

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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Head of School

We are gathered here for the most dramatic of Andover's rituals, commencement. Andover's version of commencement has much to recommend it. First of all, it moves along at a good clip. If you seniors have not experienced enough graduation ceremonies to appreciate this brevity, I can guarantee that some day, you will. Andover commencement is also beautiful. This historic campus provides a stunning backdrop for any ceremony. And finally, and most relevant to my talk today, we distribute diplomas in a most unusual way. Once we finish this part of the program, the bagpipes will lead us down the steps to the Great Lawn, where you will form the Andover commencement circle. You will stand shoulder to shoulder, flanked by the Bell Tower and the Chapel on the long axis. On the short axis, the steps of the Addison Gallery and a row of young elms (lifting their green branches along the great wall) will shelter you. I will read your names in random order. Mr. Tang, the president of the board of trustees, will pass out your diplomas. And you will hand them around the circle until the last blue leather folio reaches its recipient.

When did this ritual take root? From the archival record, we learn that until 1952, the graduates filed up these steps one by one to shake the headmaster's hand and receive their diplomas. For commencement 1952, the circle was instituted. Why? We are not sure, but perhaps the commencement script (unchanged, as far as I know, from that time) offers a clue. It reads: "This final gathering of the class in a circle symbolizes the sharing of their lives together here."

Human beings have imagined, constructed, and used circles in art and ritual for thousands of years. From Stonehenge to the Buddhist mandala, from kindergarten circle time (when you learned to listen to other's stories for the first time) to your commencement circle (when you will stand with your class for the last time), the circle holds profound and sacred meaning. It symbolizes unity and strength. When you leave this hill, to scatter in many directions, you will need that unity and strength as you confront a world far more complex and rapidly changing than the world those 1952 graduates faced. Like them, however, you will find opportunity and confront obstacles; come upon joys and sorrows, expected and unexpected. And just as they have, you will always be able to rely on the strength of your Andover commencement circle when you need it.

So, I am going to ask you to consider the circle, the Andover circle, in three ways: First, as your class circle—one circle on one plane on a great expanse of lawn at one point in time. Second, the idea of concentric circles—like the circles of water that pulse out from a stone thrown into the calm water of, say, Rabbit Pond. And third and finally, I am going to ask you to consider a sphere—to imagine a circle standing on edge and spinning around like a hoop to create the shape of a sphere.

First, the singular circle on one plane: your 2008 commencement circle. It is large: 606 feet in circumference. It will last but a fleeting moment, and there is real sadness in that for your band of 303 sisters and brothers. You mean so much to one another! Each of you was chosen to come here for some combination of traits: sharpness of intellect, breadth of imagination, kindness of heart. All these things and more form what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “content of your character.” Unique combinations of these things in each of you have made you great classmates and precious friends. You played off one another’s talents and differences. You developed your own talents (with humility, we urged) while gladly celebrating the talents of others. And your diversity mattered, as well. As University of Michigan economist Scott Page argued in his recent book, *THE DIFFERENCE*, diverse groups solve the complex problems of today’s world more effectively than groups whose members come from similar backgrounds and hold a similar point of view. We see this in action every day at Andover, a community like no other.

Now, on to the idea of concentric circles: This is the idea that your class alone, remarkable as it is, is only one among many that have gone before and many others that will follow. The Andover community extends beyond you to thousands of other graduates who share your passion for excellence, service, and leadership. Often I hear stories of Andover alumni who have come to know and respect one another, only later to discover that they both attended this school.

Last month, PBS aired a remarkable documentary, called *CARRIER*. With surprising candor and an intensely human touch, the film depicts the lives of sailors and pilots aboard an aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Nimitz. One of those pilots is Lieutenant Laurie Coffey, Andover class of ’95 (who was a stunningly good basketball player and all-around good citizen in her days at Andover). In a recent interview, Laurie said that a strong desire to serve her country led her to attend the Naval Academy. Andover gave students a consistent message that service was important, Laurie remembers. And Andover prepared her for hard work, as well as service. “Everything was easy after Andover,” is how she puts it. She learned here, as you have, that persistent hard work is more important than an isolated flash of brilliance.

But back to the idea of concentric circles: As it turns out, the creator, executive producer, and director of the documentary *CARRIER* was Andover class of ‘80, Maro Chermayeff, whose dream was always to be a film maker and who, by her own description, went through Andover “with a super 8 camera in her hand.” She learned how to crystalize the world through a lens so that her viewer sees a truth in life that escapes the naked eye. I try to imagine the conversation when these two—the flier and the film maker—discovered they had both stood in the same commencement circle fourteen years apart! They share a bond, strong and true—just as you, about to become the youngest graduates, share a bond with the oldest living graduate of Andover, who will celebrate his 90th reunion next weekend!

Fanning out, one after another, these Andover concentric circles have the power to make a great impact on the world.

That brings me to the sphere and Andover’s beautiful exemplar of that shape, a monumental bronze sculpture—one you saw every time you crossed campus: the Armillary Sphere.

As your class circle gathers on the north end of the lawn, the Armillary Sphere will balance it on the south end. But after your circle disbands, the Armillary Sphere will remain—a timeless image of the world and humanity at the center of the celestial universe, by American sculptor Paul Manship. You know what it looks like, but perhaps, seeing it every day as you have, you've never really thought about it. Surrounded by massive bronze bands, sits a family, child raised up in the arms of a mother and father. Sculpted on the bands themselves are signs of the elements—earth, wind, fire, and water—as well as the astrological signs representing the heavens.

When the sculpture was installed in the early 1930s, the great depression held the world in its clutch. For the second time that century (World War I being the first), calamitous events in one part of the globe spun out of control to affect virtually every other part. In the 21st century, that global interconnectedness is even more evident, as weather catastrophes, food shortages, and wars wreak havoc on millions around the globe and touch us all. Your generation, perhaps more than any other will be called upon to understand and engage these global challenges.

We have done our best to help you understand and engage the world. Each of you has been required to study at least one of eight world languages taught here. Just this spring, we added Arabic to the curriculum. It might seem surprising to some that those Arabic sections were instantly oversubscribed, largely due to the number of seniors who enrolled. Did you, with your college acceptances in hand, shrug off your backpacks, power down your laptops, and slide into a classic Senior slump? Hardly! Your voracious appetite for learning remained unabated. But this is no surprise to those of us who have watched as your interest in learning about and serving in the world have grown. You studied the intricacies of global economics, participated in micro-lending projects, and raised funds for China earthquake relief. Some of you have deferred college for a year to work and study in far-flung places like Jordan, China, and South Africa. One of you will accompany this summer's service learning trip to Mumbai to make a documentary of the program, in which students will study and practice solutions to the injustices of child labor. You have shown a remarkable commitment to changing the world for the better—from your close network of family and friends, to the Boys and Girls Club in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to the wider world, represented by the Armillary Sphere.

One last thing about the Andover Armillary Sphere, “Its axis is fixed at 42 degrees; 30 minutes—the angle of the earth at Andover. It points due north.”

And due north, the fixed point, for all Andover graduates, as for you, is a spirit of *non sibi*, or, in the words of our Constitution, “usefulness to mankind.” Always take your bearings on that point. The chance to do just that will come to you over and over again, sometimes in small ways, sometimes in crises. I am thinking of one of my favorite stories, of a graduate of the 80s, an investment banker. He led the effort to help the surviving members of a bond-trading firm, most of whose colleagues had been killed in the World Trade Center tragedy. As if in an “old fashioned barn raising,” this graduate and his colleagues worked around the clock to set up their competitors in vacant office space in their own building. After several months, some of his coworkers felt it was time for the outreach to end. These were competitors, after all! But our alumnus could not bring himself to end their hospitality so soon. He just knew it wasn't the right thing to do. And he prevailed. Later, when he told me this story at an Andover gathering, he

said something I will never forget. He told me that one night, in the midst of it all, he had awakened in the wee hours with a seemingly random, but powerful thought in his mind. “It was Andover inside me telling me to do this,” he told me. “It was Andover.” The fixed point. True north.

So, as you take your leave, consider the circle—your strong and united 2008 commencement circle. Consider the concentric circles of your Andover school mates of all generations and your collective potential for good. And finally, consider the Armillary Sphere, its axis fixed at 42 degrees, 30 minutes—the angle of the earth at Andover, pointing due north.

Dear friends of the class of 2008, we have come to the moment of parting. Take our blessing as you go. Go in peace. Go with our love. Godspeed.