

**Graduation Address: “The Call to Greatness”**  
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Although high-school graduation is a cause for joyous celebration, an occasion to congratulate students for their work and accomplishments and to cheer them on as they enter the world on a more independent footing, it is also a tough time emotionally for those who are a part of it. Young people who have known each other for years, who have formed fast friendships and whose happiness has come to depend on each other, will go off into the world in different directions. They will take on new challenges and make new friends and find new ways to exercise their talents. But the life they have known—its challenges and friends and activities—woven tightly into the unique setting of high school, will pass from the world of the here and now into the more distant realm of fond memory.

The emotions of parents on such an occasion I cannot begin to know because I have not yet had such an experience. Yet I can imagine that realizing that the child whose diapers you changed, to whom you read children’s books again and again, with whom you played hide-and-seek and catch and hopscotch, and over time who gradually grew to your height and began to hold his or her own during dinner-time conversation: to realize that this living being you have known for so long as your child has become a man or woman must amount to a supreme moment of awe at the wonders of nature and of love.

Today, however, I speak not as a student or a parent but as a teacher. And I speak of the special relationship of teachers, books, and students that constitutes education and culminates in the rite of passage known as graduation. To understand fully why we are here today we must consider for a moment the significance and purpose of teachers, books, and students.

Before you, parents, you see your children’s teachers. They are good teachers. Our culture, of course, serves up many jokes about teachers, jokes about how little money they make or how they supposedly have their summers off (and I guess teachers who do not read books actually do have their summers off) or how those who cannot *do* end up teaching. Perhaps some of these jokes are warranted, given the state of most of the schools in this nation. When done properly, though, the calling of teacher is arguably, other than that of warrior, the most ambitious and bold and even necessarily offensive of human endeavors. For the teacher is the one who says to other human beings, usually the young but often the old as well: “You are unformed, you are ignorant, you do not know things, you are incomplete human beings; and since others cannot or choose not to teach you, you must learn from me.” That is a tough message to deliver, and not one that many human beings, much less teenagers, normally welcome. The ambition, the boldness, the offensiveness of education in wanting to make others better, to perfect them, though they may not want to be better, explain why the two greatest teachers the world has known, Jesus and Socrates, were both put to death. They offended too many people. Their message did not suit in their own times the unruliness, the prejudices, the pride of man. And yet their teaching persisted beyond their time on earth. The stones which the builders rejected became the cornerstones supporting the temple of truth and beauty.

However ambitious and bold and offensive the teacher must be, teaching is also one of the most humbling of human experiences. To begin with, the teacher who tells others that they are imperfect and unformed suspects that he himself is far from perfect, far from a complete human being. Further, the teacher must know that he cannot find completion without his students; without them he is but a half, and a half is always less than a whole. He seeks students not because he wants to sell them something; and those who try to make education into a business always fail. A true teacher needs something more from his students than their fees and he has more to give them than a simple service or a product. As Plato understood, the life and breath of education differ considerably from mere commercial exchange. Rather, teaching, like parenting, must begin and end in love. And in a way, there is nothing more humbling than love, than the realization that you have a fundamental need for and your happiness depends on

another human being. The teacher loves his students and therefore longs to make their lives better, and by making their lives better, he finds meaning and purpose in his own life. Even more humbling to the teacher is his realization at some point that the better he performs his life-enobling work, the less his students will need him. As the teacher's love for his students increases, their need of him and his instruction becomes less and less. If he has done his work well, after a few years, the teacher will not be needed at all. The truly masterful teacher will see one day his students surpass him.

Teachers must have something to teach. Therefore they need books. For however long your children have been coming to our school, in many cases for six years, in others for two or three or four, they have been doing the same thing virtually every day. They have been going to class, opening their books, and talking about these books. Whether these several years have been time well spent depends obviously on what is in these books. Now I use the case of art, the students have opened their eyes to the wonders of nature in order to capture its beauty or its strangeness. With music, they have opened their ears to the harmonies of different rhythms and sounds. The purpose of the fine arts can easily be seen in the beauty that results from their practice. With regard to the mathematics and the sciences these students have labored over, I doubt whether anyone would question whether the time has been well spent. In these classes, the students have obviously been applying their reason to natural phenomena or to the wonderful world of numbers in order to understand the physical order of the universe. The rational understanding of that universe gives us a freedom in and a power over our world. As essential to human flourishing as are that freedom in and power over our physical world, such power and freedom must yet be subject to something higher. Recently an astute young man I know named Luke Heyliger made the point that without a higher end, without what the Greeks called a *telos*, the sciences can be directed to inhumane and destructive purposes. It is thus reassuring to know that such humane and creative young men as Mr. Heyliger and some of his fellow classmates will dedicate their lives to the sciences.

At Ridgeview, to find the ends of the sciences, to find indeed the ends of human life, we go to what are commonly called the great books: the best of literature, history, and philosophy as written in the beautiful and noble languages of the world. The students on this stage have been immersed in the great books of the Western world, from the Homer and Plutarch they encounter as ninth-graders to modern authors such as Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, and Conrad with whom they wrestle in their senior year. There have been many reasons given for why young people living in the modern world, what has come to be called the Information Age, should invest themselves in these great, old books. It has been said that the great books give us a kind of cultural capital or cultural literacy that allows us to find more success in the world. It has been said that the great books allow us to know our tradition. It has been said that the great books give us something better to do with the increasing amount of free time we have than mindlessly watching television or playing video games. It has further been said that without reading the great books we can scarcely know who we are, since human beings are so powerfully shaped by the thoughts and mentalities of the past. In addition to these reasons, I suspect there are a few people who have read great works simply so they can show off their erudition, because they have found success at playing the game of "who knows the most." And I also know that there are antiquaries who amuse themselves by sporting with the diverting accounts of the past.

As compelling as may be some of these reasons for reading the great books of our tradition, as much as our human tendencies towards pride or amusement may direct every one of us to some extent in our intellectual pursuits, these reasons do not fully do justice to what is to be found in these books nor to the deepest longings in human nature. The great books must be read—the great books are great—because their subject is greatness and these books call us—their readers, teachers, and students—to the greatness that is possible in man. The great books demand us to know, to love, and to practice what is good, beautiful, and true in our world. In other words, fully embracing the great books means much more than being a mere spectator to their plot lines and lines of argument. Fully embracing the great books means acting on their

commands. A liberal education is not just an attempt to put a lot of fancy information into our heads. A liberal education is an effort to strengthen our souls so that we may do noble deeds throughout our lives.

You see, there is all the difference in the world between reading to attain erudition and reading to form a plan of action. The first sort of reader will look at Aristotle's *Ethics* and learn that Aristotle said this and that about virtue and happiness. This reader may be able to say a lot of clever things about how much Aristotle agreed or disagreed with his teacher Plato and how both of these philosophers compare to modern philosophers. The second, active reader studies Aristotle's account of the great-souled man so that he may himself become great-souled, so he may become the man who in Aristotle's words "thinks himself worthy of great things and is really worthy of them." Such a reader does not just learn the definitions of, but labors to acquire the great virtues: prudence, courage, temperance, and justice. Acquiring those virtues is the end for Aristotle. As he tells us in the first book of the *Ethics*, "The purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us." The Scriptures put this same sentiment even more succinctly and more poetically into the imperative: "Go thou and do likewise." This sort of reading, this reading for action, equips us, encourages us, ennobles us to do good in the world. The active reader of Plato's *Republic* learns to combine in his own soul both fierceness and gentleness, those two qualities that seem so opposed, in order to become a courageous guardian of his own nation and its people. The active students of Washington's and Churchill's lives internalize the lessons in prudence, courage, and justice these heroes offer and then enlist themselves in the great crises, the great fights for freedom in their own time. The active reader of Jane Austen becomes a keen observer of human nature, learns to distinguish good men from rogues, so that when Mr. Darcy comes, and he will come, she will be able to recognize him, to enchant him, to marry him, and thus secure both love and happiness.

The great books call us to be great warriors, great saints, great scientists and philosophers, great healers and poets and builders, and, not least, great wives and husbands, mothers and fathers. These are not merely professions that I list; I speak of ways of being, of programs for doing noble and beautiful things in the world. The great books are an idle pursuit if they result only in passive wishing for the good; these books are a living force in the world if they lead their students to an active creating and defending of the good. The great books call on their readers to be great-souled. They call on you, the men and women of Ridgeview, to be what the Apostle Paul described as "all things to all men." Sometimes, they call on you simply to be good.

These books teach us how to think, how to believe, how to hope, and how to love. They guide us in knowing when to make peace and when to wage war. They urge us at times to be just and at others to be merciful. They teach us how to live and how to die.

And now I should say something about these fine students. To say that these graduates are among the best and brightest students in the nation is merely to state the obvious: a simple fact that can be captured with numbers. To realize that they are the greatest of heart does more justice to their souls. The young men and women before you today have read the great books. And these Ridgeview graduates, whom I've had the pleasure of knowing and teaching and loving these past few years, are anything but flat-souled. They have not only read the great books; they have read them with purpose, with imagination, and with heart. They have fought with Achilles; they have sailed with Aeneas; they have wept with Dido. These students are still young and as such have not yet proven themselves great. Their parents and their teachers know that they still have much study, much work, and much hardship ahead of them. Yet they bear in their character and their learning the unmistakable promise of greatness. These young men and women cannot be fooled by the false sophistication of modern man, the last man, but are full of spirit and longings and hope. For these several years they have given their minds and their hearts over to conversations about the good life and how it might be achieved in their lives. As a result, they have a head start on doing the good, and the beautiful, and the true.

I could give many instances collected from the past six years that would illustrate these students' love of learning and of life. Perhaps the first time I was amazed by their maturity and work ethic was when two young seventh-graders, Candice Niquette and Sarah Erthal, came to me at the beginning of the second semester to ask whether they could, in addition to completing the remedial math class they were in, work on their own to do all of the pre-algebra class and thus be placed into Algebra I the following year. They only requested to meet with Mr. Yu occasionally. I gave my permission, probably thinking that such a laudable desire could not long hold sway over thirteen-year-old hearts. And yet by the end of the year, through hard work and some assistance from Mr. Yu, they had done what they had committed themselves to, and in the following year were two of the strongest students in algebra. Not surprisingly, several years later, they asked permission to do a similar self-paced program, this time by completing all of German II on their own because they had found first-year German too easy. This time I did not take their request so lightly. Other students in this class have shown a similar dedication to their studies and drive for self-improvement. Making up entire years of work in single semesters has seemed to become the rule rather than the exception. The stories of Katelyn Miller, Tara Mertens, Elin Moorman, and David Wiederhold in this regard are simply epic. Many of these students have given up their lunches to take classes they just couldn't miss out on and have begged their teachers to offer more electives, not so they could pile up credits and grades, but so they could read more deeply into the literature that feeds the soul. Cassandra Fink and Tim Dwyer skipped their lunch period their freshman year so they could take rhetoric. They were allowed to eat in the class, however, which is why Tim crunched his potato chips through about every speech given in that class. And then there are the students who initially did not want to come to Ridgeview, students such as Kat Wyns and Jonathan Asbury. They had simply heard too many rumors about us; perhaps they thought they could not make good grades at Ridgeview. Or they thought they could find better education in brand new schools costing tens of millions of dollars. But the chronic cursing in the halls by the other students brought Kat and Jon quickly to our doors. Ridgeview's classes and the whole school would not have been the same without them.

The character of this class of students can best be witnessed in their efforts these last few weeks. Finishing up harder courses than any of our students have taken before, sitting for Advanced Placement exams left and right, these students have nonetheless performed under pressure and without much sleep with grace and wit and intelligence. Their senior theses were from start to finish magnificent, as you parents got to see. Even more, they have brought joy to their teachers and animated the whole school. We have seen Justin Schaffer staying up all night not only to study for an AP Latin exam but also to finish a script to an unsanctioned dramatic production that did honor to the faculty and to the school. (I am told he even fit in some swing dancing and a couple of rugby games that same night.) We have seen Leah and Hannah and Tara weeping and hugging each other before going into their last literature discussion with Mr. Hild. We have seen Matt and Candice and Sarah getting together to make sure that a fine young man who could not have gone to Prom otherwise would have a tux, a ticket, and a date, a very lovely date, I might add. We have seen Jonathan, after winning more scholarship money than any student ever has from this school, when nothing he turned in could affect his grade, writing an in-class essay until the last second it could be turned in when all the other students had finished. And we have seen Budi Waskita, that good-hearted, hard-working young man from Indonesia who will honor us at Stanford next year, coming up here on the seniors' day off, to spend 40 minutes talking with Mr. Herndon about the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. I might add that Mr. Herndon was not reluctant to spend forty minutes talking about Ortega. I could tell many other wonderful stories about these young men and women. Some would be a little embarrassing, and some are just too personal to share with everyone. But, alas, I must finally let them go, though they seem unwilling to go. Just yesterday at 4 o'clock Mr. Carpine and I had to tell that fine young man Josiah Fusher, who was hanging out in the halls signing yearbooks with his friends, to go home. High school is over, we said, though neither of us wanted to see him go.

Which brings me back to where I began: what happens to the teacher when his students who once needed him move on? Perhaps this question only betrays my own, private concern. But it is a real concern, nonetheless, and I am sure that not a few of these other teachers share it with me. I give away no secret in saying we care very deeply about this class that has a special place in our hearts. Though there are many great students coming up through the ranks whom I shall enjoy teaching and spending time with, I have yet wondered for some time whether when these students graduate and leave me behind, life might lose some of its savor. This increasing sense of worry explains why I have taught more classes than I ought to and still be able to run the school. I quite simply long to be with them and to share with them the heartening fellowship of human understanding. I crave their company and am lost without it.

Yet I have found hope in the midst of their senior theses, in the most unlikely of places. I do not normally consult Nietzsche on matters of ethics and the afterworld. His idea of the eternal recurrence of the same, however, strikes me as among the most sublime of human sentiments. I shall read a passage with which our students are very familiar.

*How, if some day or night a demon were to sneak after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you, "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything immeasurably small or great in your life must return to you" . . . Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or did you once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him, "You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly" . . . The question in each and every thing, "Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?" would weigh upon your actions with the greatest stress. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal.*

If it were given to me to live these last six years over and over, to be able to have these students again and again in class, to be able to open up our books and our hearts together every day, to hear their laughter in the halls, to share their joys and their setbacks, to read their essays and even haggle with them about the dress code, to weep together through the last scenes of *Pride and Prejudice*; to be able to live such an eternal recurrence would be, for me at least, Heaven indeed.

For now, I thank the parents from the bottom of my heart for entrusting us with your wonderful children. We must charge these graduates to go out into the world, ennobled by their learning, and to become great-souled men and women. They have much work to do. We teachers have nothing left to teach them. We have nothing left to offer, we have nothing left to give them—but our love.