Senior/Faculty Convocation Address
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I really am honored to have been chosen to be your faculty speaker today. For future reference, a greater honor might be to be chosen with the proviso that you don’t have to give the speech. But, we’ll leave that for another time.

What to say? I found this to be surprisingly daunting. I have been railing at many of you for the better part of a year – and a few of you since you first came to Andover. All of my economics students know that I have no shortage of suggestions for improving your future if only someone would make me “dictator for a day.” But no one is going to, and my time with you is almost up.

I took a page out of your play book and Googled “graduation speeches.” It’s always a good idea to know what the luminaries are saying. “Change” was the common theme. It seems that America’s wisest are recommending that you be infinitely malleable—ready to change course, change jobs, change your vision of the future, perhaps even change your livelihood. I got the feeling that success would come to those who could be the most perfect chameleons—adapting everything as needed to a torrent of change. I have no doubt that our wisest are wise, and that true change is assaulting us at an accelerating pace. But I wonder, in the midst of all of this, how you’re supposed to know who you are, what you stand for, where you will compromise, and when you will stand your ground.

Furthermore, I get the feeling that the graduation speakers all had a rock solid sense of the future. This will happen, that will happen. They may be right, but, interestingly, the very best and brightest have not been right. Certainly, the older I get, the less sure I am that I can give good advice about the specifics of tomorrow.

All of this left me sort of stuck until I realized that I do have one powerful insight. I don’t know what is going to happen in your future, but I do know who is going to make it happen. I am staring right now at tomorrow’s purveyors of change. Your wonderful class of 08, and classes of 08 around the country, hold the key. And that being the case, I worry much less.

It won’t necessarily be easy. In my opinion, your future, if rightly lived, will be a version of what you have been through here. Right now, you are all thinking of Andover in the glow of fast friendships and wonderful memories. But I know what many of you have been through. Much of your time has been spent slogging it out in a science lab trying to make your observed results match your intellectual understanding of a process, or in English, trying to make sense of a timeless novel with the paper due tomorrow, or trying to sort out some miserably intractable problem in international relations. If you feel wiser at the end, your wisdom has sort of a shaggy dog quality that makes you not quite believe
in it. But, by and large, you have done your best. The one thing I do know, that you can’t
quite believe, is that your best will be good enough—much better that most of the clap-
trap that passes for wisdom today. Your best, if writ large, would play out to a grateful
world. As such, something makes me think that my message to you should be, don’t
change. Just be yourselves and stay at it.

If you do change, as many of your elders have, you may fall into an increasingly common
trap—an intellectual dead zone known as certitude or ideology. Ideology is so often the
result of simply tiring of the struggle. Let’s just find something and stick with it. It’s
“right.” But we’ve learned, I hope, that ideology and certitude are the implacable enemies
of progress. If progress has a friend, it’s the process you have been through here. The
great truths come down from the ancients, but each generation must battle these truths out,
in current context, to see what is true today. In some measure, we have stopped doing this
in our country, to great disadvantage.

It all sounds rather lugubrious, and thank goodness it isn’t. I was just at my 45th high
school reunion a couple of weeks ago in Washington D.C. While, in a historical sense,
we are here on earth for just a blink, it actually takes a lot of time to get from your age to
mine. There is time to laugh, learn, love, and live life fully. There is even time to come
back to Andover to tell us what’s out there, and I hope you will do that.

Yet, I do think that the graduation speakers are not all wrong. Life will, in one way or
another, call almost all of you to account. Who are you? What do you stand for? How
deeplzy are you committed? And when your individual accounting is at hand, all I can say
is please do at that time what you have done here, in this time, which ends on Sunday.
Argue. Sweat it out. Listen. Gather opinions and try to know what you’re talking about.
Live with your doubts, but turn it in. Adult life has these precise equivalencies. If you do
this, I promise you that you will move this good ship earth forward a full notch, which is
what we are all here to do.

Your seniors, my generation, we have not left you the world we might have. I regret this.
It was ours to do more. Particularly in the last decade or so, we have wandered far from
our roots and from our better nature. It is now all too obvious that we, my generation,
well, we could really use a hand. Teaching you has taught me that you will offer that
hand, and it will be strong. No old teacher could ask for more. I thank you from the
bottom of my heart.

Good luck, God’s speed.