

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Sunday, June 7, 2009

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Head of School

First of all, congratulations, on behalf of all of *us*, to all of *you* in the Class of 2009! We are proud of all you have learned; we are even *prouder* of who you are. Also, on this glorious and triumphant morning, thank you on behalf of you seniors to all the people, especially your families and your teachers, who encouraged and supported you during your journey through Andover. And what a journey it has been!

You arrived here from many different places. You set out now for many different destinations. Andover has affirmed the person you were when you came; it has also transformed you. Each student has a unique experience here—there is no Andover mold. Yet a certain spirit unites us all; there are common lessons from your Andover journey—lessons you will take with you.

Think back to the beginning. If you came four years ago, you all took English 100 and read Homer's *Odyssey*. That ancient text tells of the journeys of Odysseus and his son Telemachus. They both depart their island home, Ithaka, for ocean travels filled with peril and pleasure, danger and desire—always with the goal of returning to Ithaca and Penelope, the wife and mother who awaits them. But Homer's heroic and eternal tale is about much more than encounters with gods, monsters, and angry seas. Robert Fitzgerald, translator of *The Odyssey* says it this way: "If the world was given for us to explore and master, here is a tale about that endeavor long ago...[about] the wakeful intelligence open to inspiration or grace....exemplary for our kind...."

Homer's characters traveled in search of truth, courage, independence, and deep human ties—just as you have searched during the Andover journey that brings you here this morning.

Every traveler needs guidance—sign posts along the way. Your teachers, family, friends, and your own sense of who you are and who you want to become gave you direction as you blazed your own trail through the landscape of Andover. On the next leg of your journey, lessons you have learned at Andover—ideals, principles you have internalized—will guide your progress. Suiting my remarks to the

powerful hold of a certain numerology on your class, I offer up nine Andover principles for your journey onward. “Nine for ’09,” if you will. And you will notice that I have gleaned a number of my salient Andover lessons from your own insights.

#1: Your character is more important than how smart you are. Listen to the wise words of one of your classmates, offered at the Cum Laude dinner this spring: “We will truly [have] graduated [only] when we start to apply the skills and abilities we have learned here...not just...the abilities to solve physics problems or to write really good papers....Try these abilities instead: how to keep your word, win gracefully, fill three hours with meaningful work; [how to] look at your friend and see that he or she is better than you at something and to be okay with that! To put yourself out there in class with the chance that you will be proven completely wrong. To hold [the door open] for the guy behind you. To recognize the true significance of being with Youth from Every Quarter; to acknowledge our thousand...tiny differences and, in the process, cherish our common humanity.”

#2: Keep curiosity alive. Ask questions. Stay open to new ideas. If you think about it, some of the most interesting work you have done here has sprung from your own curiosity. For example, some of you set out to answer critical questions as you researched your topics in environmental science this year: “What is causing honey bees around the world to disappear and how is their disappearance affecting crops?” “How much high fructose corn syrup do we consume, and how much farm land is dedicated to producing it?” Whether or not you intend to become a scientist, you will use your science education to make good decisions as citizens in a world that depends on the understanding and wise use of science and technology for its well being.

#3: Learn from great teachers and mentors. Some of you will recall from reading *The Odyssey* that “Mentor” is the name of the wise old teacher put in charge of the upbringing of Telemachus in his father’s absence. Great teachers are always great mentors! One of you has compared being taught by your favorite Andover teachers to really great conversations that just keep going—before, during, and after class. Education at its best is, truly, a conversation—the transmission of the best of our culture from one generation to the next.

#4: Surround yourself with friends who bring out your best thoughts and deeds. Find friends who, like you, value the life of the mind, friends who will help you to reach high, to reject mediocrity, to avoid short cuts. In a recent speech, one of you recalled a late night conversation in your ninth-grade dorm. Here is what

you said, “We spoke [that night] about the nature of perfection. I [said I thought that] it truly does exist, manifested in our relationships with other people. A friend of mine [said he believed] that perfection is something that can be attained through individual efforts, and another...that it must be discovered, not created by [human] efforts. It was something I had not previously thought about and without the input of friends would not have considered...” Remarkable insights for 13- and 14-year-old boys!

#5: “Keep a poet in your pocket.” I owe John Adams, the second president of the United States, this adage. He wrote to his son, John Quincy, “You will never be alone with a poet in your pocket.” You have learned here at Andover how great literature, art, and music will not only keep you company, but bring new understanding of the world and the human spirit.

#6: To succeed, you need much more than talent. You also need at least three other things, so this principle has three parts: preparation, coaching, and desire.

First: Preparation. One of you studies beneath a photograph of the great boxer Muhammad Ali working out with a punching bag. Below the image is an Ali quote: “The fight is won or lost far away from witnesses, long before I dance under [the] lights.”

Second: Coaching. By this I mean coaching with a small “c.” Great teachers and mentors coach you to learn from practice so that you will perform better the next time around. They prod, refine, encourage, and model. Listen when they tell you to come off the starting block stronger, revise that paragraph yet again, try your experiment with a new set of data.

Third: Success is about your heart’s desire. Our Andover boys’ boat took first place in a tight race to win the New England championship several weeks ago. In the recording of her call of the race, just as the Andover boat is overtaking an opponent’s to win by the slimmest of margins, our coxswain shouts, “Who wants this more?” An appeal straight to the heart! And sometimes, when muscles weaken, when the mind loses focus, it’s heart alone that pushes us across the finish line.

#7: Try to help (in Andover parlance, live *non sibi*). You needn’t singlehandedly bring about world peace or find a cure for cancer. Just go about your everyday lives, with the idea of making things better. You will be leaders, the question is why: To wield power or to serve?

#8: Be true to yourself in whatever work you choose. We do not live for ourselves alone, yet we must live by our own lights, our deepest beliefs. On a

warm, breezy evening in May, I attended an event on a New York City rooftop deck, where over 200 recent Andover graduates gathered. These young people – your predecessors in the commencement circle – work in business, government, fashion, the arts, medicine, teaching; and all seemed to be doing something they love, doing it well, doing it with integrity. Fully engaged in life, uplifting in their youthful optimism, they happily shared stories with one another and eagerly asked about life here on Andover Hill. Even the 2009 college graduates—many of whom face uncertainty in this economy—told me they feel hopeful and confident that they will, in time, find fulfilling work that makes a difference to them and to the world.

#9: Be kind. That’s it. Be kind.

So, these have been my “nine for ’09.” You will add to the list as you continue your journey. Like your predecessors, you will find throughout your lives times when an Andover lesson will pop into your head or your heart.

A couple of weeks ago, on a crisp, clear May morning, as I walked up the path approaching George Washington Hall, I noticed a large banner draped across the front of the building. Blue letters, splashed boldly across a double length of white sheets, spelled out several quotations – one of them from the poem “Ithaka” by Constantine Cavafy. Until then, I had not known of the work of this poet, a Greek, who lived most of his life in Alexandria, but I am happy to have been introduced to him. In a remarkable coincidence, I opened The Boston Globe Books section this very morning to discover that a new translation of Cavafy’s poetry has just been published to enthusiastic reviews.

The poem, *Ithaka*, published in 1911, recalls *The Odyssey* and conjures up the idea of Ithaca (the destination of Telemachus and Odysseus) as a metaphor for destinations. The poet urges us not to become so focused on reaching our destination that we forget to savor the journey. Such a message rings true at Commencement. For this ceremony, this conclusion, this destination (an achievement, to be sure) is not really the point. Rather, it is the *process* you have gone through, the journey you have made to reach this place. That is the main thing.

Here then, from the pen of Constantine Cavafy and from that hand-lettered banner, excerpts from *Ithaka*:

*As you set out for Ithaca
Hope the voyage is a long one
'full of adventure, full of discovery*

.....
*May there be many a summer morning when,
With what pleasure, what joy,
You come into harbors seen for the first time;*

.....
*Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her, you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

.....
*And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
You will have understood by then what [this Ithaca means].*

Dear friends of the class of 2009, we have come to the moment of parting.
Take our blessings as you set out on your journey.
Go in peace.
Go with our love.
Godspeed.