The Title of this speech, “Your Infinite Influence”, is not original. I was inspired to write this speech by an article I read in a professional magazine I receive for corporate lawyers. It resonated with me because I love words.

I’ve loved words for as long as I can remember. I love books, yes, but I read the cereal box in the middle of the night when I make a snack. I read old newspapers I find lying around. I read the 50 year old knitting magazines in the waiting area of my church.

But best of all, I read history, and I read fiction. I love the power of words. Really good words. Words that don’t bounce off but words that sink in.

A little secret about Mary Scott, I don’t like, what I call secondary words. I don’t like words about words. I don’t like self-help books, and I confess I’ve never read a book that purports to give me 5 simple steps for getting better at anything.

I like to live through the words that are spoken either in real life or in great works of fiction. Think about that for a minute. Think about the words that have profoundly affected you.

For me, I think of my father saying “Mary Scott, Look before you leap; Think before you speak.” Or my mother, “Nothing good happens after midnight.”

I think of that famous beginning of the Tale of Two Cities “It was the best of times and the worst of times.”

History provides us infinite words to live by “We have nothing to Fear, but fear itself.”

My Faith words have comforted me in my darkest moments. I vividly recall where I was on 9-11, in Kuwait, just 30 miles or so from Iraq, wondering if Saddam Hussein would use the opportunity to roll back into Kuwait City and over our little outpost at Ali Al Salem Air Base. I remember our chaplain reading to the commander and his staff where I sat, scared, trying not show it, thinking about my family, my Chaplain spoke the words –

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil.”

I think it’s safe to say that we are the sum of the words that we hear, we read, we say and we think.

I heard once that a child’s mind develops around the number of words it hears in the first years of life. If that’s true, then how important is it that we talk with children – even before they can talk back, we must talk with them. I expect that you graduates had parents or other important, influential persons in your life who talked with you. Persons who instinctively knew or objectively knew the importance of you hearing words.

I say this because you are here today. You have arrived at the point of embarkation. You are a success, and somebody or some bodies helped you get here. You are about to leave school and move to the next phase of life – a phase where your words, thoughts, deeds will have an ever increasing and potentially profound effect on others.

You see Graduates, you have really unprecedented power. Your words have profound, durable impact. But beware, with this power comes great risk.

Consider the power of the words of President Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address “Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” These may be some of the greatest words written and spoken by an American President, and to think, these words survived without Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Blogs, Websites, etc, etc.

Contrast that with cheap words, words that are beneath us, cavalier and silly comments. Pandering words. Words that chase – not lead. Cowardly words. Mean and hateful words. And consider that some of these words wind up on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Blogs, Websites, etc, etc.

Now President Lincoln’s words did outline him, but most of the words of the 100 billion plus people that have gone before you are now gone. Anthropologists estimate that spoken language developed 50 to 70,000 years ago, but written language didn’t appear until
cuneiform 5,000 years ago. Just 500 years ago, the printing press was invented, and the printed word went into mass production with the Gutenberg Bible.

My guess is that words probably had the best chance of survival prior to print when they were in songs. Songs have marched into battle with armies, have comforted us in death, have heralded new life, have celebrated marriage, have defined Faith, and words can sometimes be effectively sung when they can’t be said.

The Iliad, The Psalms, Spirituals, all these words were sung, and they became imprinted on people and were passed along.

Some of you have first-hand memories of the 1960s where American Folk and Rock Music Musicians led the charge to push back against a society they considered to be too rigid.

All of us have, every single one of us, have wept our way through a love song with gulping, heaving broken hearted cries:

At my door the leaves are falling  
A cold wild wind has come  
Sweethearts walk by together  
And I still miss someone

I go out on a party  
And look for a little fun  
But I find a darkened corner  
because I still miss someone

Oh, no I never got over those blues eyes  
I see them every where  
I miss those arms that held me  
When all the love was there

I wonder if she's sorry  
For leavin' what we'd begun  
There's someone for me somewhere  
And I still miss someone

Oh, Extra credit if you know who sung those words – Yes– Johnny Cash! Whew! You can barely say those evocative words without tears. Now that’s power!

But, nothing in our history beats the power of the explosion of stored, disseminated, available words like the last 30 years or so. And most shocking of all – the permanence of our words today – our words today are recorded and protected and are a part of human history in ways that could not have been imagined even a few decades ago – much less when Mr. Lincoln proclaimed the words that became a part of the fabric of our America.

Another way to think of it is this, your words may live forever, and your influence, therefore can be almost infinite.

Graduates, become a master of words. Speak briefly and clearly. Be careful and thoughtful. Be truthful.

And understand what comes before a mastery of words: Reading, Talking, Noticing, Being genuinely interested, Curious…and at the end of all that, remember that thoughts come before words. Master your thoughts, and you’ve mastered your words and actions.

Master your words and actions, and you, Graduates, will save the world. This takes discipline and commitment. Great words never come from fools, and the words and actions of fools don’t last long, but they last a lot longer that the fool wants them to. That’s an original by the way.

No, great words come from great people, who are committed to doing great things and being more than just a warm body who lives and dies without ever being the "man in the arena" instead of "the critic":

These are President Theodore Roosevelt’s Words:
"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who err and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."

Oh, those are such good words, aren’t they?

If you aren’t affected by those words, there’s something wrong with you.

Don’t be cavalier, don’t ever, ever, ever take on a “cool” attitude or allow yourself to be unaffected by words. Because, if you do, you will be the critic instead of the fighter in the arena.

You won’t have that fabulous, wonderful, bigger than life experience of hearing words like these, those words rumbling into your mind like a freight train, rattling your bones, upsetting your sleep, distracting you in church, and ultimately changing you for the better.

If you are too cool to appreciate fine words, you won’t laugh enough, and don’t give up a single laugh in this life.

If you ever need a good laugh, read Mark Twain. First you will laugh, then you will grimace from the truth of it, then it might just change you, just a little.

I was reading some quotes from him about Government:

“Reader, suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Government. But I repeat myself.”

“Whenver you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect.”

And something to consider when you are thinking about misbehaving, also from Mr. Twain:

“Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence.” By the way, that goes with my mother’s words earlier “Nothing good happens after midnight.”

Graduates, I’m counting on you to save the world, and use your words to do it. Become a master of your words. You will never regret it.