

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Sunday, June 8, 2008

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President of the Student Government

A few months ago at an academy event, I had the opportunity to meet a member of the class of 1947. Our conversation, of course, revolved around Andover. I asked him what he remembered about his time at PA, and, to my surprise, he did not cite academic triumphs, college decisions, or even the outcome of Andover/Exeter. He recalled a pickup football game.

He described the specklings of mud that had to be painstakingly removed from the white school shirt he had been wearing; he described the sportsmanlike verbal interchange that preceded the first snap of the ball; he described the playful sneer on the rain-and-sweat-glazed face of the quarterback (his roommate who remains one of his closest friends to this day); he described the slippery quality of the ball that had been found behind the bleachers just a few minutes before; he described the enticingly disturbing squelch that the ground made as he dug the toe of his topsider into the soaked turf sixty years ago.

He did not tell me who won; this was not about victory, it was about experience. As I watched him recount this moment – impeccably captured in his own mental annals – I witnessed in his eyes a tremendous depth of awe and inspiration.

He then said, “Andover was the best time of my life.”

Andover has changed considerably since then. We no longer are confined by a dress code, we have graduated the President of the United States, the coach of Patriots, and Scooter Libby; and the other day someone pointed out to me that there are girls here now.

But despite these changes, the timeless depth of the Andover experience has remained unshaken, and the words of this alumnus illustrated to me part of the mystery of the Andover charisma – part of what separates us from institutions like that younger one up in New Hampshire.

We are all well aware of our statistical excellence. Andover boasts the lowest admission rates of any secondary school in the country, our yield rate blows rivals – peer schools – out of the water, and our SSAT and SAT scores are off the charts. Our college placement is exceptional, our students are motivated and ambitious, our campus is beautiful and we destroyed Exeter at A/E this fall. We are, after all, the best.

But, every now and then, we need to look beyond what one could find in an Admissions viewbook, and appreciate the depths of experiences that cannot be filled into a box on the Common Application, of memories so full that they become their own rewards.

This alumnus reminded me that Andover is about more than figures, charts and lists; it is about moments. Moments that shape us, teach us and sometimes hurt us, but ultimately define us.

The uniquely captivating, 230-year old atmosphere that pervades our campus provides an avenue that delivers us to the darker, more mysterious, more inexplicably, accidentally beautiful back-alleys of our own minds; a catalyst for the 3 am dorm conversations that redefine our outlook on everything from politics to dating. Andover provides the serendipity and spontaneity that inspire and baffle us, that trigger the curiosity-fueled decision to leave the dorm as soon as curfew ends, tiptoe across the dew-speckled Great Lawn before the rest of the school wakes, and watch the sun rise – while sitting next to our best friends – from the cold, hard comfort of the armillary sphere.

Andover has given us the ability to appreciate that image – of a pale yellow star inching its way up the morning sky – on a level beyond that of the stellar and lunar timetables that will enable us to pass fourth period’s Cosmology test, a level beyond that of the symbolism of a rising or setting sun as presented in *A Farewell to Arms* that forms the centerpiece of our English 300 paper (whose due date is imminent), on a level beyond that of a recognition of the striking color value that we

will, later that day, regurgitate in pastels or watercolors or oil paints as part of an art project. Instead, we can appreciate the sight of the sun, the scent of the damp grass, the sound of our best friend's giggle and the feeling of solitude, for the infinite simplicity of its own existence as a moment, frozen, that echoes only satisfaction and fulfillment that need not be analyzed, scheduled or evaluated, but simply *lived*.

Andover gives us that – a type of education wholly separate from textbooks and pop-quizzes; a variety of learning that cannot be taught, but must be experienced, and I would urge everyone not to forget the value of these moments, the brilliance of profound frivolity.

It is that charm that changes and inspires us, and fuels the enduring adoration of this institution that leads a member of the class of 1918 to choose to come to his ninetieth reunion in a few weeks, or that leads one of our biggest donors to give to Andover even though he failed his French final senior spring, preventing him from graduating. When asked why would donate so much to a school that did not even give him a diploma, he replied, “because Andover taught me how to walk and talk.”

This applies today. It does not refer to lessons in etiquette, posture or enunciation, but to the variety and juxtaposition of lifestyles, philosophical credos and political perspectives that the moments that define our Andover memories expose us to.

Hundreds of students across the world get perfect test scores, make varsity teams and even get into the colleges that we will soon attend, but nobody else has the collective experiences that have made our time at Andover so memorable, and made the class of 2008 so strong.

It is these moments that have forged friendships that I know now will last for a lifetime. It is these moments that give us a sense of the *people* that we live with, play with and study with, that make us truly embody *non-sibi*.

It is these moments that motivate students to, at no personal advantage, take a few minutes to help someone with a math problem, to console a distressed friend or even relative stranger for hours, to lend out pens, pencils and calculators to those in need, it is these moments that, I think, motivated my room-mate to put up with my late sleep schedule, and allow me to sleep on his couch every night for the past week because my bed was covered in piles of paper and books. It is these moments that create the environment of ambition – but also of cooperation and warmth – that brought many of us here, and that has made our time here so fantastic.

Since my arrival in 2004, as a five-foot-two, petrified junior with a voice several octaves higher than it is now, Andover has taught me how to walk and talk.

I firmly believe that, at this point in my life, I have Andover to thank for much of what is good in me, and it is to you and to Andover that I must apologize for my myriad shortcomings.

I owe all of this to our school not because of my SAT score, but because of those moments that have redefined me: those touch football games, those early morning walks across the Great Lawn, or last night's spur-of-the-moment sanctuary dance-party.

As we move on, as we grow older, and as the world tells us that we must become more serious, please keep in mind the value of profound frivolity.

This is what makes Andover unique. This also makes *you* unique. Much to my chagrin, we are about to part ways. In just a few hours, we will be Phillips Academy alumni.

In the years to come, you will challenge yourselves, succeed most of the time, fall short every now and then, and encounter a whole set of experiences and goals. I know that you will all go on to do incredible things. I know that I will read about your accomplishments in papers and on the news, that I will hear of your deeds from classmates and friends, but please know not to measure your worth by such things.

As was the case when we arrived here, you may find people who can sometimes outdo you.

You may not be the top of the class or the best on the team, but know that these encounters speak nothing of the character that I know you all possess in volumes, and while you may find people who run faster, do better on tests, play the piano more smoothly, I know more surely than I have ever known anything, that there is no group as *good* in the sense of integrity of character and strength of allegiance, as the group that I see before me now; the group with whom I have formed friendships deeper and more meaningful than any I have ever had before; the group that has bolstered me, inspired me, kept me afloat, and, for better or worse, elected me; and there is no group anywhere in the world with whom I would rather have spent the last four years of my life. Regardless of whether or not you become valedictorians and senators, you will always mean the world to me, and the people sitting around you.

So thank you, everyone who is here, for facilitating this. Thank you teachers, for giving us the best education we could ask for. Thank you staff, for putting up with our adolescence. Thank you administration for balancing tradition with modernity.

Thank you mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, for forgoing anywhere from one to four years of time with your children, for allowing them to enrich the lives of the rest of us.

Thank you for giving your all every time you see us – my parents, for instance, while I was in their room at the inn writing this speech, were in my room cleaning and packing.

Thank you for making the sacrifice that you knew was in the best interests of the three-hundred students I see before me, thank you for forcing yourselves to watch this period of development, angst and excitement from a distance.

Thank you to everyone who is not here who has made this experience possible – trustees and alumni like that member of the class of 1947, or of the class of 1918, or that prominent donor.

But most importantly on this day, thank you to those of you who are here, who are right here, for the support, the friendship, the assistance, the late nights, the early mornings, the kind emails, the enlightening dinner conversations, the borrowed pens, pencils and calculators, the shoulders to rest on, the couches to sleep on, the experiences, the moments, to live on. Class of 2008, it has been the greatest honor of my life to share four years with you, and I can only hope that I will see you soon. So thank you, everyone, for giving me more than I could ever have hoped for, and I wish you all the best of luck in every endeavor.