

The Future of 1952
A Commencement Address for the Class of 2002
18 May 2002
By Randall Bytwerk, CAS

Members of the Class of 2002 (the rest of you can listen in if you'd like).

This afternoon I shall predict your future. That is treacherous. There are few ways to be right, many ways to be wrong.

Still, I am confident that what I say will come true. I know your future because your future is in front of you. Now, that may sound obvious, but I mean it literally. Before you and behind me sit seventy members of the Class of 1952. Fifty years ago they gathered in the Civic Auditorium in downtown Grand Rapids to hear the Reverend R. B. Kuiper speak on "The Balance that is Calvinism," then walked into a world that was no more certain than our world is now.

I know your future because I asked the Class of 1952 to tell me about its past. Like good Calvin folk given an assignment, they turned it in. Quite a few of them are sitting behind me. Thank you!

What they did, you will do. Where they struggled, you will struggle. What they suffered, you will suffer. The particular events of your lives will differ, but the broad outlines will be the same. Their past is your future.

The Calvin yearbook for 1952 opened with these words: "We cannot stop to congratulate ourselves on our initial progress, but we must strive to make the coming years even more successful." Strive they did, succeed they did. Let me tell you about them.

Most of the Class of 1952 married, as will most of you. Many of them wed Calvin classmates. Some of you will do the same. A third of all Calvin alumni, by the way, are married to other alumni. We sometimes joke about students too eager to marry, and it is true that Calvin College is an educational rather than a matrimonial institution. Yet it is also true that one of the most critical decisions that most of you will make is who to marry, and marriages between those who share deep convictions are likely to endure. Most of the marriages of 1952 have lasted and grown. We pray that yours will too.

And most of you, though not all, will have children and grandchildren. We hope you will remember Calvin fondly and, like the Class of 1952, will encourage and support those you love the most to follow your path here. Over half of the alumni who responded to my survey had at least one child graduate from Calvin. Genevieve Mulder has the record, with seven children, all of whom are Calvin grads. A third have grandkids at Calvin now. At least five of today's graduates have grandparents in the Class of 1952. One member of that class told his five children: "I'll help you go to any university you want, as long as you graduate from Calvin first." That doesn't happen as often today as it did in the past, perhaps to the distress of the Admissions Office, but we hope that many of your children and children's children will follow you here.

The members of the Class of 1952 used what they learned here to do well in business, the arts, the professions, and in the rest of their lives too. They founded real estate companies and farmed. They became professors and nurses and teachers and housewives and salespeople and preachers and missionaries. Many found themselves in careers they had not expected, or in more jobs than they had planned. By and large, they have done well. They worked hard. They achieved things they scarcely imagined in 1952. Sometimes they failed, but Dr. Roger Slater quotes poet James Russell Lowell, who said: "Not failure, but low aim is crime." Aim high, Class of 2002, aim high.

Members of the Class of 1952 have won the awards their chosen vocations give. One of them, Dr. Calvin Seerveld, received Calvin's Distinguished Alumni Award for his inspirational work as a Christian scholar and artist.

Do take the time some day, by the way, to look over this booklet that profiles the winners of that award. The graduates received copies as they entered. There will be copies available at the reception for the rest of you. We give the award to people like

- Artist Elmer Yazzie, who has taught for twenty-four years at Rehoboth Christian School;
- Geraldine Vanden Berg, a missionary to Nigeria for thirty years;
- Richard DeVos who built a great corporation;
- F. Stuart Kingma, who helped to eradicate smallpox.

Shortly you will hear from John and Juliana Steensma and Jack Kuipers, this year's recipients.

I expect one or two of you will receive it too, and you will honor us more by accepting it than we will honor you by giving it.

But when I asked the Class of 1952 what they were proudest of, most did not first list those things. I had one recipient who was disappointed with me for asking the question of what the graduates were proudest. He wrote, and I quote: “You would serve your audience well by never mentioning pride or being proud, except in a pejorative way.... There is a dog food by that name.” Well, that may be, but I saw little in what the Class of 1952 told me that I think would displease our Lord, and much that made me delighted to represent the college that graduated such fine people.

My favorite story is Stan Van Reken’s. Stan got an engineering degree, but turned out to be a real estate entrepreneur with remarkable accomplishments. Yet he is most pleased with what he has helped others to do. Some years back, he found that it was hard for missionaries to afford Christian higher education for their children. He established the Christian Missionary Scholarship Foundation, which this year supports one hundred and eleven students, fifty-nine of them at Calvin. Seven are members of the Class of 2002. “A giving nature,” he says, is rewarded more than you can imagine.” Stan is one of many. In ways mostly quiet, the men and women who sit behind me wearing that fifty-year medallion have acted justly and loved mercy and walked humbly with their God since they left the Franklin Street campus. They are good examples to you, and to the rest of us.

Let me give you a small sampling of the range of experiences they have had.

- Case Vande Reé graduated and quickly found himself on the front line in Korea. So did others.
- Dr. James Ryskamp was a member of the autopsy team for President Kennedy and operated on Lyndon Johnson.
- Nel Gritter Jasperse raised eight children, then became a Hospice nurse.
- Thomas Smith has a patent for a dart game.
- Eugene VanderWall helped develop engines for NASA spacecraft.
- Evelyn Karsten got kissed by a rabbi.
- Robert VanderLaan served for seventeen years in the Michigan State Senate.
- Howard Schipper helped resettle about 10,000 refugees.
- Ken Ludema directed thirty-one doctoral dissertations.

- Jake Terpstra had lunch with Phyllis Diller.

Trudy Vermaire told me that she had a much richer life than she ever expected. That can be said of many of the Class of 1952, and it will be true for you too.

But the Class of 1952 has had its measure of profound grief. Some stood by the graves of children or spouses who died too soon. One had a daughter raped and left for dead. Some marriages failed. One had two houses burn down with all her possessions. Some have had deep personal disappointments. They stood amidst of the ruins of their lives and dreams, wondering how they could go on. Some of you will stand in such circumstances. You will wonder why it happened to you, and where God was and is.

The Class of 1952 can tell you that as deep as your grief will be, with the support of your God, your family, your friends, you will endure, and more than that, find joy again. I asked them what advice they had for those of you who might endure what they had endured, and I got words of deep faith that had overcome, though not forgotten. Listen to pediatrician Kathleen Zandstra Mannion, who had three sons die young. “The ways of God are unknown,” she says, “but we know that all things work together for our good.” Or hear Robert and Carolyn Bolt, whose fourth child came into the world with Down’s Syndrome. “The Lord,” they told me, “has a way of turning something that seems terrible at the time it occurs into something that is good.” Some of you will discover the grace to say such things with more conviction than you can today imagine.

In a few minutes you will join the 50,000 living alumni of Calvin College, many of whom surround you in this place. Then you will sing the Calvin *Alma Mater*. There are two verses. The second is the important one. Pay heed as you sing.

Calvin, Calvin, God has been thy guide;

Dear Alma Mater, thy strength He shall provide;

Be loyal ever to the faith of old,

God's name and honor we ever shall uphold!

Most of you, like most of the Class of 1952, will mean those words, and will find ways to live them out wherever you may go.

Perhaps you can follow the advice of Donald Holwerda who is somehow listed as a member of the Class of 1952, even though a detour through the Korean War postponed his diploma until 1956. He urges you to sing the Calvin *Alma Mater* in the shower! It’s

good advice, even though Don's wife told me he doesn't do it himself. If like me you're the kind of singer that makes dogs howl, find another way to proclaim those words. But whenever and wherever and however you sing or remember or live out those words in the coming fifty years, you will do your *alma mater* proud.

On a day in May in the year 2052, the Lord willing, many of you will return to Calvin College. You will wear the fifty-year medallion. You will see the vigorous faces of the Class of 2052 and wonder how time passed so quickly. You will have raised families, and will see some of your grandchildren in front of you. You will have served God and his church, built careers, traveled far and wide, taken pleasure in the Creation, and much more. Some of you will have endured things you cannot now conceive of enduring. And most of you, like most of the Class of 1952, will be proudest not of what you have done for your own reputation or standing, but of what you have done to advance the Kingdom of God.

Members of the Class of 2002, congratulations on the work you have so far done. I join with your families, your friends, the professors and staff of Calvin College, and with the 50,000 who were here before you, to wish you blessed lives filled with our Lord's grace.