The Lessons of Dachau
Baccalaureate Address to the Class of 2006

Spring Break isn’t what it used to be - and maybe that’s a good thing. While some of you may have indulged in beachfront bacchanalies, a significant number of you participated in “Alternative Spring Break” activities – helping Katrina victims muck out their debris-filled homes in New Orleans, working on a “Habitat” construction project in Alabama, helping build a school in Mexico or studying Jewish heritage in Prague.

In fact, there were a small number of Germans courageous enough to see what was happening - and to speak up about it. You will not be surprised to learn that they were college students.

Back in Munich, Pat and I made another pilgrimage - to the shrine of Sophie Scholl and the martyrs of the White Rose at the University of Munich. Sophie was 21 years old, a pretty brunette, a talented artist, and a dual major in biology and philosophy who graduated from the University of Munich. Sophie and her brother Hans were college students like you – who have the moral and intellectual courage to speak out against evil and to work for change. All too often, we become morally timid as we mature, seduced by comfort, by financial obligations and by a growing talent for rationalization.

Each generation produces college students like Sophie Scholl - like you - who have the moral and intellectual courage to speak out against evil and to work for change. All too often, we become morally timid as we mature, seduced by comfort, by financial obligations and by a growing talent for rationalization.

On behalf of your College and your professors, I entreat you to resist this seduction. Muhlenberg is a college that understands it must train each rising generation to devote itself to justice and to remain skeptical of power. We understand that we must help you develop those habits of intellectual rigor, of compassion and of simple decency for which our country and our world hunger. But most important of all, we understand that you must teach us to look unflinchingly at that world and to find within yourselves the courage to acknowledge and confront what is wrong.

I believe we have succeeded. I believe you have learned these lessons. You have acted both globally and locally to help the powerless and the afflicted, raising funds for tsunami relief, Katrina relief, for the victims of the 21st century’s first genocide in Darfur; and volunteering for dozens of social service agencies and programs throughout the Lehigh Valley.

You are our best hope. Never surrender your intellectual independence. Never surrender your passion for justice. As you build your careers and raise your families, never become distracted by the mundane. Never harden your heart to the needs of others - both locally and throughout our world.

And now it is almost time to say farewell to you, the Class of 2006. But remember: this is your College - now and for life. Its future - like the future of our country and our world - is now largely your concern and your responsibility. The faculty and staff and students just like you in the Muhlenberg classes coming along behind are depending on you. Visit us frequently, stay in touch, do good in the world. Godspeed!

Peyton R. Helm
President, Muhlenberg College