

Commencement Address  
Darra Goldstein  
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Madame Chair, Mr. President, and the Board of Trustees; Headmaster Roach and Members of the Faculty and Staff; Parents, Family and Friends; St. Andrew's students; and above all, Graduates of the St. Andrew's Class of 2008:

I am so honored to be here today, not just up here at the podium, but as part of the wonderful community that is St. Andrew's. I remember the first time I heard of the School. It was 25 years ago, in my first class at Williams. I asked the students to tell me a little bit about themselves. There was this one brawny guy who said he played football and had gone to St. Andrew's. In my mind, I confess, I pigeonholed him as a prep-school jock – not someone who could ever tackle the Russian language or begin to understand my dear, soulful Dostoevsky, even if he could tackle a running back! Well, that student was Jeff Lilley ['82], who went on to become not only a star football and baseball player at Williams, but also one of my favorite students of all time, a brilliant Russian and history major who is now an advisor on democratic processes in Kyrgyzstan.

I bring Jeff up for two reasons. First, because he was my initial, if tenuous, connection to St. Andrew's. But the second reason is more important. Jeff was the first of many students to teach me not to be so sure about things, not to make my mind up so quickly, as I was all too often likely to do (and, as my daughter can tell you, I am still prone to do). Another student comes to mind for the same reason. This was back in the dark days of the Soviet empire, when I had just initiated an exchange program between Williams and Tbilisi State University, in the Republic of Georgia. Because conditions were difficult, both

politically and physically, I interviewed prospective students to make sure they were up to the challenge. One student didn't make the cut. Not only was he vociferously, irrepressibly anti-Soviet, but he had never been outside of the United States. Worst of all, he had a phobia about flying. Not someone I wanted to spend three weeks with in a foreign culture, not to mention the four long Aeroflot flights during which I'd probably have to hold his hand!

A day later this student appeared at my office door, distraught that I hadn't accepted him. I explained why he didn't seem a perfect candidate for the trip. He didn't disagree with my assessment. He just kept saying that he really wanted to go, that he was tremendously curious about Georgia, a place that seemed so different from anything he had ever experienced. Steve came back to see me two more times before I finally relented. And I'm so glad I did – he's still a good friend today. Like Jeff, Steve has gone on to a brilliant career. He left Harvard Law School to immerse himself in Russian and post-Soviet studies and is now chief of the political-economic section at the U.S. Embassy in Kazakhstan.

Right about now you parents in the audience are probably thinking, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan?! Keep this professor away from my child! Meanwhile, you students, the St. Andrew's Class of 2008, are probably wondering how these stories could possibly relate to you. The answer is that they show the value of uncertainty, of suspending judgement. Jeff and Steve, and many other students since, have taught me how important it is not to be too sure.

This is a hard lesson to learn, and I'm still learning it. Western culture doesn't make it easy. As soon as we can talk, we're supposed to start making up our minds. Just do a quick search on Amazon to see how many preschool books ask "What do you want to be when you

grow up?" – not to mention all the annoying adults who pester you with questions about "Where do you want to go to school? What do you want to do with your life? Are you going to be a high-powered lawyer like your dad, or a brain surgeon like your mom?"

We are taught to be confident, to be strong, to know exactly what we want and then to go for it. The take-charge kind of people, the go-getters, are the ones who succeed, we are told. Decisiveness is where it's at, especially in this election year, when the pollsters and pundits tell us that the American public wants candidates who know their positions, who don't backtrack or change their minds, who aren't contemptible, unelectable flip-floppers. To succeed, they – we – must always appear self-assured+

. And of course confidence is a good thing, to a degree. But what I want to suggest today is more of an inward model, one that doesn't preclude having confidence or knowing what you want, but one that admits to ambivalence, and in fact celebrates it. Because only when we allow ourselves to admit exceptions and doubts and cracks in our ideas and opinions do we open ourselves to new thoughts and experiences, new possibilities. Keats referred to this as "negative capability" and believed that the secret of Shakespeare's talent lay in this condition of being unsure. He called Shakespeare "a man capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubt". This state of being is, to me, where learning begins.

Yet American culture perceives ambivalence as a weakness. We're taught that if we're ambivalent about something, then it follows that we're wishy-washy, that we don't care very deeply. Ambivalence is often taken to mean indecisiveness, passivity, even indifference, rather than being recognized for its potential for revelation. Coined on the model of the word "equivalence" from the Latin for "equal in

strength", "ambivalence" actually refers to the ability to hold conflicting feelings at the same time, the prefix "ambi-" meaning "both". Although the word's literal meaning refers to the strength of competing ideas, figuratively we can interpret it as the power that is to be found in the act of maintaining contesting points of view. Listening to our doubts and uncertainties gives us an opportunity to explore, to delve deeper, to get under the rock of our reasons, those heavy, granite certitudes that we accept as our foundation stones. Now I'm not suggesting that you live without your beliefs and faiths, your foundation stones. Not at all. But I'd like you to recognize the value of the cracks as well. Ambivalence, the refusal to be so sure, is a kind of crack or fissure in the protective layers of certainty that we've been taught to erect in order to succeed.

In American society, cracks visibly symbolize something that has gone awry, that is well on its way to being broken. On the most obvious level, cracks represent imperfection and the need to be fixed. Those who suffer a mental or emotional breakdown are said to have "cracked". But not all societies see things that way. In Japanese culture, cracks are celebrated as a manifestation of wabi-sabi, a recognition that things are always in flux, always evolving. In traditional Russian culture, men who would be considered crazy by the standards of others, less devout, societies were venerated as holy fools, blessed individuals who had seen the light.

I'm not suggesting that you all put on hair shirts and climb to the top of a stylos in the desert to live out the rest of your days. But I do want you to look for the cracks, those imperfect places in otherwise sleek exteriors. Once you recognize them and tell yourselves it's okay to explore them, you'll discover that it is in these interstices that meaning often resides.

As many of you have learned from your amazing English teachers here at St. Andrew's, literary revelation frequently occurs through fissure. We love to be swept along by a story, and we are confounded when the author interrupts the narrative by altering the point of view or wrinkling the chronology, waking us up from our immersion in what we thought to be certain storytelling terms. The Canadian writer Alice Munro does this brilliantly in "Carried Away". She transports us in a life story beautifully told across recognizable historical eras and events – the First and Second World Wars, the great influenza epidemic, the Depression. Then, when we're sufficiently lulled, she shakes us awake with a disruption in time. As readers, we're perplexed, and maybe a little vexed, to be so jolted, and that's when Munro lets us in on her secret – that even those lives that seem most certain, aren't. It is the crack that best allows us to enter into her story, to participate in it – if only because we have to stop and wonder why she has suddenly cast us into doubt right when we're expecting resolution. Whenever our certainties about a story's outcome are challenged, we are forced to stretch ourselves to accept the possibility of a new, and different meaning. It is in this process of stretching that we learn and we grow. The cracks make us stop, scratch our heads, and look more closely to see what is hidden within. They lead to awareness and, if we're lucky, to a moment of epiphany.

Here I can't resist telling you an anecdote about our daughter, Leila, when she was a little girl. We have lots of stone walls in our yard, and the garter snakes love them. One day Leila noticed some snakes darting back into the wall as she approached, and from then on she was intent on catching them. She did the logical thing: she got her daddy to lift the stones, one after another, to determine whether a snake might be hiding underneath. Now those were big stones, many

weighing more than a hundred pounds, and Dean was a good sport for a little while. Then he announced that he wouldn't dismantle the whole wall just to check for snakes. So Leila got down on her knees – not to beg, but to look in the cracks. And sure enough, she started spotting the telltale flickers of snake tails, at which point she had the evidence to command her father, "That one, Daddy, pick up that one!" Dean would lift the rock, Leila would grab the snake, and then, though she'll deny it forever, she'd give the snake a hug and sometimes even an exuberant kiss. This happened over and over again, until Dean finally tired of lifting huge stones, the wall was half dismantled, and a snake peed on Leila. But she had discovered two important truths. First, that cracks, not surfaces, revealed the objects of her desire. And second, that she didn't really want to be a snake handler. An epiphany of sorts.

In his essay "The Crack-Up", F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." St. Andrew's has given you that ability, and the diplomas you're about to receive attest to how well you've functioned! I hope you'll continue to use your first-rate intelligence. I also hope you'll see this summer as a kind of crack in the edifice of your instruction – a juncture during which you can explore who you are and what is important to you. Don't worry if you can't quite figure it out – that in itself can be a gift.

As you sit here today in these idyllic surroundings, about to graduate, some of you are probably thinking, "I don't want to leave this place – ever!" Isn't "graduation" just another word for being cast out of Eden? Maybe so, at least in the case of St. Andrew's. You've spent some of the best years of your lives here at this beautiful school, with great teachers, a caring staff and loving friends – an ideal community. But now you're also looking forward to new, and exciting

ventures. Glorious memories; promising futures. Already you're required to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time! But I know you'll manage. Remain strong in your ambivalence, embracing your future, yet loving what you've left behind. To paraphrase what Ernest Hemingway wrote about his cherished years in Paris in the 1920s: "If you are lucky enough to have lived at St. Andrew's as a young person, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it will stay with you, for St. Andrew's is a movable feast."