Kenyon College

Office of Public Affairs

The following Commencement Address
was given by Francis Thomas Vincent Jr.
Former Commissioner of Major League Baseball,
on May 23, 1999

The Rewards of Failure

Thank you, President Oden, for that warm and gentle introduction. I'm reminded of the scientist who was honored at the White House and who, after having been introduced in terms similar to these used by President Oden responded: "My father would have appreciated that introduction and my mother would have believed it."

I know how that scientist felt. So again, my thanks.

I am very flattered by the invitation to speak here today on this lovely Sunday morning in May. Somehow the spring resonates with advice given out in large dollops. For this is the season of commencement speeches.

And as one who has given a few commencement speeches in my time, and as one who has heard even more such speeches, I have developed Vincent's law of commencement speeches. And it is a law I intend to apply here today as well.

You can be encouraged by that fact. For the law is: there is no such thing as a bad short commencement speech. And the corollary--of course--there is no such thing as a good long commencement speech.

Today's talk, then, will adhere to Vincent's law. It will be brief. For I have also learned that most speeches and virtually all speakers are soon forgotten by even an attentive audience. Who among you can remember any commencement talk? Or the name of the speaker? And so, if I am to be forgotten, let it be quickly. I shall be brief, and I shall be gone!

There is a second lesson I have learned over the years of speaking to nice people who are my captives for a while, and that is to begin with baseball. So here goes.

In this academic environment, however, I choose to begin by quoting a set of aphorisms by America's prominent social philosopher, the eminent Lawrence Berra of St. Louis--my pal, the eloquent "Yogi." Think hard on these:

*Yogi said: "No one ever goes to that restaurant any more--It's too crowded."

*He said: "Ninety-percent of this game is half mental."

*And finally, he said: "I never said half the things I said." I know how he feels.

Now let me take you to the essence of this little talk. For I want to talk to you today not about success--for you have each achieved a measure of that. And many people will tell you how to be successful. Nor do I want to share with you Vincent's prescription for the achievement of life, liberty, and total body happiness. I leave that to politicians!

No. Not me. Not here. Not today. Rather, let me talk to you of failure. Yes! Failure. For that is something I know a bit about. For it is my thesis that we, all of us, learn much more from failure than from success.

Am I correct that you remember most vividly the lowest grade you achieved on a paper or test? Do we not all remember the time we couldn't come up with the answer; the time we drew a blank on a quiz; the time we said something really silly and everyone laughed; the time the professor was sharply critical and we were badly stung?

We need to confront failure to learn from it. For who among us cannot expect to fail regularly as we proceed to meet the challenges of graduate school, of a job, of marriage, of citizenship and even of friendship? We will get to know failure. We will not let it surprise or frighten us. We will, if we are wise, make it our friend.

Let me talk to you of my own failures. You have been told of my apparent success. Here is the other side of the coin. For like Janus of mythology, all of life has two faces.

A failure of good judgement: In my freshman year at Williams College, I was captain of our freshman football team. We went undefeated. I was sitting on top of the world. I was young, strong, and healthy.

Then in December of that year, my roommate and I were horsing around, as eighteen-year-olds will do. He locked me in my room by taking off the doorknob. Then he left me.

So what did I do? I took a nap for a few hours. Then in a moment that defines failure of judgement, I went out on the ledge to swing to the next room.

> I slipped and fell four stories to the ground.
> I broke my back, spent four months in a hospital, and came out paralyzed. My world was also shattered.
> Of course, I recovered to some extent. But the damage is permanent. And yet from that failure came some blessings.
> I had been a jock. I became a student.
> I had ignored what truly matters in life. I learned better.

For once you are paralyzed and can't walk, you learn to appreciate a walk in the wet grass on a summer morning. Or a swim in Nantucket Sound on a hot day. And how nice it is to enjoy Beethoven, Verdi, a good book, and a quiet evening with friends. You need not walk well to enjoy some sublime pleasures.

At age eighteen, I learned--painfully--what truly matters. I wish you easier lessons.

Failure of performance: In college I was a good student. I graduated with several academic honors. Then I

got to Yale Law School, and in my first year, I failed to make the honors list there, which is called membership in the Yale Law Journal. My grades were not good enough.

What bitter dregs that was. I recall vividly wondering whether I could ever hold up my head, having failed so badly. For me, this was really a sharply edged failure.

But I learned in the later years that academic brilliance--though I never achieved it--is not sufficient. The truly essential skill is good judgement. And the truly essential asset is character. Being smart is helpful but there is much more to life. Thank God.

At Yale, I greatly admired the fellow who was number one in our class. Years later, he came to me while I was at Coke and asked for a job. Even I got that lesson!

Failure of persuasion: Sadly, my tenure as baseball commissioner ended in failure. I failed because I couldn't persuade the owners or the players to avoid war. The owners were determined to try to break the union, and the players union refused to recognize its role in helping to build and improve the institution of baseball.

My failure resulted, in part, in a five-year series of battles that produced very little change. That warfare hurt the game in ways that have harmed all baseball constituents.

And I am sorry, very much so, that I failed. I wish I had possessed the skills that were necessary to avoid what took place.

And so, while people tend to be gentle with me on the topic, the fact is I failed. But I am consoled that the fans have stuck with me and most have thanked me for what I tried to do. If I failed, at least I tried to do what I thought was right.

Remember too that some of our great public figures were very familiar with failure until fate afforded them another chance. Our greatest general, Ulysses S. Grant, who graduated at the bottom of his class at West Point, was a failed Army officer, who at the onset of the Civil War was eking out a living in a small store in St. Louis. Winston Churchill, had he died on his sixty-fifth birthday, would have been unknown except as the failed proponent of the Gallipoli disaster in World War I. Dwight Eisenhower was a mere colonel when World War II began. And General George Patton was dyslexic and flunked out of West Point in his plebe year. But he came back, persevered and finally graduated. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, that towering figure of a president, failed to be selected for membership in the Porcellian Club at Harvard, a substantial social failure, and for the rest of his life, despite all his success, that rejection stayed with him like a splinter in his foot.

And even in baseball, failure becomes your pal. If you fail only seven out of ten times at bat, you'll make the hall of fame. And think of it, Warren Spahn, the winningest left-handed pitcher of all time, failed to win a game in the big leagues until he was twenty-five. Sandy Koufax, another pretty fair left-hander, couldn't throw strikes until he, too, was twenty-five. Ted Williams failed miserably in the 1946 World Series, and Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle set records for being struck out the most times in a season.

Yes. Failure. It is a part of my life. It will be a part of yours, too. Expect it. For it will come.

And yet, life rewards those who having failed, and having failed over and over, still manage to move on. It is the decision to try again that will eventually lead to a reward.

And so I end with a reference to my great hero, Mr. Churchill, who at the very end of his life was honored at Oxford University by being asked to speak at a commencement there. He gave the shortest speech of his life and, I believe, the shortest commencement speech ever.

After he was praised effusively in the introduction, and after the thunderous applause had finally dimmed, he stood silently before the expectant audience. He stood for a long time, not saying a word. The audience waited, expectantly, for the supreme orator of our age to begin. And it waited. And it waited.

Finally, in that voice that continues to resonate down to our generation, he bellowed out: "Never, never, never, never, never . . . give up." And he sat down!

Who am I to try to top that.

Thank you.

Francis "Fay" Vincent, who joined the organization as deputy commissioner in April 1999, became commissioner of Major League Baseball in September of that year following the death of A. Bartlett Giamatti. He had previously served as executive vice president of the Coca-Cola Company, president and chief executive officer of Columbia Pictures Industries, , associate director of the Division of Corporation Finance of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, a partner in the law firm of Caplin and Drysdale, and an associate in the law firm of Whitman and Ransom. A cum laude graduate of Williams College, Vincent earned his law degree at Yale Law School.

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