

Good evening class of 2025 graduates, parents, grandparents, friends, township commissioners, district administration, faculty and staff...esteemed guests.

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of discussing with a few graduates what might be on your minds this evening. And what I learned is that while each of you has a different story to share, you do have something in common: you are facing *uncertainty about what lies ahead*.

You are leaving the familiarity of routines, structures, people you have seen around you since you were children. For some of you, since you were five years old in kindergarten.

Whether they be expected or unexpected, exhilarating or devastating, transition points bring uncertainty. And with uncertainty, we wonder what's next.

When we wonder what's next, we can experience fear...so you know from your psychology classes what that can mean. For some of us, when we don't know how to respond to uncertainty, our autonomic nervous system can take over and trigger that reptilian brain space where all we can do is react: fight, flight, freeze or fawn.

Tonight I share with you a story that demonstrates strategies for moving past that fear response, how we can respond and act despite uncertainty.

The story is about my grandmother, Myriam, when she was between the ages of 4 to 7.

My Armenian grandmother was born in Urfa, Turkey and was a child in 1915, the year the Ottoman Turkish Empire declared that all Armenians be deported or exterminated.

My great grandparents sent their daughter, my grandmother, away when she was about 4 with another family in the hopes that it would save her life. And it did.

It must have been a hard life. She was tattooed on her left hand with a mark that identified her as a slave...and I can remember my grandmother telling me that she "didn't like doing the chores."

When the family who owned her decided to relocate to a region deeper into Turkey that removed any hope of rejoining her Armenian parents, Myriam knew she had to get away. Even at 7, she feared the uncertainty of the future, which could include ongoing enslavement or eventually being sold into a harem.

So when the family was walking through a small village, Myriam noticed a group of Armenian orphans being shepherded by a few helpers who happened to be Christian missionaries.

At 7, my grandmother moved toward the group of Armenian orphans and joined them as they walked together. And, later that night while stopping to rest, one of the Sisters asked who she

was and how she got there. And she just said, “I don’t know,” and shrugged her shoulders. And the Sister and the other children just said, “that’s okay.”

The children went to an orphanage in Syria where young Myriam grew up in community with other girls who spoke her language and loved her. (She also met my grandfather there, but that’s another story.)

I realize that Myriam’s story is an extreme one and that she was only 7 years old. Yet her story speaks truth about how people thrive within uncertainty.

The first Truth, we covered earlier: You will have uncertainty in life.

These uncertainties can emerge during not just traumatic times like a war but also during joyful, transitional times too—like after a graduation.

Some of you are wondering if you can be independent, or what am I supposed to do with the rest of my life? Some are wondering, “What if I don’t go back to school after a gap year?” Or “Will I stay with my boyfriend or girlfriend?” If we allow fear to take over with those questions, we will stop in our tracks.

The second Truth: When faced with uncertainty, you can help yourself.

What did Myriam do? She assessed her situation. She couldn’t change the war. But she could change her own individual circumstances.

She didn’t analyze it to death. She took action. She did the next right thing.

Myriam looked for help. And I believe she was able to look for help because she learned early from her parents that as God’s Creation she deserved a life worth living to the full. And like my grandmother, you all have been surrounded by parents, loved ones, friends, teachers who have surrounded you with the message that as God’s Creation you deserve a life worth living to the full.

What else do we learn from this story.

The Third and Final Truth: When faced with uncertainty, and you aren’t sure what will happen next—you can help others.

The missionary Sisters had no idea what was going to happen. They didn’t have all that information. They just knew that although life had become very uncertain, they could help others.

We don’t need certainty to do the next right thing. We don’t need certainty to be helpful to other people.

I believe that this class is full of people who desire more than anything else to be helpers. And my understanding from conversations with some of you is that you can feel a little bit of guilt about how much you have been given compared to others.

Yes, you have been given much by grace in that you have been able to attend a school like Upper St. Clair. You've been given access to privileges and blessings that many have not.

And you have been blessing others. This class has raised money to help pay for medical bills for community members and donations for Children's Hospital, assisted neighbors with shoveling snowy driveways, babysat your neighbor's energetic toddlers, coached young kids, tutored struggling peers, and raised awareness to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness.

In this life, you will face uncertainty. **When you are uncertain, you can seek help. And when you are uncertain, you can help others.**

You have been practicing these skills all your life, and I have no doubt you will continue to do so.

So congratulations, on behalf of the school board. We are excited to hear from you in years to come. Enjoy your evening, and God bless you.