not look that way to your friends relaxing in the sun. As Frederick Buechner says, "God is foolish to send us on a journey for which there are no sure maps. Such is the foolishness of God." "And yet," He quotes the Apostle Paul, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men." If you want to transform your world, seniors, I dare you to dive in. Never swim alone and prepare to go the distance despite loneliness, doubts and weariness. Don't aim at success. Aim at being faithful and God will give you success. You must be the transformation you want to see. Life always and only reproduces itself. May God bless you wherever you go. Thank you for listening.

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