

Academic Convocation (August 31, 2026)

Matt Edmonds

Faith and Learning, Or Not

Almost a quarter-century ago I took part in a convocation ceremony similar to this one. It was my first week of college, and if my memory is correct—and it may very well not be—there was a brief ceremony, which was followed by several lectures. Each new student chose one of those lectures to attend.

One of the options was philosophy, something I had never had the opportunity to study in high school, so I thought—a bit naively—why not? What could go wrong? Well, let me tell you: in a philosophy lecture, *a lot* can go wrong, and fast. Within 5 minutes, I was so hopelessly confused that I remember *nothing* about the lecture itself, only that I walked out of the building thinking “I will *never* sign up for a philosophy course.”

All of which is to say, I understand that the stakes for me today are high. And, as chair of the history department, I have made what I think is a very responsible decision: I am going to take this opportunity to talk about every discipline *other than* history.

I’m kidding, of course. (Sort of.) What I do want to talk about is perhaps a cliché: *faith and learning*, which most of you know is our school’s motto. Mostly I want to talk about learning, but before I do, I’ll say a little bit about faith.

I am not a particularly religious person. You might even call me a skeptic. If faith is defined as belief, or trust, in the absence of evidence, I struggle with that. As those of you who have shared a classroom with me know, I do not operate on faith; I want to see your *footnotes*. And yet... I have spent most of my career in Episcopal schools. Why? I think this statement from the National Association of Episcopal Schools explains it: Episcopal schools “invite all who attend and work in them—Episcopalians and non-Episcopalians, Christians and non-Christians, people of no faith tradition—both to seek clarity about their own beliefs and religions and to honor those traditions more fully and faithfully in their own lives.” *To seek clarity about their own beliefs...* In other words, what Episcopal schools offer is an invitation, a choice. Faith (or not) and learning... *Or not.*

One unfortunate side effect of schools is that students—quite reasonably, but also quite wrongly—come to believe that learning is 1) something that happens in school; and 2) something that you *have* to do. So I’m here to remind you of a subversive fact. You don’t *have* to do anything, even if your teacher tells you to. You are an individual with free will, and everything involves choice. Homework? Your choice. Getting a good night’s sleep? Your choice. Breakfast sign-in? Your choice!

Of course, your choices do have consequences, and everyone else has choices, too. Don't want to do your homework, go to bed on time, or sign in at breakfast? Make these choices often enough, and you might be told it's time for you to *choose* a new school.

You have come to St. Andrew's—presumably—because you see yourself as one of the "curious, motivated, and diverse" young people described in our mission statement. (And if you don't yet see yourself that way, know that *someone* does; otherwise you would not have been accepted.) But try as we might to create a culture at St. Andrew's that isn't dominated by devices, we live in a world that makes it easy to *not* be curious *or* motivated—to disconnect from your own thoughts and drown yourself in an endless sea of "content" that is not the result of conscious thought but of an unconscious algorithm. In fact, I would argue, we live in a world that makes it increasingly easy to not *have* any thoughts.

Learning, on the other hand, means having thoughts of your own. And if we have thoughts, and we have the ability to make choices, we will inevitably have *different* thoughts. At some point, some of your ideas are bound to be incorrect, or at least unpopular; some of your unique interests will set you apart from certain peers. And when this happens, there will be strong social incentives for you to adjust your thinking—and sometimes you should. Not simply because you want to go along with the crowd, but because learning about and from the crowd convinces you—really convinces you—that there are better ideas out there. But sometimes the ideas "out there" are *not* better. Sometimes the idea in *your* head is the one that the world is lacking. The ultimate aim of learning is the ability to tell the difference. We call that wisdom, and *that* is the work of a lifetime.

What I'm getting at here is that *learning* makes us *human*. And all of us—from the youngest III former, whoever that happens to be, to the oldest faculty member—are on the same journey. From a biological perspective—and I trust that my more learned colleagues in the Science Department will correct me if I'm wrong—our brains have evolved in specific ways, over millions of years, that enable complex language and higher-order, abstract thinking. These essentially human skills have also enabled humans to create *artificial* intelligence, the phenomenon that is reshaping the world around us every day. Some might have us believe that artificial intelligence represents the very pinnacle of human ingenuity, and indeed, I have heard some people describe AI as if it is a new deity in which to put our faith. Again, I am skeptical, but either way, this brings us back to the idea of choice. Faith... or not. Learning... or not.

One of the great things about St. Andrew's, as Ms. McGrath likes to remind us periodically, is that in coming to this school, we have all—students and faculty alike—made a choice to be here. But I think she would agree that this is only the first of many important choices. Please do not make the mistake of thinking that, in showing up to St. Andrew's, you have already done the hard work. No, my friends—the work is just beginning. When I speak of the choice to learn (or not), I'm talking about a choice we make constantly, every day, every hour. How we engage on dorm or in the dining

hall. How we engage in the chapel or the classroom. How we engage when no one is watching, or when it's late and the paper due tomorrow morning isn't finished.

And let's be honest: we're not perfect. We all have bad days, days when the world has beaten us down a bit, days when we would rather just be left alone. And that's understandable. Sometimes we choose *not* to learn, and that's understandable, too. We're tired. We're human. The question is: what choice are we making *most* of the time?

Learning starts with recognizing that *it is a choice*, and that the choice is *ours*, which is, again, increasingly difficult. Companies have invested billions of dollars into reducing the friction in our lives, into making things that used to be a hassle as smooth and as seamless as possible. “*Buy Now*” with a single click. *Subscribe & Save*. *Buy two of that thing and just return the one that doesn't fit—you can drop it off at the UPS store, and you don't even need to put it back in the box!* And, in some ways, I appreciate this, because I, too, can be slothful at times. Of course, the more accustomed—I might even say, *addicted*—to these conveniences we become, the more they can be monetized.

That said, my main complaint with these innovations is neither their escalating cost nor their environmental impact (real though those are), but rather the insidious ways they shape us as people. The easier these everyday transactions become, the easier we expect *all of life* to become. What these companies are selling, then, is not *stuff*, first and foremost—it is an illusion, a seductive fantasy of a life without hassle. A life where we have less stress and more time to do the fun things we enjoy.

But there's a reason why “IRL” exists as a shorthand: on some level, we know that the digital world, the world of frictionless consumerism, is *not* real. It might give us a dopamine hit that feels good in the moment... but that life will not, cannot sustain us. So where can we turn for social, intellectual, moral sustenance?

Allow me to recommend *faith and learning*. These are not things you will master in the next one to four years; they are what philosopher James Carse has metaphorically called “infinite games”—games that have no winner, games in which the entire point is to keep the game going as long as you can.

To zoom in on learning, the kind of learning that we aim to do here is not training for a career, and although some might call this a “college prep school,” neither is it ultimately about preparing you for college. Instead it is preparation for life—*real life*. Indeed, to cite our mission statement, “St. Andrew's develops the independence, character, mind, and spirit of its students to prepare them for lives—*lives—of citizenship, service, and purpose.*” Of course, we anticipate that each of you will attend a great college—assuming you *choose* to do so, and that, too, is a choice—but notice that the document that defines our purpose as a school actually makes no mention of college. Getting into X University is a finite game; unfortunately, not everyone can win. But *learning* is an infinite game—anyone can play, and for as long as they choose to do so.

To quote the Roman philosopher Seneca, “It takes the whole of life to learn how to live, and—what will perhaps make you wonder more—it takes the whole of life to learn how to die.” We call our graduation ceremony *commencement*, a word which means *beginning*, because St. Andrew’s aims to provide a foundation for learning that will continue long after you leave this place, and in choosing to come here, you join a connected community of learners that you will carry with you until you die.

To come back to the choices we have discussed, one thing that faith and learning have in common is that, for most of us, they do not always come easily. Faith is accompanied by moments of doubt; learning, by moments of struggle. In fact, we might say that both require a conscious *choice*: faith requires a choice to believe in the face of doubt; learning requires a choice to persist in the face of adversity.

It might sound strange to say, but as many of you know—and as some of you are about to find out—at St. Andrew’s, we actually *create* adversity. We put obstacles in your path and challenge you to overcome them. Some people call this “rigor.” But we also—even more so, I think it’s fair to say—pride ourselves on supporting you through this process. We create the conditions for learning and then *invite you* to make a choice—to learn, or not. What we cannot do, as much as we may want to at times, is choose for you.

It is admittedly a difficult choice because it requires you to weigh a tangible short-term payoff against an intangible long-term promise. In other words, the deck is stacked. But the choice still exists, and although our human fallibility means that we will sometimes choose the short-term payoff, *humanity* depends on our willingness to choose the long-term promise.

This may sound grandiose, but think about it: if previous generations had not chosen big, ambitious, long-term goals—goals that required them to learn—we would not be where we are. I mean that in the sense of the species—the whole history of human development—but also quite literally: *we* would not be where we *are*. In founding and endowing this school 97 years ago, A. Felix duPont made a choice to put his wealth to long-term use and create a school that would serve generations of students who might not otherwise be able to attend boarding school. We are the beneficiaries of his choice. And now it is time for us to make our own choices.

I wish you all a wonderful year, and I have faith that you will—more often than not—choose learning.