May 28, 2016
Baccalaureate Ceremony – Edith Memorial Chapel

Rev. Morrow, Rev. Jones, Chaplain Rashad, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Roeckle, Mr. Goeman, members of the faculty, parents, friends, and above all, members of the great class of 2016 – Good Evening and welcome to Baccalaureate!

I thought I would give you something to reflect upon by sharing 2 stories; one literary and one real; stories that are about redemption -- that is to say, the opportunity to redeem oneself, to lift oneself up, though some kind of atonement.

But redemption often carries a transactional connotation: the notion of repaying a debt, of buying back the value of something. After all, we somewhat interchangeably talk about redeeming the souls of sinners through penance just as we redeem the value of coupons and pawn tickets; we refer to an unappealing individual as having few redeeming qualities; or we might say, “He redeemed himself in the second half of the game by scoring two goals.”

In the cases I will describe, this atonement is more about paying it forward when you have the good fortune to have a second chance.

And in the end, if the redemption we are talking about is that of an ordinary soul, a relatively innocent ordinary soul, then the stories might just be about the kind of salvation that is accomplished, not as a buying back, per se, of one who has transgressed, but more the result of a simple recognition that humanity, for all its imperfections, is worth betting on, is worth taking a chance on, and ultimately is deserving of a deep and abiding love and respect.

(pause)

One of the great novels in literature is The Wretched, by Victor Hugo, more commonly known by its French title, Les Misérables.

With the popular Broadway musical and the recent film offering a simplified version, people aren’t rushing out these days to buy the 1500 page novel. It is not exactly a beach read.

But the full story is a grand-scale, beautiful, wrenchingly-tragic saga set against the sweeping backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars and bloody revolution of early 19th century
France.

The focus is on those individuals on the margins of society, those who suffer the most, who bear the brunt, and who are least often offered a second chance, if they ever even had a first chance.

One of the pivotal moments in this monumental narrative occurs early on. For the theft of a loaf of bread because his family was starving, the main character, Jean Valjean, spends 19 hellish years of brutal penal servitude in a notorious prison; when he emerges, he is utterly spurned by society.

At long last, he stumbles upon the home of a country bishop who takes him in, feeds him, and gives him a bed. Still desperate and not understanding the charity of his host, Jean Valjean steals off in the night with the household silverware. Captured shortly thereafter, he is dragged back to the home of the Bishop where the police expect to force a confession.

Instead, the Bishop intercedes, saying, “But I had given you the silver candlesticks as well, why did you neglect to take them with you?”

After dismissing the dumbfounded gendarmes, the Bishop pulls the equally disbeliefing Jean Valjean aside, and says, “Never, ever forget that you have promised me to use this silver to become a good man. (...) it is your soul that I am buying back for you; I withdraw it from the depths of despair and loss, and I give it to God.”

This gesture is about believing in mankind, about believing that compassion can mend a soul tortured with despair; and in fact, for much of the remainder of the novel, Jean Valjean tries to pay it forward and be worthy of the kindness that was shown to him.

As you probably know well, he is doggedly pursued by Inspector Javert, who ironically is the offspring of destitute parents and born in prison. Shamed into hating his own humble roots, he spends his life rigidly trying to impose strict order on a disorderly, untidy world, and to do so he applies a fanatical interpretation of the rule of law. Says Hugo, "[h]e would have arrested his own father if he escaped from prison and turned in his own mother for breaking parole. And he would have done it with that sort of interior satisfaction that springs from virtue."

Having broken his parole and escaped from a second stay in prison, Valjean tries desperately to assume a new life and a new identity with Javert ever on his heels. There are a series of moments where he sacrifices his anonymity, risking a return to prison, in order to do the right thing and to help another soul in need.

There is the rescue of Père Fauchelevent, a petty, jealous individual who becomes trapped beneath a heavy, overturned cart, and is being crushed to death. With the crowd watching, Javert, who suspects Jean Valjean’s true identity, says to him pointedly that he has known but one man in his life with the strength required to do what is being asked
here, “a convict in the Prison of Toulon.” Looking Javert directly in the eye, he falls to his knees, crawls beneath the cart and lifts it with his back to save Fauchelevent.

Then there is the character Fantine – pregnant and abandoned by her lover, she is fired from her job for lack of moral rectitude. She sells her hair, her teeth, and ultimately herself to stay alive and to support her daughter. She is, by the way, one of a number of characters in the book that trace back to real experiences in Hugo’s life.

As a young man, on a cold winter’s night, Hugo witnessed a French dandy, a well-dressed bourgeois, taunting a shivering prostitute in the street. When she ignores his harassment, he grabs a handful of snow and pushes it down the back of her thin dress. She strikes him, and he has her arrested for assault. Hugo tries to ignore the injustice, but after some pangs of guilt, goes to the police station and testifies in defense of the girl, whereupon she is released. While laudable, Hugo long wrestles with the fact that he had hesitated before doing the right thing. In the novel, Fantine is subjected to the same cruel gesture of snow down her back, and when Jean Valjean intervenes, he again exposes himself to discovery.

Through it all, Javert pursues him. As the epic draws to a close, Valjean is given an opportunity to end his persecution once and for all. In the chaos of a violent street uprising, he is given the chance to execute Javert with little chance of any repercussion, and yet, he spares him, daring Javert to redeem himself, daring him to disregard the debt of his life that ironically he now owes him.

In the end, Javert cannot reconcile this complexity. He sees a man hardened by cruelty emerge with a good and generous heart because of an act of charity. He sees his rigid, righteous view of the world called into question, even proven wrong. And unable to live with this challenge to his unassailable sense of moral superiority, he takes his own life in response, throwing himself into the Seine.

Of his novel, Hugo wrote,

> So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation which, in the midst of civilization, artificially creates a hell on earth,

> […] so long as the three problems of the century - the degradation of man by exploitation, the ruin of women by starvation, and the atrophy of childhood by physical and spiritual darkness -- are not resolved; […] so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, there should be a need for books such as this.

So this novel is an important parable, a beautiful story of a life set back on track by one who believes in the goodness of the human heart. Such stories stir our souls. But indeed, it is merely a novel, a contrivance, a fiction. And I find myself looking for some reassurance that it is more than just a good story, that believing in the goodness of the human heart actually works.
With this in mind, my second story is real, and it too is about getting a second chance, about paying it forward.

I have a friend named Brandon Chrostowski, an extraordinarily talented chef who runs a restaurant in Shaker Square on the edge of the city of Cleveland.

Beginning 16 years ago with degrees in culinary arts and business management from the Culinary Institute of America, he went on to work with some of the very best chefs in the world at some of the very best restaurants in Chicago, Paris, New York, and now Cleveland.

His current endeavor, since 2013, is EDWIN’S, which as I mentioned is located in Shaker Square, and which has received multiple awards as one of the area’s very best French restaurants. I have eaten there many times myself, and the *coq au vin* is superb. But this is not about *coq au vin*. Not exactly.

The real story here, what motivates him to try to make a difference, is his deep-seated belief in humanity, his mission to invest in people, and to give them a second chance, much like the bishop in Hugo’s novel.

Mr. Chrostowski has taken his gifts as a chef and used them as a means to help those on the margins of society, those most in need of someone to believe in them. And it is a rather inspiring story.

As he tells it, as a very young man, he made a series of mistakes that culminated in his arrest. He found himself before a judge facing serious charges and as much as ten years behind bars. For some reason, and he is not sure why, the judge decided to give him another chance, and just gave him a year’s probation.

Since then, as his fortune took a different direction, he has spent his life trying to pay it forward. The story behind Edwin’s is that he employs ex-convicts: men and women who have committed crimes, and who have spent time in jail.

He is a very tough boss, there is a no excuses policy, and he only brings people into his training program if they are serious about taking advantage of this opportunity he is offering.

When you go to the restaurant, his employees are, to a person, all extraordinarily professional and do a wonderful job. And, as you might suspect, if you look in their eyes, if you scan their tattoos and hear them speak, you can tell that they each have a story, that they have seen some things. Most were raised in very tough circumstances, and all are benefitting from Brandon’s belief in them; from his willingness to take a chance on them; from his desire to pay it forward.

And it is working. People, who in most societies, including our own, would have
been discarded, are discovering that they matter, that they have a future, that they can be proud of themselves, that they have a chance. And that is making all the difference.

These stories of misfortune, of redemption, of faith in mankind inspire me:

- A man of God chooses to take a chance on a desperate individual, who proves to be worthy of this trust.
- A judge, who for some reason, saw something in a young man on his way down a slippery slope, and allowed him to redeem himself. He now, in turn, is spending his life seeking to redeem others, to give them the chance that he was given.

And as I look around and see all the signs of our own singular good fortune, I am reminded that we have been afforded many advantages right from the start. We have not had to plead or work for a second chance, life has dealt us a good hand at the outset. And therefore, I am reminded of our collective obligation to use the gifts we are given for the benefit of others.

You seniors, as you prepare to move on from Lawrenceville, you take with you certain gifts that you have acquired through the privilege of being a part of this community – a knowledge that certain things matter.

You have lived and grown up in a place built upon the notion of trust and respect. You have spent time in a community where people care to know you and respect you; where every voice around the table matters and is worthy of being listened to; where doing the right thing is expected – always; where playing fair is the only option; and word of honor is sacred. In this way, you have acquired an understanding that people matter, even those on the margins, those least often afforded a second chance.

And you go off into the world equipped with the strength of character that comes with these beliefs. As my parting advice, I would like to remind you that the world sorely needs leaders committed to just such values.

You will take your talents out into the world, and with hard work and striving, you will all do wonderful things, but through it all, keep in mind the courage of the simple country Bishop who sees not a wretched waste of a human being but a fellow man who is worthy of his trust; and think of the vision behind Brandon Chrostowski’s restaurant, where he tries to be a refuge for those who need a shot at rebuilding their lives.

Keep close to your heart a belief in your core values, a belief in your responsibility to pay it forward, a belief that other people matter, especially the most humble and most vulnerable…

…and if you can live your life guided by these beliefs, surely the world will be a better place.

Thank you, and have a wonderful graduation.