

Dr. Kevin Fridy – December Commencement Keynote Speaker

When I graduated university, our commencement speaker was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his nonviolent activism that helped end the racist Apartheid regime in South Africa and usher in the “Rainbow Nation.” I’m a political scientist who specializes in African politics. This was great luck. He was a remarkable person whose work I deeply respect.

I don’t remember a single piece of advice he gave that day. While it’s an honor to deliver this commencement, I am nowhere near as impressive as Archbishop Tutu, so the stakes are low. I do, however, have relationships with you that he didn’t have with us on that sunny DC afternoon decades ago.

As a UTampa professor, I’ve taught many of you. For those who escaped my classroom, I see my robed colleagues before me. It is a privilege to work beside these folks. They work incredibly long hours for modest pay, obsess about meeting learning objectives, and are always looking to pull you into their research. They beam with pride when they talk about your accomplishments. From a profit-maximizing mindset, this kind of care makes little sense. But it’s real, and whether you realize it or not, you’ve benefited.

Family and friends of graduates — I see you in your fancy outfits. Thanks for sharing your students with us. I’m one of you too. **My daughter is in the stands. We’re here to celebrate my wife’s second master’s degree.** Being a relative or friend of a graduate takes effort — late-night homework with your kids, quiet time for a studying spouse, listening to struggles of a stressed friend. We do this not for instant reward. We feel your ups and your downs as our own and do small things, often quietly, to help tip the balance toward joy. Graduates, these family and friends care a lot about you.

From my position as faculty and family, I offer you three pieces of forgettable advice. Here goes...

First, ask more questions than you answer.

- Drake or Lamar?
- Raise hell, praise Dale, neither, or both?
- Should I stop at that boiled peanut stand?
- Are flip-flops appropriate for this event?

The answers are obvious: Lamar, both, and yes — times two. Your answers might differ. That’s okay.

- How much poverty am I willing to tolerate — for myself, and for others?

- How much discomfort am I willing to endure for a healthier planet?
- Whose jobs and what norms am I willing to sacrifice on the altar of efficiency?
- How much harm will I cause to get ahead?
- What will I stick my neck out for — and how far?

At your next cocktail party, you'll meet two kinds of people: those who've never asked these questions and those who claim to know all the answers by cliché. Don't be them. These questions should be a perpetual struggle. People who don't try and people who assume transcendence are boring...and they do harm.

Second, let the wildflowers grow.

I grew up on a farm in North Florida and inherited a green thumb. My yard is slowly becoming a Florida native plant jungle. My favorite plant is called Bloodberry. Unless I pointed it out, you wouldn't notice it. Small leaves, unremarkable flowers, a chaotic little bush.

It's endangered in Florida. I planted a few and babied them. They died. Tried again — same story. Then one day, just as I was about to go for round three, a few leaves appeared in a crack between the driveway and road. That plant is now waist-high. Truth be told it's a little hard to back the car out without hitting it. But if someone harms that plant they're going to have a fight with this old man on their hands. Plants can have a personality. I like this one's grit, resilience, and confidence in who it is.

Most of you have already deviated from "the plan." Primary, secondary, tertiary school then exact job or graduate school you planned from the beginning. **Nearly all of you will deviate. We're not all roses built for neat rows. If you find out you're a wildflower, be a wildflower.** Bloodberry is a beautiful part of the garden. **If you're a rose, understand diversity in the garden helps the pollinators we all depend on.**

So far I've told you to stay curious and authentically embrace uncertainty. Your time at UTampa, if we've done our jobs, has fueled these flames you brought with you when you arrived. That's why we give you a general education curriculum — art and science, math and reading, courses that match your major and others that don't. An open and flexible mind leads to better ideas. But it doesn't fulfill a contract you didn't know you signed.

I began by telling you how your faculty, families, and friends care for you, often in a way that feels unconditional. You thought you were being pushed forward with no strings attached. I must now inform you: there was some fine print.

Third piece of advice — give a damn.

Neither "Meh" nor "Me" should be your answer to everything. **Care enough about the rest of us to act.** Move from what Hannah Arendt called the Contemplative Life into the Active Life.

A brilliant but disengaged mind won't solve ancient challenges like war, pestilence, famine — or newer ones like AI, climate change, extreme inequality, or political polarization. Negligence won't help us scratch that itch of making sense of the world or figuring out ways to add meaning. Negligence won't help your community deal with a mental health crisis, build more livable neighborhoods, or educate its children for our uncertain future.

We all have packets of hope in a brighter tomorrow we acquire over time. As life makes evident our inability to achieve enough progress on this goal on our own, we secretly pin these packets of hope onto others to ease our burden. All that help and care from family, teachers, and friends that delivered you here today — the secret is it came with a clandestine exchange of this shared burden.

That's heavy stuff on a joyous day. But how well you carry and share this hope is more important than the size of your boat, the number of social media followers you have, or the reps you do at the gym. For the best among us, this mission sometimes even triumphs over pursuit of basic human needs. That, my friends, is the human condition.

The good news is you aren't alone. All these people watching you today are fighting the good fight too. All those people sitting around you ready to walk across the stage when I shut up, they're on your team.

Before I close, I want to ask a favor I learned as a child in church. At one point in each service, you are asked to greet your neighbors. If you're not religious, don't worry, the point of this exercise is connection not proselytization. So please, graduates and audience, indulge me for half a minute and greet the few folks around you.

Okay settle down. I'm running overtime and I can feel the hook coming out.

That was nice wasn't it? You all look happier and more ready to take on the world. Those little exchanges of hope come in the size of one of those tallboy brown bags you get at gas stations when you want to sip on their stoop. The hope your loved ones have conveyed over the years looks like an oversized duffle bag bedazzled by your favorite sorority sister. At our best, we regularly share our hope, big and small, of a brighter tomorrow with each other. I join your families, friends, faculty, and staff in rooting for you. Congratulations, class of 2025. Spartans....go slay.