

Commencement Address  
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Parents, friends and family, faculty, Trustees, Class of 2010 - Good morning. It's a great honor for me to have the opportunity to speak with you this morning.

I thought that for just a few minutes I would take you back in time - to Graduation 1983. I was sitting right there. Full head of hair. Russellesque, even. I have the pictures to prove it. The best one is of my mother and me. My mother came to all my graduations - high school, college, graduate school - but it's clear from her smile that this was the one that mattered, probably because in my case it was so improbable. She had been preparing for the worst.

Before I left for St. Andrew's at the beginning of my eighth grade year she took me aside, looked me straight in the eye and said with ferocity I would not forget: "If you get kicked out... don't come home." So she was very happy and proud when I graduated - as I know your parents and family are today. And remember: this day is not yours alone. It's also your family's and especially your parents.

Your education - your life until this point - has been a total team effort. My mother again had a way of reminding me of this fact, by repeatedly telling - usually when my friends were around - the story of my birth. To hear her tell it, the labor lasted for weeks and I was the largest, most uncooperative child a woman had ever wrestled into life. Her point was a simple one: I brought you into the world. It wasn't easy. Don't forget it. I never have. And I hope you won't either - at least not today.

My mother wasn't the only person here that day. There were my teachers, a number of whom are here this morning. Mr. Amos - Michael's grandfather and my biology and zoology teacher - who is out there somewhere and who first introduced to me the wonders of this nature reserve we

call our campus and dignified my interest in wading through the back waters and swamps around here. The then-brilliant and the still-brilliant Mr. Higgins who made math as engaging to me as the back of a baseball card. There was Mrs. Roach, my advisor. She's still my advisor; I plan on keeping her on retainer. And Mr. Roach. Of course he wasn't Headmaster yet or what he has since become - one of the great voices in independent school education today. He was known to us as "Bug" - get it? - and we wondered what Mrs. Roach was thinking when she married the guy. Then there was Mr. Speers; we call him "Boy" Speers, because he looked like he was 13 and needed to eat his Wheaties. He's graying now and looking about 22. Damn you, Will.

And over there - somewhere - sat Ms. Matouk. It's a beautiful sunny day in May, a day for pastels and beautiful print dresses and Monica is dressed in her customary black, looking vaguely Victorian - or at least that is how I imagine her. Because we didn't really know each other in high school. Monica's tenacious, unrelenting pursuit of me didn't begin until after we returned to St. Andrew's as teachers. I was telling Matt Gamber's family last night that Monica and I didn't really move in the same circles when we were students here - which is a bit of an understatement. My friends and I didn't wear black or read Proust or even know who Proust was. We were idiots.

But there she was. There I was. And now here we are 27 years later. And Isabel's here. And Alexander. And Maia. And all of you. And you're graduating and going to college and we're moving to Jordan. It's really a bit overwhelming - and quite amazing. So here's my first little bit of advice: Look around. Very carefully. You never know.

A few years back, during the fall of our sabbatical, I was sitting in the Redwood Library in Newport, R.I., where Ms. Matouk and I have a home, reading the *Boston Review of Books*, when I stumbled upon an essay by Elaine Scarry, a literary critic at Harvard. It's entitled "Citizenship in Emergency." It describes the final hour of United Airlines flight #93 on September 11, 2001, and how a group of passengers brought down the flight and thereby saved the lives of many others on the ground. The essay reconstructs, with imagination and scholarly precision, how this group of passengers determined not only that the plane had been hijacked but that, in all

likelihood, it was being used as a missile to attack the nation's capital. Scarry describes how these passengers, using their cell phones, collected information on the ground, determined the intentions of the hijackers, conferred with each other, developed a plan to storm the cockpit, voted on it, took leave of their loved ones, and, finally, acted. It's a powerful essay and Scarry makes of it a parable of civic virtue and heroism.

I knew I had to share this with my students the moment I finished reading it. And soon the idea for a new course began to take shape in my mind. Drawing inspiration from Scarry's essay the course would, in essence, declare a national state of emergency and draw attention to the various crises our communities, our nation and the world face: climate change; genocide; ethnic cleansing and war; poverty, educational access, human rights; the coarsening of public discourse and the dramatic impact new technologies are having on the way we conduct our civic life. I imagined it as a series of provocations - the syllabus as the intellectual equivalent of a half-time speech in which, as a country and a planet, we were down by two goals. And I began to research it.

One problem, though. As I put the course together, it began to look very political, and I suspected that it might seem slanted to some and, well, liberal. And that's what I want to talk to you about for a few moments - the liberal bias of St. Andrew's.

This bias, I am told by an anonymous source - ok, it was Ben McDonald - is beyond dispute. Our students are liberal. Our speakers are liberal. Our faculty is liberal. Our faculty pets are liberal.

This is difficult for me to say, but: Ben, you're right. St. Andrew's does indeed seek to provide you with a liberal education, but only, I would suggest to you, in the limited sense that all schools are - or at least should be - liberal. Only in the limited sense that education - or at least a liberal education - seeks, as the root of the word implies, to liberate the mind, through the diligent use of reason, from unexamined assumptions, traditions and accepted belief. That's what

a liberal education does. It's what Socrates meant when he spoke about the emptiness of living an "unexamined life." It's what Woodrow Wilson meant when, asked about the purposes of a liberal education, he said: "To make a person as unlike one's father as possible." It's what the late educator Neil Postman meant when he argued that "schools must continuously make themselves into training centers for subversion." It's what the founders of this school meant when, in an early statement of the School's educational philosophy, they spoke of helping students "achieve freedom from ignorance, superstition [and] tyranny of any sort." It's what we mean when we say that St. Andrew's should be counter-cultural. It should teach us to question, to challenge, to stand in opposition to thoughtlessness, to spectatorship and intellectual complacency.

You already know this - it's the standard cliche' of most graduation addresses - but I happen to believe it: one of the great purposes of your education is to instill in you a questioning spirit. This spirit says: accept nothing; question everything. Be suspicious. Skeptical. Cast a cold eye. Come to your own judgements. It is a radically subversive idea, and it is indispensable. It is the essence of citizenship. It's an idea that informs the 1st amendment to the United States Constitution and the ideal of a government based on deliberation, dissent and public debate.

This belief in the liberating powers of human reason is, I hope, one of the principal reasons you are going to college - to sharpen and discipline your powers of interrogation. To learn to question with precision and sometimes with an insistence that will make others - and perhaps even yourself - uncomfortable.

But this is, in the end, a terribly inadequate view of education - not wrong, not misguided, but simply incomplete. It's simply not enough. It's not enough for you to doubt and to question; you will need to learn how to believe as well.

So let me say something about the conservative function of your education. Let me say something about the conservative bias of St. Andrew's.

I love reading, and I assign a lot of it. And I love reading passages in class. I rarely let my students read. I pick the readings; I pick the passages; I read them. Not a terribly liberal idea, I know. And on a couple of occasions recently something funny has happened; as I read, I am so moved by the power of the words my voice breaks.

This is always embarrassing when it happens. There's a double take among the students. It's first period or sixth just after lunch, but suddenly everyone is alert, uneasy. "Uh oh," they think, "he's losing it."

I thought I would share two such passages with you. The first is from a well-known tear-jerker, George Orwell's essay of 1946, "Politics and the English Language." Orwell is writing about the relationship between language and barbarism - the way language - perhaps our finest instrument for the apprehension of clarity and truth - can be corrupted and made to serve evil purposes. He writes:

*In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face... Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombed, from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectifications of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements.*

I first read that in the fall of 1981 in Mr. Speers' V Form English class. It's a testament to the power and lasting influence of Mr. Speers' teaching that I can still pretty much remember everything I read in that course, each paper I wrote, even some of the class discussions. And I certainly remember reading this essay. But I have to confess: it didn't have much of an effect on me. I don't know - perhaps "Boy" Speers wasn't on his game that day. I liked it, I appreciated the advice Orwell offered on the craft of writing - and I recited it to you on that basis alone - but it didn't move me then as it did that day in class when I read it aloud.

What moves me about it is not the simplicity and clarity of Orwell's style, but Orwell's humanity. His passion. His indignation. Indignation at injustice, at slaughter, at murder, at war; Indignation that something Orwell loves and something he believes in - the English language - could be hijacked to justify such things.

My second example is from the great Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and her story "Cell One" which I taught last year to a group of seniors. In Adichie's story of a young, privileged and spoiled college student finds himself wrongfully jailed in one of Nigeria's most notorious prisons for a crime he did not commit. His name is Nnamibia. His parents are well off and reasonably well connected, but helpless to effect his release. Each day they come to the prison to visit Nnamibia, and slowly he begins to tell them about his experience there. He tells them about the food - of which there is never enough. About the bribe money he pays for protection, about abuse and torture. About an old man who, like himself, has been wrongfully imprisoned - in effect taken hostage by the authorities in the hopes that he will help them find his son who has been accused of robbery.

One day his parents arrive to discover that Nnamibia is no longer there: he has been sent to a terrible place, cell one, a place from which very few emerge alive. His parents are frantic with fear. But then just as suddenly and without explanation, Nnamibia is released into the custody of his parents. As they drive him in the family's Volvo Nnamibia finally speaks. This is what he says:

*“Yesterday, the policemen asked the old man if he wanted a free half bucket of water. He said yes. So they told him to take his clothes off and parade the corridor. Most of my cellmates were laughing. Some of them said it was wrong to treat an old man like that.” Nnamibia paused. “I shouted at the policeman. I told him the old man was innocent and ill, and if they kept him here it wouldn’t help them find his son, because the man did not even know where his son was. They said that I should shut up immediately, that they would take me to cell one. I didn’t care. I didn’t shut up. So they pulled me out and slapped me and took me to cell one.”*

Dramatized in this extraordinary story is what I will call, borrowing from others, an “ethic of care.” Nnamibia, who as the story begins is adrift and indifferent to others, learns to care and, somehow, finds the courage to act. He decides to stand up for an old man. He decides not to shut up.

This theme - our encounter with strangers and our refusal or acceptance of the claims they make upon us - is the wellspring from which much of our scripture, literature and art draws its urgency. We see it played out in works with which you are now familiar; we see it in the wisdom literature of the major world religions, especially the Gospels; in the prayer attributed to St. Francis that you have recited - or listened to - so many times in chapel; in Shakespeare’s tragedies and comedies; in Melville’s great story “Bartleby, the Scrivener;” in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, when, with the civil war coming to an end, he asks all Americans to reach across the divides separating them and “to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.” We see it in Orwell too. Orwell believes that writers and artists should stand in solidarity with those who are the victims of war, arbitrary power and violence. For Orwell writing is an act of caring.

Which brings me back to what I called earlier the “conservative” function of your education.

The purpose of your education is not simply to give you the ability to think critically - to challenge, to question and to doubt - but also to care; to seek out, consider and in the end embrace noble ideals, the kinds of ideals that will give meaning and purpose to your education, your career and your life.

I put it to you this way: if your education does not, in some fundamental way, move you and inspire you, it's not working. It might get you a good job, it might help you climb up some hierarchy, but it's not going to help you lead a meaningful life.

Another way of saying this is that you must not simply approach the world critically, but also reverently. You must learn to revere. To value. And this is very different, but no less essential, than questioning.

I hope you won't confuse reverence with other, lesser forms at attachment, like 'liking.' Liking is easy; it takes little effort, it's fleeting, and it can be cheaply purchased. Mrs. Roach doesn't simply like *Pride and Prejudice*; she reveres its vision of marriage and love and friendship. Mr. McLean doesn't simply like trees; he stands in awe of nature's beauty and, for that reason, recoils at the thought of its destruction. The study of social movements isn't simply an academic exercise to Ms. Pressman: it expresses, I suspect, her belief in the transformative potentials of civic action. It's a statement of hope. I know I could write a similar sentence for each of my colleagues. They know what it means to revere - which is not to say that your teachers think about the things they do uncritically. It takes a lot of hard work and study and critical thought to think your way to reverence; the reverent mind is not an uncritical or lazy mind.

You might fairly ask at this point: where will such ideals, such values come from? Where do I find them? That, as it should be, as it must be, is a question only you can answer. You will need to discover these values yourself. In reflection and study. From your own reading in literature and philosophy and religion. From art. From history. From the example of great men and women

who have sought to live lives of principle and purpose. And from institutions and communities, like this school, that have tried to embody goodness and virtue.

The kind of educational quest I am recommending to you will not be easy. The world will push back. It is organized to push back. It's organized for distraction, thoughtlessness, isolation - not reflection and study and community.

And truth be told, many schools and colleges have simply given up on all this. Some are simply complacent and fail to encourage what I earlier called liberal thought. Others are academically rigorous, but stiff and narrow. These schools are soulless. They fail to offer young people the opportunity to believe in anything bigger than themselves or to engage in questions of enduring significance. These kinds of schools are afraid. They are afraid to talk about the things that matter, like courage and happiness and beauty, even though, we know, we all know, that these are the very things that give all of that course work, all these years in school, meaning and purpose.

But this one does; this school has a soul - and that is the source of its devastating and enduring power. It's educationally fearless. Mr. Roach, Mrs. Roach and the faculty they have led - with the support of all of you assembled here today - have staked their careers, their lives, on the idea that the most important things can be learned, that this is the time to begin learning them, and that they are best taught in a school like this one committed to the virtues of both charity and disciplined inquiry.

And you have been at the heart of this great project. More than that; you have helped create it. And what you have done here will endure. But by virtue of your experience here, you are also now stewards and caretakers of this vision. This, in fact, is what it means to be a graduate of St. Andrew's.

Your challenge, then,, is a simple one; your challenge is to stay true to this educational vision: to honor it; to pass it on; to extend and deepen it; and finally to find new and distinctive ways, ways that are completely and uniquely your own, to express it.

We wish you all the best. We believe in you. We are proud of you.