

“One Final Lesson: Individuals Count”
Ridgeview Classical Schools’ Graduation 2004
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Graduation is never an easy time *emotionally* for either parents or teachers. For eighteen years in the case of parents, for anywhere from one to twelve or thirteen in the case of teachers, we say we are preparing children and young people for the opportunities and rigors of life. Day in and day out we teach them discrete lessons that we hope add up to a view of and purpose in life that will enable them to live happily and ethically on their own. And yet when the moment comes that they must leave us—the moment when our combined efforts have borne fruit, the moment when we realize they do not need us so much anymore—we want in the pit of our stomachs these young people to stay a little longer. It is at moments like these when I realize how my grandfather must have felt whenever we took leave of him after visiting for the weekends. My grandfather was simply a puppy or a baby jealous for time with me. No matter how long I stayed with him on trips and vacations—once I stayed an entire summer—he would always get sullen on my departure and say, “Are you leaving already? You just got here.” Being young, with people to meet and things to do, I never quite understood his sense of melancholy and loss. I do now.

As I look at these young men and women about to leave us, I cannot but ask the same question: Why are you going so soon?

Luke, where will we be without your performances?

Lindsey, how will we organize a dance without you?

Kali and Timothy, you just got here; it’s not right to give us only one year.

Izzy, Colorado Springs is a long, long way off.

David, we have plenty of middle-school boys who could profit by your genteel
influence rubbing off on them.

Matt—you know, Matt, when Mr. Carpine and I first saw you one summer day,
with spiked hair and all other sorts of spikes, we thought you might give
us trouble. How wrong could we be?

Paul, what will Ridgeview be without your erudition, your manly presence, your
. . . Bagpipes?

Abbye, can't you take just one more class from me? The classroom will have no
flavor without your saltiness, without your spunk.

If I sound rather attached to these young men and women, there is good cause for it. I have
had all but one of them in class, and two-thirds of them were in the first class I taught at
Ridgeview: Western Civilization II. Western Civilization II met in the “virtual classroom,”
which was not a classroom at all but a space with a bunch of chairs in the balcony and a postage-
stamp-sized whiteboard on an easel on which I wrote copious but apparently illegible words and
facts, for which the students were nonetheless responsible. In that class we attempted to figure
out how on the ashes and ruins of the Roman Empire civilization was born anew, how something
was made out of nothing. As we explored those themes, the teachers and board of directors and
parents and, most important, the students likewise made Ridgeview into a school, a great school,
a classical school, made something out of nothing.

But the moment has come when these founding students must leave this school, and the most
we can do is offer them a hearty congratulations for their achievement and perhaps one final

lesson. What lesson can we possibly offer these young men and women who have already thought such deep thoughts, who have already written so many papers, who have already said so much in class, and who today, as they embark upon a new life, show such great hope and promise?

That lesson is simple. At least it is simple to understand but by no means easy to believe or to prove in one's own actions. Our lesson today is nothing other than the summary of every class these students have taken, of every book they have read, and of every problem they have worked out, at Ridgeview. And it is a most appropriate lesson for a school that is sending nine graduates into the world, all of whom we know intimately, rather than legions (some might say hordes) of anonymous persons. That lesson is that *individuals count*. Individual men and women count, and therefore they are not to be discounted in the course of human events, in the great achievements and crises in our world. This time last year I spoke of the good and the beautiful and the true. That phrase is a kind of shorthand for all that is lovely and noble in our world, for the things that make life worthwhile and happy. But the good and the beautiful and the true do not constitute some ready formula that can be conjured up in a test tube or a simple tale that can be packaged between the covers of a book, at least not just one book. The good and the beautiful and the true are the result of human effort, of human courage, of human thought, and of more than human faith. In short, the good and the beautiful and the true constitute a way of life. Every human being is given the opportunity of living a life, at least for a time. But the way human beings live those lives determine the character—the goodness or badness, the blandness or the brilliance—of our civilization and our times. Let me explain.

In Western Civilization II, my students and I were trying to make sense of how civilization could emerge from darkness and ruin, how something could be made out of nothing. For there was nothing after the fall of the Roman empire. There were no laws, no governments, no signs of culture, no schools. We began our study with only a few monks being led by a singular notion of God and a few knights being led by the singular notions of a few ladies, a few monks and knights who wanted to bring light to the prevailing darkness. To give these students a sense of how a few monks and a few knights and a few ladies could have had such a dynamic influence on the course of world events, I assigned a little-known essay by the great Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield titled, "The Role of the Individual in History." In this little-known essay, Professor Butterfield made a huge claim. He held that history, that is, the human story, does not move according to either the whims or iron laws of systems or because events with pre-ordained names such as the fall of Rome or the French Revolution decide to happen at a given time. Instead, history is the sum of innumerable biographies; it is the collective effect of individual men and women either doing or not doing their duty. If this theory is true, then the most sublime moments in history as well as the most depraved are not the result of fate or chance or the hypnotic powers of any one man, but the natural consequences of how individual men and women choose to live their lives.

Butterfield's theory, then, holds that individuals count in history. Yet we cannot take it lightly. We should not come away with the glib attitude of the self-esteem manuals, which say, "I'm just as important as anyone else no matter what I do or don't do." That statement is not true. That statement is the doctrine of inertia and laziness and a false sense of worth. Rather, history has shown time and time again that those individuals who strive the hardest, who demand

the most of themselves, who stand up to be counted, as it were, count the most. Professor Butterfield went so far as to say that a change in world history “could be produced through the conscious purpose of twenty men, none of them possessing artificial advantages at the beginning of the story—twenty men united by a sense of mission.” We are about to graduate our eighteenth person, a number pretty close to twenty, our eighteenth person who has demanded much of himself, or herself, by going to this school, who has not taken the easy path but the path of most resistance. Will these few graduates and those that follow be able to change the course of our history? If so, will they change it for the better?

The idea that individuals count in history places enormous responsibility on the shoulders of every individual, especially every thinking individual: everyone who knows that diseases are only cured when an individual scientist discovers a cure, that wars are only won when an individual general plans and executes a viable strategy, that jobs are only created when an individual entrepreneur decides to take a risk and start a company, that love only exists when a man and a woman decide to love each other and to stay in love, that a child is only raised properly when a mother and a father commit their lives to raising him so. When these efforts are not forthcoming, when individuals choose not to pursue the good and the beautiful and the true, civilization does not reach its heights; life is not so lovely.

Since these students began at Ridgeview—I remind you that was in September of 2001—we have seen many events in our world that reveal the great potential for good or for evil in human affairs: from the destruction of the twin towers, to the removal of the Taliban from Afghanistan, to the scandals of the Catholic Church or the mutual fund industry, to the advent of the human

genome project, to the landing on the planet Mars, to the building of new schools in this country and in Iraq, to the depraved pictures of Abu Ghraib. Of course, we tend to hear more about the bad things than the good given human beings' fascination with the catastrophic. While these events have been unfolding, these students before you have been studying their English, their history, their science, and their math, working hard to learn things and to make the grade, working to prepare themselves for this world of so much trial and so much error. As I have watched the world scene and at the same time watched these students in class, I could not keep from wondering: "What if an Abbye Bruhin had been there, what if a Paul Provencher had been in charge, would not things have come out better, have come out right, even if we had never heard about it later?"

The moment is coming, is coming soon, when these young men and women will be the ones in charge in our classrooms and our operating rooms, who will be speaking in our law courts and from our pulpits, who will write in our newspapers and our journals. And they will, I am confident, not act according to some base passion or momentary and partial interest, but will make their decisions and take their stands on behalf of the good and the beautiful and the true. Their coming of age, then, while it may leave us with a momentary sense of loss, the loss of their childhood, must fill us with a stronger and more abiding sense of hope: the hope that they will leave the world a better place than they found it. Having seen their work and their thought, I can assure you that I have a lot more hope for the world than I did three years ago. These young men and women are the source of that hope. And for that I thank them.

With this final lesson must come—you must forgive me for this, for it is my last chance—one final assignment. That assignment is to realize the power and capacity of the individual man or woman, the individual who devotes his intellect and his courage, his dreams and his sweat, to the good and the beautiful and the true. Your assignment, former students of Ridgeview, is to go into the world in your various capacities and callings and to slay the dragon, if not of the “thou shalt,” at least of ignorance and vice and disorder. You must find some small corner of the earth to call your own and in that place do deeds both noble and beautiful, make something out of nothing. I shall not define precisely your particular deeds or place. The time has passed when your teachers can define and direct and perhaps circumscribe your thoughts and actions for you. The individual who counts in history and in human endeavor must define his own cause and make his own moment. We all are watching expectantly, hopefully, for you to make yours. Thank you.