

**“From Breaking Rocks to Building Cathedrals: The Conversation of Ridgeview’s
Third Graduating Class”**

Graduation Address 2005: Ridgeview Classical Schools

Dr. T. O. Moore

Across the nation at this time of year valedictorians speak and salutatorians speak, principals stand up and say nice and encouraging things about going out into the world, boys and girls walk across the stage when they hear their names called and receive a somewhat important piece of paper called a diploma. We might say that graduation from high school is a universal rite of passage in America. All young men and women go through it, and they go through it in pretty much the same way. Or do they?

There is an old story, probably apocryphal, about three men working in a quarry who were asked what they were doing. The first man said that he was breaking big rocks into little ones. The second man said he was making a living. The third man said that he was building a cathedral. Now notice that all these statements are true but all quite different. The first man did not look beyond the task and the sweat of the moment. We can imagine what went through his mind: “I’ve broken up fifty rocks today; I have fifty more to go,” or something to that effect, from one hour to the next, day in and day out, for his whole life. The second man extended his thoughts somewhat. For him, working in the quarry meant supporting himself and probably his wife and children. And of course, supporting oneself and one’s family is a worthy business, enlisting the virtues of responsibility and perseverance in some measure. But in this man’s mind we see an entirely personal objective, perhaps a grudging admission that man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, without any indication of aims beyond one’s immediate concerns. The third man’s answer is different. He is building *a cathedral*. Make no mistake: he is breaking big rocks into little ones, too, and no doubt making a living. But the ultimate end of his endeavor, however backbreaking and tedious in its daily routine, is to offer an encounter with the divine. Ultimately, his life is not about sweat or necessity; it’s about rapture. Thus, not only are these men’s answers different, but their lives are different. While none of these lives is lived in vain, they vary in the extent of their devotion to the good and the beautiful and the true. Their words measure the distance between the thoughtless and the thoughtful, between the pedestrian and the sublime.

In the same vein, I wonder how *our* students would describe the ceremony of graduation taking place today in contrast to students graduating across the nation. The words of Miss Tillson and Miss Dubler are no small indication of that difference. Indeed, I wonder how our students would describe the work they did at Ridgeview. For they did have to work, you know. We do not give degrees lightly at this school. How would they describe the many, many hours they spent at home, reading and writing and preparing for the following day's lessons? An ordinary sort of student might say, "I am doing homework." A better sort of student, perhaps even the "honor roll student" we read so much about on bumper stickers, might say, "I am trying to make good grades." But our students, perhaps not at first, but certainly by now, might have rather different answers to the questions parents ask to keep up with their children. "Josh, it's time for dinner; what are you doing up there in your room?" "Ben, why were you up so late last night? Your light was still on at eleven." "Chad, what are you working on now?" "Kristen, you seem preoccupied; what's on your mind?" Their answers: "Mom, I'm trying to figure out why the Russian people would have allowed themselves to be ruled over by such cruel tyrants and by such a perverse ideology." "Dad, I can't figure out why Kurtz has no self-control, no regard for life, why he is a hollow man." "Oh, nothing really, Mom. I'm writing a paper on these rules and these principles of morality C. S. Lewis calls *The Tao*. I think he means a combination of conscience and tradition, but I haven't started my paper yet, so I'm not sure." "You wouldn't believe what we're learning about in biology: these emergent diseases that can wipe out entire populations because people have not yet developed an immunity. That's scary." These various responses add up, if I am not mistaken, to one general answer that tells us what our hard-working students have been doing with their books day in and day out, night in and night out, for these years. They have been trying to understand the nature of man and the nature of the universe. They have been building cathedrals of the mind and spirit: cathedrals not to serve as mere monuments and museums, relics, if you will, like most of the cathedrals now in Europe, but cathedrals in which to live and work and worship, cathedrals in which they have learned how to know and to serve the good and the beautiful and the true.

There is a story to be told here: a story of the steady march from breaking rocks to building cathedrals, a story of transformation, a story, perhaps, of self-transcendence. It is not the story you will learn from the directors in Hollywood who make their predictable and sophomoric movies of adolescent life. It is not the story you will find on MTV, whose mercenary purpose is to turn every teenager into a drug-using, ill-bred, catatonic consumer of bad music and bad morals. It is not a story you will see coming out of the nation's capital or out of its various outlets of information and news. It is not a story that you will read about perhaps even in the *Coloradoan*. Or perhaps you will. But it is a story nonetheless, a good story, a story that needs to be told.

This story begins with a few adolescents, perhaps a bit more curious, a bit more daring than their peers, but adolescents nonetheless, with all the passions and proclivities of their age. And these adolescents come to this building, or some earlier version of it, to do what? To read books, to read good books, even great books, under the tutelage of their teachers. And they find the books pretty interesting, pretty—to quote more than one of them—“cool,” or is it “rad” or “chill” these days? I forget which. And they become pretty good readers. At least, that's what the numbers tell us. And we must have numbers, mustn't we, Mr. Williams, with all the objectivity and assurance of science that numbers provide? The numbers tell us that our curious adolescents are the best readers in the state of Colorado in their freshman year and the best writers in the state in their sophomore year. One hundred per cent of them can persuade beleaguered CSAP graders that they are not totally without sense and the ability to turn a phrase.

But imagine no world of perfect quiet and contentment. For these restless adolescents, these freshmen, have no tradition of academic achievement, no well-worn path, to follow. They must, with students just one or two years their senior, make their own traditions and their own paths under the guidance and rules and hard grading of their teachers. Questions emerge, complaints even. Can I get into college with a “B” or a “C” on my report card? Why must *all* the classes be so hard? The homework is too much. The dress code is too strict. Why hasn't anyone made any fun for us, as they readily manufacture fun at other schools? This porridge is too hot. That porridge is too cold.

Two prodigal children—a son and a daughter—leave for a time, only to return within a semester. Others consider it. Some leave and never return. Even the most diligent among them wonder if the grass is greener on the other side. I have recently learned that a lady who stands before you today speaking of her love of learning got essentially nothing, nothing, I tell you, out of my lectures and discussions on the great British statesman and critic of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke. And that should not surprise us, since Burke is the voice of tradition and rules and boundaries and restraints and tested maxims and civilization and laws, things the young lady was not so sure about in those days. Thus these young lions (*à la* Nietzsche) do battle with the dragon of the “thou shalt.” And they find that the dragon fights back, that the “thou shalt” are not hackneyed and tired phrases. Or what is more accurate, the young lions have a conversation with the dragon, and they find that the dragon is just, or at least clever and unwavering and very much alive. I am happy to say that years later a Raskolnikov-like dream comes over the young lady who had gotten so little from my lectures, pointing her back to her Burke and ahead to her own critique of the philosophy of Nietzsche, a critique that embraces tradition and rules and boundaries and restraints and tested maxims and civilization and laws, or, in Burke’s phrase, “manners and civilization and all the good things that go with manners and with civilization.”

As we look back on the efforts and accomplishments of this graduating class in preparation for their moving out into the world—not their preparation, but as every parent knows, *our* preparation—we must ask what kept these students here. What kept them in this new school without too many amenities, this small school with so few students, this hard school requiring so much work? What kept these students here these four years; what changed in them; what brought others here to join them; and what now distinguishes them from those students across the nation who are merely moving across the stage and picking up a piece of paper, who are merely graduating? Moreover, what will they take with them into the world that perhaps many, many others do not have, that unless lit by a spark of substance in some select college or some odd class, they may never have?

The answer to these questions I believe can be found in a single word: *conversation*. For if I had to summarize the efforts and motivations of this graduating class in a pronouncement of a few words, I would say simply, “They came for the conversation.” Now I must explain what I mean by conversation. Today what passes for conversation is often “small talk,” irrelevant banter about the weather (without any knowledge of earth science, mind you), or about which sports team won which game, or particularly among adolescents these days, a monosyllabic exchange over what passes for cool and what does not. Conversation also often ends up being idle gossip or malicious rumor. “Don’t bring up religion or politics,” we are told, because doing so might “spoil the conversation.” Conversation is something we do to be nice, to pass the time, to get the low-down on our neighbors, but it is not meant to amount to very much.

And yet there is an older view, a much older view, of conversation that insists, “In the beginning was *the Word*.” This view holds that an individual’s life must be judged by his conversation and his conversation by his life. Aristotle held that what distinguishes men from animals is the power of speech. Through speech, men come together to talk about what is just and unjust; they discuss and decide what constitutes the best life and then try to build that life for themselves in a large community called a polis. Conversation, then, cannot exclude, but must be chiefly about politics and religion, as well as justice and laws and morality and beauty and science and, in a word, civilization. So far from being irrelevant banter, through conversation we arrive at the truth of things. If such is the case, then should not the education of youth be concerned chiefly with their conversation? Should not the goal be to train young people to express themselves logically, forcefully, and truthfully in the various arts and sciences?

Four years ago, we founded this school on a proposition. We held that you could take adolescents and open up their minds and hearts to truth and beauty simply by having them converse with the great thoughts and deeds and discoveries of the past. The greatest test to that proposition came in the ninth grade—for two reasons. First, the spirit, or *thumos*, of the fourteen- and fifteen-year-old adolescent is in high gear, while reason and self-control have only begun to kick in. To make things worse, at one point the boys in

this class vastly outnumbered the girls. Second, the books in the ninth-grade part of the curriculum were the hardest or at least the most unfamiliar: Homer and Plutarch and Thucydides and even Goethe on plants, books not normally read until college these days, if at all. So how did these graduates before you today live up to that proposition? How did they approach what we call at this school “The Great Conversation”? They did not just stick a toe in or wade out slowly. They dove into the Great Conversation headfirst. And for four years they have been swimming into ever deeper and deeper waters, into better and better conversations. These are the students who as freshmen in the first year of the school would begin the class with no teacher—those times Mr. Hild, coming from Longmont, got slowed down by the snow. This is the class that considered it an insult when we wanted to bring in a substitute whenever a teacher was out. They could carry on the conversation on their own just fine, thank you. This is the class that gave you the JUNTO: not a military junto because we are not a military school, but a conversational junto based upon the model provided by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography*. Students would gather together on a Sunday night, putting aside all their homework and other activities, to talk about matters of culture and politics and art. What has been manifested many times over the years is that these young men and women were made for this conversation because human beings are made for this conversation, and these young people were discovering their humanity.

“So what are you saying, Mr. Principal, that these students just, just *talked*?” Yes, they talked. They talked and discussed and disputed and argued with each other and asked questions and ventured answers. They, of course, did other things besides. They sang and played music; they painted; they did experiments; they solved difficult math problems; they learned languages; they gave speeches and they wrote papers, things that are all part and parcel of this Great Living, Human Conversation. But chiefly they talked: not because it was expected of them or because their grade depended upon it or because they were cocky boys who thought they knew everything; well, maybe at first. No, they talked because they had something to say. And isn’t that why Socrates talked, because he had something to say? Or Jesus? Something about the nature of humanity and the nature of the universe. Something about the good and the beautiful and the true.

As we send these young men and women out into the world, we must take pride in their achievements, must savor the memories they gave us, and must give all of them thanks for the school they helped create. At the same time, we cannot be remiss in our duties by failing to give them a final assignment, a new proposition to work on and to prove as long as it may take them. Call it the Quintilian or the Churchillian proposition. It is that the superior word leads to the superior deed, that language is action, that the great orator is the good man or woman, that civilization can be saved by a lion that roars, that the breaker of rocks who calls himself a builder of cathedrals does not lose his head in the clouds as he looks to the heavens for truth and direction but that he actually breaks rocks better than his fellows in the quarry. On this proposition rests the very foundation of this school, of our own cathedral of the mind and heart. I cannot help but wonder whether on this proposition rests the fate of humanity. These graduates have proven the first proposition, that young people can learn from and converse with the greats; we eagerly await their solution to the second, that they can imitate them. With a great deal of faith, an abundance of hope, and an immeasurable amount of love, we look forward to following the lives and conversation of these few men and women. They will be sorely missed, and I for one, will miss their conversation.