

Ridgeview Classical Schools
Graduation Ceremony 2006
Dr. T. O. Moore
“Arete and Happiness”

High-school graduation has become a very particular moment in our culture. It is as close to anything we have in this nation to a rite of passage, to a formal dubbing of the squire that releases him from a kind of apprenticeship and confers on him the privileges and responsibilities of the knight. Perhaps this inauguration into adulthood and independence is not complete until yet another graduation—for many—four years hence. But certainly high-school graduation is far more universal than graduation from college and, in the mind of the teenager, far more liberating. Graduation marks both an end and a beginning, and as such is an occasion filled with emotions, both happy and sad. From one angle, the graduate has his whole life in front of him and enters a world full of promise and opportunity. From another angle, if the actuarial tables are correct, he has already lived a quarter of his life. Many of his habits, capacities, and desires are already fixed. This time of life, then, is what Churchill said in another context, “not the end, not the beginning of the end, but the end of the beginning.”

At such a moment, it is fitting that we salute the young graduates for a job well done and urge them to be well in the future. Parents and relatives and teachers and principals must wonder, however, what gift, what piece of advice, what token of our love and esteem is most appropriate at this juncture, what words might serve to sum up the opening chapters of their lives and guide them throughout the subsequent annals of their existence. If we could wish them to have anything in the future, what would it be?

Would it be money or success or fame as the world defines these sometimes fickle goddesses? Would it be fortune, perhaps even more fickle still? Would we wish them to have above all a life of ease, or at least a life easier than that of their parents who might have had an easier life than *their* parents? Would we urge them to continue their pursuit of education, and thus to commit themselves to the eternal Ridgeview, which, like one of Marlowe's stories, never ends? Or would we simply ask them to be happy? And what, after all, is happiness?

While I am sure these young men and women will experience no small measure of success and fortune, and may even find fame, and will definitely continue to climb the steep intellectual mountains of the eternal Ridgeview, the pursuit in life I hope and expect them to embrace the most fully is that of excellence, for in excellence they will find the surest and most direct route to happiness. Excellence, of course, requires some definition, as does happiness. Excellence is a word you hear a lot these days, especially and mistakenly in connection with education. There is scarcely a public school in the country that does not try to stake its claim on excellence. And yet these claims often ring hollow. They sound like so many Coke commercials promising that our consuming carbonated sugar water will bring us somehow closer to what the ancients called "the good life." Excellence is a word so bandied about by everyone that it has become inflated currency, applied to things not in the least select or extraordinary.

The true meaning of excellence is in fact what our graduates have been studying for the last four years. And these graduates know that to ascertain any truth in a world with

so little rudder and compass about the important things one should begin by confronting the ancients and their languages. The Greek word for excellence is *arete*, which in the Greek actually signifies two things: excellence and virtue. Thus, to the Greeks the attaining of excellence without virtue is unthinkable; the two are united in speech and thought. A word closely associated with excellence is *eudaimonia*, normally translated as happiness but really meaning, “having a good spirit” or perhaps Socrates would say, “having a good conscience.” According to Aristotle, one must have excellence and virtue to achieve happiness and the good life. The notion that one must be virtuous to gain happiness has a long history in the West; it became almost a platitude in the eighteenth century, the age of our nation’s founding, an age of vibrant classical education. Thus, when Jefferson, an exceptional classicist, said that human beings are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights and that among these are the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, what he meant by happiness was closely connected to the pursuit of virtue.

What are the consequences for these graduates if they adopt such an understanding of excellence, of happiness, and therefore of human life? First, they must recognize the somewhat daunting truth that happiness can only be measured over an entire lifetime. Aristotle went so far as to say that no man can be counted happy until he has died, partly because human beings are subject to the vicissitudes of fortune their whole lives but mostly because a person must prove his excellence, his virtue, over the span of his life, not just in a few moments, by the uttering of a few accepted clichés, or through an occasional foray into philanthropy.

The second thing they must realize is that their ideas of happiness may very well conflict with those of the prevailing culture. I have little doubt that if you would ask most teenagers these days to define happiness, they would have little to say about virtue and a lot more to say about fun. Fun, of course, is quite different from happiness. It is a momentary taste of pleasure, rarely connected with sustained effort, hardly blamable as a release from our busy lives, but then neither worthy of being elevated to the status of a pursuit or a quest or an ideal. The word fun, interestingly enough, comes from the Old English for “fool.” The fool in Anglo-Saxon times, was, of course, the jester, the clown who made the king laugh when his majesty could afford to take his mind off the labors of fighting wars and judging disputes in his realm. The *fon*, or fool, was not to be taken seriously. His life was literally a joke.

Now I know what you may be thinking: that I am going to say that these young men and women on the stage today have pursued the ancient rather than the twenty-first century understanding of happiness by coming to a school that on philosophical principle allows nobody any fun. And in thinking so you would be half right. You would not be entirely right because they have had fun from time to time, whether satirizing my noble efforts of requiring young men to shave, or combining all of my various addresses to the students into one “don’t drop your pants” speech, or inaugurating the first annual battle-of-the-sexes football game in which the young men generously duct-tape their arms to their sides, or providing the school with its first, slightly less-than-Olympic-sized swimming pool. These witticisms have been more than fun; they have been clever.

Our students' chief occupation, however, their leading passion, has been the noble and disciplined inquiry into the good life. These students have shown the maturity to choose hard study over careless fun, to prefer the examined life to blissful ignorance. They have embraced habits of study that have allowed them to dig deeply into the sciences, into languages, into the great literature of the Western tradition, and into the logical and beautiful world of mathematics; they have already dug more deeply into these subjects than most people in our society, even most college graduates, ever will. The excellence, the virtue, required to attain such habits of study and of mind is not often celebrated in our modern culture. Producers and directors in Hollywood pore over the high-school sports pages to find some inspiring story that might be turned into blockbuster movie. They blithely ignore a seventeen-year-old who breezes through advanced calculus and differential equations in college, or a high-school student who writes complex poetry modeled on the ancients, or a senior who directs her own Shakespearean plays. Intellectual excellence is, unfortunately, rarely offered as a spectator sport, either because its victories are quieter or because the world's would-be spectators are too ill-prepared to understand intellectual virtue.

And yet the victories won by the human mind cannot be ignored when won over an entire lifetime. The victories of the human mind and of the human soul are those which determine our true excellence as human beings, as thinking and moral creatures, and therefore these victories govern our chances for happiness, for that self-approval that comes only with knowing that our lives are endowed with purpose and meaning. With

the help of their parents and their teachers, these young people have already begun to strive for such happiness through their longing for the true and the beautiful and for the good and the heroic.

One of the favorite plays in the age we have come to know as the Enlightenment was based on a heroic struggle in ancient times against tyranny and injustice. The play, Addison's *Cato*, recreating the final moments of Cato's life and his resistance against Caesar, was performed at Valley Forge at General Washington's command. Washington's favorite lines from that play, put into the mouth of Cato's Stoical son, guided the father of our nation his entire life:

'Tis not in mortals to command success,
But we'll do more, Sempronius, we'll deserve it.

We cannot know whether our great graduates today will command success in their lives. We can say with some certainty, however, that should they continue to devote themselves to lives of intellectual and moral excellence that they will deserve success; they will deserve that most elusive of human pursuits, happiness.