

Hudson Link-Mercy College Commencement Exercises
Sing Sing Correctional Facility
Valedictorian Address

“Mercy Met Me There”

Delivered by Todd Matthew Young
June 3, 2009

Thank you all for that warm, heartfelt welcome. First of all I have to thank the Lord Jesus, because without Him, I would not be standing anywhere, let alone before you today. I need to thank Commissioner Brian Fischer for his unwavering support of progressive programs and education in prison. And a special thanks for the six-month sentence reduction all of us have earned by virtue of graduating today. Next, the entire Sing Sing Executive Team for their positive attitude towards programs like ours, Mercy College as a whole, especially the representatives here with us today, Hudson Link’s Board of Directors and benefactors, Sean Pica, Executive Director, Gabriela Economico, Office Manager, and Arlene Mohammed, our Academic Coordinator and surrogate mother, all of our professors, our friends, family, and loved ones who have supported us through all the phases of our lives. All of you being present here today, helps to make this occasion even more memorable for us. I would like to thank Tim Robbins for representing us so well in the Shawshank Redemption. You truly showed what a college educated person can accomplish in prison.

President Teddy Roosevelt was quoted as saying “A man with no education can steal a freight car, but a man with a college education could steal the entire railroad.” Maybe that quote was not the best one for this situation.

Before I begin the body of my speech, I’ll ask you to bear with me—my wife told me this speech had better not be a generic, dull, boring commencement speech if I know what’s good for me. So I am under some pressure here as I am sure you can understand.

23 years ago, when I should have been graduating from college, making my family proud, seeking my niche in the world, where I might make my dent in life, I was instead walking around with a chip on my shoulder. Thinking no one could teach me anything. I was very much a punk and a cocaine addict. In my selfish state of arrogant ignorance, raging against my wounds, real and imagined, I took the life of another human being. For this despicable act, I was deservedly sent to prison.

Prison is very much a survival game, and I arrived equipped with attitude and some street smarts, enough to survive the worst of it. I thought to make the best of my life-long confinement and loss of freedom I faced. I knew I had no future, simply an existence. I was a used-up coke bottle if you will, my niche on the trash heap, making my dent in the landfill of life.

In today’s world, environmental concerns are at the forefront. We are all **“GOING GREEN”** by respecting the planet, avoiding waste of resources, developing alternative energy sources, and recycling. Well, we here in Sing Sing have gone green for years now!

Unfortunately, we live in a world where instant gratification is the norm and if something does not perform to expectations, it is replaced, rather than repaired, a disposable world. The majority of society views prison as a landfill hill of disposable people, good for nothing. I thought society had

sent me to the dump where unwanted trash belongs—that's how I felt—fully deserving to rot away, not fit for civilization. The weight of all my bad choices, errors in judgment, addiction, disgrace to my family, angry violent behavior, had me fully convinced I was where I belonged. What other company could I expect than to hang out with the other disposables on the garbage pile? It is not difficult to endure prison when you know what you did and hate yourself as a result. You feel you have no value; you make your niche in the landfill.

However, God had another plan, and He always GOES GREEN.” My wife Lauren showed me the road to begin forgiving myself because she saw something in me, some potential, and some possibility. Lauren encouraged me to try college. And Mercy met me there. All of you who support education in prison look at the landfill as a recycling center. You see potential and strive to provide us with the refining process necessary to nurture it. It isn't easy and it is not always pretty.

The recycling process can be downright painful. First, scrubbing away the memories of past failures, then removing the labels of criminal, convict, loser, trash, and felon. Sanitizing away the bacteria of ignorance, insecurity, doubts and self-deprecation. Smashing the stigmas of poverty, the drop-out mentality, addiction and violence. Heating things up, raising the bar, skimming off false belief systems and damaging negativity; purifying and empowering with knowledge and truth—melting fears and replacing them with hope until we are transformed into new, useful and valuable resources—fit for society and able to shine. EDUCATION IS OUR RECYCLING CENTER

When I first started college I truly didn't think I could do it: I didn't believe I could succeed, I wasn't a good student, couldn't do math, would never amount to anything—but Mercy met me there. So what has college done for me? What have my professors helped me to realize through their teaching efforts? I have a broader perspective in my outlook. I have an increased ability to communicate effectively in many mediums, greater compassion for people, pride in the accomplishments of others, increased self-esteem, confidence, discipline, a greater sense of myself as a person: I now feel that I am just as good as anyone else, yet better than none. I have a vision for a future full of prospects, the ability to think critically—see the bigger picture—a deepened ability to love myself, others, my wife and family. A passion to improve, to achieve, a desire to help others reach their goals and an overarching desire to give back to society, to become a positive, galvanizing influence on the world

The examples shown to me by my professors have enabled me to realize I have a gift to teach, to help others gain an understanding of sometimes difficult material. I charge my fellow graduates today to take the gift that has been bestowed and help someone else. Reach back into the landfill and give a hand up to another person. Knowledge should not be allowed to stagnate. Instead, it needs to be shared, like the love of God: the only way you can keep it is to give it away. The more you help others, the more you learn. Trust me, you can do it. You should do it. You must do it. If only to prove to yourself that you have changed. Transformation affects much more than just ourselves.

Education has had such a profound effect on me one might think I would forget that coke bottle I used to be but I don't ever want to forget. George Santayana said that “Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.” I never want to repeat my history. We as prisoners have long thought that having a record was a strike against us, but I suggest that it can be a blessing as well. We will be reminded of where we have been and our past will be foremost in our minds.

So, gentlemen, **Don't Forget** where you have been! **Don't Forget** the sacrifices made on your behalf to get you here. **Don't Forget** the heartaches and sorrows you caused your family, your victims and their families. **Don't Forget** the debt you owe to those who have gone before and those who come after you. Antoine Doran. Lloyd Naraine and Bhisham Persaud, you are the youngest graduates here today. You are doing the right thing and that is commendable, but **Don't Forget** you are role models and you represent more than just yourselves. **Don't Forget** the words of Abraham Lincoln who said: "Bear in mind, your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other thing."

It is not what is done to you that determines your outcome, but what you do next. You can decide to let the past go and accept responsibilities for your actions and reactions. When you do this you take back your power, open yourself to new options, and make choices that position you to come out of it stronger, wiser, and more blessed. Mr. Rogers, the famous TV show host, said "We know deep down that what matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win too! Barack Obama agreed with this idea when he said: "Our individual salvation depends upon our collective salvation." To put it simply, we need each other.

I have been blessed to have friends who are willing to see me as I am today— forgive my past, support and embrace my wife and me, to help me win too, if you will. Robert & Muriel Mandia, your friendship, love and support has been very special to me. Thank you for being there for Lauren and for me, and for being here today. I love you whether you like it or not. Dan and Cheryl Whitley, I appreciate your being here with us today and for all of your encouragement. Dan, your godly counsel has helped me more than you know.

As much as it is important that I remember I have "Gone Green," I wish I could somehow erase from the life of my mother the memories of the pain and shame I caused her. Mom, I have given you numerous reasons to be ashamed of me. Today I give you reason to be proud. You see, you did do a good job with me: it just took a while to show. I vow that this is the first of many more, and I vow to be a son you can be proud of. I love you.

To my sister Colleen, I know I turned your world upside down when I did what I did. I went away when you were 12 years old and today you are a grown woman and I could not be more proud of you. This year you receive your Master's degree despite the hurts of the past. You have risen above them. I vow to be the brother and friend you deserve. I love you, Sis.

To my wife Lauren, oh, baby what can I say? You are the inspiration and motivation in everything I do. Your never-ending support, belief in me, constant encouragement have made me who I am today. You are the greatest wife on the planet, bar none. I love you with all my heart and all I am. I vow to always strive to be the best man I can be for you. I am the one honored to be your husband! How cool is that?

To conclude, Warren Buffet once said, "Chains of habit are too light to feel, until they become too heavy to break." That is a profound observation. For years, I felt those chains, but now my former chains have been cast off, replaced with a new chain, one forged of Hudson Links: links of confidence, compassion, selflessness, generosity and empathy, a chain linking me to success. One day soon I will exit these gates to find my niche out there—like Sean Pica, Gregory Frederick, Mark Wallace, Marvin Ramos, Za'id Ali, and others. And like them, I will bring honor to my mother, my sister, my friends and family. And maybe, restore honor to that life that was lost at my hands 23 years

ago. Oh, and that coke bottle that I once was? It has been recycled into pure, crystal clear valedictorian glass. For that I thank you all and God Bless.