Opinion
EarthBeat



Molly Burhans delivers the 2023 commencement speech at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, on May 20. (Alonzo Fotography LLC)

by Molly Burhans

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*[**Editor's Note:** Molly Burhans, founder and executive director of GoodLands, delivered this speech for the 176th Commencement ceremonies at Saint Mary's*

College in Notre Dame, Indiana, on May 20. It has been republished here with permission.]

Let me begin by congratulating all the graduates! Whether you are completing your undergraduate degree or you came to Saint Mary's to continue your growth with a graduate degree, you are celebrating a wonderful moment of completion. And I hope to send you off into the next stage of your life with something to ponder: Why is the bad so loud when the good is so pervasive?

All around us there is good and beauty, and yet we sometimes have difficulty silencing the bad. You have completed an educational goal today: you've spent the years leading up to this moment being challenged, facing painful, lonely moments and quiet desperations; you've engaged in noisy celebrations; there have been internal adventures of your soul and mind, and perhaps external journeys that have taken you far from home — this is all tremendously admirable and not a small feat. I pray for all of you that the pervasive good always makes itself more noticeable and remarkable in ways that drown out the bad in your lives.

You know there is a truth here: the good is pervasive, but the bad can be so loud, whether the bad shows up in the world around us or inside our own heads. And I hope one thing you take away from your Saint Mary's College experience is what I'll call discernment. Discernment is the ability to hear and respond to the quiet, still voice of God. Discernment allows us to hear injustice and suffering – which are some of the real and important "bad things" in the world — and to never lose hope that we have the ability to change these things and the courage to do so.

Discernment can help you understand that it is not important to listen to a disturbing TikTok video or mean meme, that it is not important to dwell on an internal voice that tells you that if you are walking out of here with less than a 4.0 grade point average you will not excel. You need to be above people who say that women who speak their minds are not pleasing, or that masculinity is not compatible with emotionality, or that you're too strange, or your hair is too long or too short. Don't pressure yourself to have a perfect career lined up at graduation and side-hustles at the ready. (Don't worry, you're in good company if you do not! Many past graduates, including myself, have been there. Extra credit if you are an adult learner or super-senior).

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The strength and fortitude required for this next chapter of your life will require cultivating ecologies of care and compassion for yourself and those around you; it will require discernment and the ability to step away from the noise and into peaceful silence. Taking the time to look around and listen to that quiet pervasive good will be essential. If you are a traditional-age undergraduate, finishing college in your early 20s, I'm just a decade older than you and I can see that no previous generation has grown up with the ubiquitous noise of today. It can be a struggle not to let it overwhelm you.

So, let's look around right now: to your right and left. Look at the people around you. Look at this beautiful campus. I'm looking around, and I see so much good. Now, if you will, look with your mind's eye back centuries to the soil we stand upon today; home of the Pokagon Potawatomi, who have been using this land for thousands of years, and continue to do so today.

Let us zoom out from our individual selves and selfies to this community space and region and consider the complex palimpsest of the place and our relation to it; on this land and below the foundations of these buildings is a complex geographical dialectic of good and bad, of grave injustices that we should never forget and always seek to heal, of courage and cooperation, of halls that educated generations of previous students and housed their beautiful transformative moments; of everything everywhere all at once.

Some of this history you know well. Around 180 years ago in this place we are today, the Sisters of the Holy Cross arrived. Not long before, Father Edward Sorin and a small group of priests had set out to the northern Indiana wilderness to found what would become the University of Notre Dame.



Saint Mary's College President Katie Conboy (left) with Saint Mary's 2023 commencement speaker Molly Burhans, founder and executive director of Goodlands. (Alonzo Fotography LLC)

Four intrepid sisters followed them from France, and if you have not thought deeply about the 19th century, I can guarantee that any hiccups you may have had with the TSA while getting to South Bend pale by comparison to their arduous journey to this location — across the ocean, over land, a long journey without motor vehicles, and yet somehow they made it. They arrived bringing the Holy Cross mission to respond to the needs of the time and to prepare the world for better times. They carried faith that would help generations to come grow and gain spiritual, intellectual, and emotional maturity — as well as the fortitude to not lose sight of that pervasive good that surrounds us all.

Here we are today on this same land, and I see the Class of 2023: independent, smart, strong undergraduate women from all over this country and even as far as

Ghana who have reached a major milestone, a college education, a milestone that women were denied less than two centuries ago and that too few have the opportunity to reach today. I see students from a rich diversity of backgrounds whose differences create a unique tapestry that is a profound part of the identity of Saint Mary's. I see graduate students, women and men, who represent an expansion of the educational opportunities offered at Saint Mary's. I see Sisters of the Holy Cross, still present and sponsoring this college and carrying forward the mission of those four sisters who first arrived here; I see so many who have supported the graduates — friends, families, instructors, staff — the good is pervasive.

For women, that loud bad I mentioned can sometimes be very loud, so I want to offer you special words of encouragement today to keep journeying forward in the face of obstacles. For men, I encourage you to make a commitment to removing those obstacles where possible for women — and for all of you to make empowering those whose opportunities have been limited a part of your own life and work.



Graduates process in front of Le Mans Hall during the 2023 Commencement Ceremony at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, May 20. (Courtesy of Saint Mary's College)

My journey has involved a number of obstacles and ups and downs. My path began in my late teens with a simple idea that grew out of my work in soup kitchens and

homeless ministries. Buffalo, New York's landscape is littered with unused and abandoned properties. The city contains food deserts and has a large homeless population. Where some saw only urban blight I saw possibility and the opportunity to transform these neglected spaces to promote human health and flourishing through making land work for good.

Community gardens. Rehabbed buildings for housing. At the same time I realized that all of the missions and ministries of the Church can be tied back to land — if you want to feed the hungry, you must grow that food somewhere; if you want to house the homeless you must have a shelter for them; if you want to give drink to the thirsty, you need a clean water source; if you want to promote peace you must prevent the destruction of natural resources; you can mitigate illness and promote physical and mental healing if you have a clean and beautiful environment. In 2015, Pope Francis recognized the connection of the well-being of the Earth to the well being and the good of all people in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*'.

The possibilities I saw in property inspired me to co-founded my first company in 2013. GroOp is an indoor vertical farm that to this day provides fresh organic produce year round in Western New York. My co-founders were older and more experienced, and working with them gave me a glimpse of the power of social entrepreneurship. It showed me how hard work, cooperation, and innovation can bring an idea to life and make a difference. At the time I was discerning religious life with Benedictine Sisters in Erie, Pennsylvania, and as I looked out at their monastery's vast land I dreamed of edible food forests, ecosystem restoration, and verdant life-giving landscapes that could support all of the sisters' missions.

I pursued a graduate degree in Ecological Design with dreams of making land work for good by becoming a park ranger nun or a farmer nun. I was hopeful that I would find a major religious order with a mission for conservation and environmentalism. As my own graduation approached I felt like I was running up a mountain ready to meet my park ranger sisters. But, when I got to the top of the mountain there was no one there. I had to figure out what was next.

I decided to work on a project that would enable the Catholic Church to truly use its lands to implement Pope Francis's vision of stewardship. So I founded GoodLands.

The idea that a 25-year-old woman, whose dreams were about as big as a nice garden plot, would be able to convince one of the world's largest landholders, the

Catholic Church, to transform its property to support its mission – to make land work for good – may have seemed impossible, but I was and remain deeply committed to this lofty goal.

What ensued has been an adventure that has taken me from the slums of Nairobi to the halls of the Apostolic Palace in Rome. From couch surfing with generous strangers to multiple audiences with Pope Francis. I followed the Jesuit mantra to "See, Discern, and Act" — knowing that to transform our stewardship of the environment we must understand the environment and maps are the best tool for this. I led a team to create the first digital, global map of the entire Catholic Church, and the journey continues to this day.

So, how does this relate to you, new graduates? I have shared my story because you, too, will encounter both opportunities and setbacks as you move through life. If college was more of a struggle than a breeze for you — it was not easy; if college was new to you and your entire family, if you are one of the significant number of first generation students here — it was not easy; if you had to balance work and study — it was not easy; if you are a graduate student balancing family and career and undergraduate loans — it was not easy. And college for most of you involved the most collectively traumatic event in recent history, the pandemic. That was not easy for anyone and I applaud you all for the effort you made to get through it. And here you are today, celebrating a monumental achievement.

As you go forward, think creatively about how you are uniquely poised to further the good around yourself and others by using your knowledge and skills, by dreaming big, by making a good noise with your life to compete with the loudness of the bad. I invite you to prepare yourself for challenges, and instead of running from them — embrace them as part of your journey. Move forward with love and faith and may you always discern that which is good and true. Congratulations to the class of 2023!