COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS*
Sunday, June 6, 2010

Barbara Landis Chase
Head of School

Dear Seniors, dearest friends, here you sit in this tender, tectonic moment—together for the very last time. And I struggle mightily to find the right words to send you off. In search of inspiration, I reach back to a beloved novel published exactly 100 years ago for my text. It comes from E. M. Forster’s Howards End: “Only connect; Live in fragments no longer.” These words are well suited to your strengths and to the challenges you will face in this new, often wonderful, sometimes frightening world. A century after Forster wrote Howards End, new technologies help us, compel us, to experience more and more of the world. But connectivity does not necessarily lead to authentic connection. So, this morning, let’s think about real connection. You are good at it; and I will show you this, I hope, by asking you to consider three ways of connecting: connecting with your history; connecting with this place; connecting with others.

**First, connect with your history:** Especially with your families! In your early, vulnerable years, your families took care of you. As you grew, they came to understand your promise and potential better than anyone. They sent you to Andover to develop your character and use your talents. They watch you with pride today. This first part of my talk is dedicated to your families—those who sit here this morning and those who are here only in spirit.

One of my favorite radio shows, StoryCorps, airs the interviews of thousands of pairs of ordinary people, often family members: parent and child; brother and sister. They enter one of the StoryCorps booths around the country, and sitting at a small bare table across from one another with microphones in front of them, they begin to talk. Every day details, along with feelings never before revealed, begin to emerge.

Inspired by StoryCorps, I once taped an interview with my 90-year-old mother about her childhood in small-town Pennsylvania during the Great Depression. She told me how she had cajoled her mother into letting her deliver newspapers after school to earn extra money, how the canvas bag holding the afternoon edition of the Harrisburg Telegraph hung heavy on her shoulder; how excited she felt to be given an extra nickel for landing the paper smack in the middle of a neighbor’s porch, every day for a week. I learned a lot about my mother that day and a lot about myself.
So, a suggestion, Seniors: take the time soon to interview, or at least to have a long conversation with, your mother, father, or another close family member. Ask them about their lives and your life so far. And listen, really listen, to their answers.

You might ask questions from your earliest history like:

- What is your first memory of me?
- Tell me about my very first day of school.
- What was your favorite children’s book to read to me?

And ask questions about your more recent history:

- How did you feel on the day you dropped me off at Andover?
- How have you seen me grow and change?
- What do you hope for my future?

In these conversations you will discover from your past life clues about whom you have become, and also insights into the soul of someone you care for. As the title of the StoryCorps book puts it: Listening Is an Act of Love.

It was not just family members who helped make you who you were when you came here. The teachers who taught you shaped you, as well. This came home to me with shining clarity on that grand day of the spring Andover-Exeter games. My husband and I had invited college friends to join us. They took a special interest in the games. The husband is an Andover alumnus; his wife, a kindergarten teacher, who taught several members of your class, including one who was running in the track meet. My friend and I cheered Tavie on as she started out strong in a large field of runners in the 3000, then fell behind, and finally, in the last leg of that important race, put on a valiant burst of speed that brought her past several runners to finish a strong third, with her best performance of the season. As she crossed the finish line, I saw joyful tears on my friend’s face as she took in the wonder of the strong young woman her former five-year-old student had become.

It’s all those influences—your families, your teachers, and of course, your own resolve and resilience—that have brought you to this place today. So, I believe, as an institution, we need to cultivate a certain humility about our impact on you. Profound as it has been, it does not stand in isolation, but as part of the fabric of your whole life.
The second connection: to this place, this community, this idea of Andover. Here you connected with new teachers and new friends; new ideas and opportunities. We have seen the fruition of those connections vividly in this spring of your Andover career. Your final projects capped a broad and deep reach into—and connection with—knowledge and goodness. Just a few examples:

Your Art 500 projects connected you with the inspiration of an artist you chose whose work you admired. They connected all of us with your artistic talent and with the very human issues you explored: Jen’s beautiful photographs of African and African-American students, with Ethiopian face decoration, explored the ties and dissonances of the African Diaspora. Inspired by pioneering photographer Edward Muybridge, Sam used multiple video cameras to explore the beauty of human movement. Both artists used images of classmates as subjects—a further close connection. At the opening, in the crowded and energy-filled gallery, I loved hearing you explain to friends and family, over a glass of lemonade, how you went about your projects and what they meant to you.

On the muggy spring evening of the poster session for your Molecular Biology Research course, each of you stood by your posters, poised to describe your research on the biology of brain cancer and spinal-cord injury. Many of us lay people struggled to comprehend the difference between a Glioma cell and an Axonal commissure; but you opened a window into the world of science for us, and the view was inspirational. Your research had potentially groundbreaking implications for—connections to—real-world problems, in this case disease and injury. You told us how you intrepidly connected (that word again!) with scientists around the world for help in obtaining molecular reagents. Zara reached all the way to Osaka, Japan, where she found a scientist who gladly sent her the rare antibody she needed for her research.

These are but two examples of how these extraordinary teachers helped you to see how what you were learning mattered to you and the world. Increasingly, as you made your way through the program, you saw connections between and among what you were studying in various classes. As seniors, several of you were enrolled both in Spanish 520 (modern Hispanic Culture and the Emerging Global Economy) and in the upper level history and social science course (Macroeconomics and the Developing World). You may have thought you were making connections between the two courses purely on your own, but there is another layer to the story. Your two instructors, realizing many students were cross-enrolled, coordinated their efforts so that you would be more likely to make those connections. As you enter your post-
Andover world, having made these connections will help you to be the kind of problem solvers our society needs.

While you were at Andover, you concentrated on developing yourself, just as you needed to do. Adolescence is, after all, a time of self-differentiation, which requires a certain degree of self-absorption. Yet you have been able to care about, to connect with others as you have made that internal journey. Think about how you have cared for one another! As only one example of how you reached out in a broader way to care and connect, consider how Jacob not only developed his own superb talent as a violist, but spent hours sharing that talent with children in the Lawrence Strings Program. But for this program, in which many of our student musicians teach, bright and eager youngsters would not discover the beauty and discipline of playing an instrument. Just another kind of connection.

Now, you are on the brink of leaving all these things, all these experiences behind. Savor your leave-taking. Realize just what you are leaving behind:

- the beauty of this campus;
- the vagaries and injustices of New England weather;
- the great teachers who asked so much of you and who knew and cared about you;
- hard work, late nights;
- your daily presence in each other’s lives;
- above all, the joy of this place—all taken together!

All, all, to be left behind.

Consider, though, what you will not leave behind. Friendships will endure and the timeless messages of Andover: Goodness and Knowledge; the End Depends Upon the Beginning; Youth from Every Quarter; Non Sibi. Carry these with you as a cloak against indifference and cynicism. Carry with you too, this experience you have had of living with caring, hardworking, honest, and brave people, who can celebrate their differences and embrace their common human spirit.

Only connect….

Which brings us to the third and final type of connection: connecting with others. Empathy is the power to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. Non sibi, importantly, takes the idea of empathy and adds the imperative of action. Reach out in thought and feeling; then do something. Sometimes, I think, we make the mistake of applying the
term *non sibi* only to vocations clearly identified with service. But *non sibi* should be central to whatever you do. Your education prepares you for many useful vocations. You need not become mendicant monks to live lives of *non sibi*. What you *do* need to do is to ask yourselves constantly how much you need for yourselves and how much to share with others. In whatever work you choose, hold yourselves to a high standard of excellence *and* of honesty, fairness, and generosity. In striving to do that, *non sibi* can be your guide, your anchor, your true north.

Many of you have taken part in Broadening Horizons, a program that brings alumni to meet with students to share their experiences of both success and failure. In this spring’s session, you had the chance to meet with a dozen alumni from the 1950s through the 1990s; they were journalists, filmmakers, small business owners, music producers, public servants, investment bankers, writers, and NGO officials—talented people, yes, but above all, honorable and caring people. Their stories connected you to their lives. Their stories showed you how the messages of Andover had endured for them and how those same messages can endure for you. In your evaluations of the program, you quoted several of their most memorable lessons; here are three:

- Always follow your heart, no matter what others expect of you;
- It is alright not to be sure…exactly where [you are] going in life, as long as [you are] open-minded and willing to…[search for your] true passion and purpose…
- Feel your feelings; tell the truth; and keep the commitments you make.

The best advice I can imagine. As a coda, may I add my own for this morning: “Only connect…”

Dear friends of the class of 2010, we have come to the moment of parting.

Take our blessings as you go.
Go in peace.
Go with our love.
Godspeed.

*This version of the Commencement address has been slightly adapted from the original remarks*