COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
Sunday, June 9, 2013

Hemang Kaul ’13
School President

On behalf of the class of 2013, thank you Mr. Palfrey for all you have done in your time so far at Andover. I wish you the best of luck in your coming years.

When I finally sat down last night to write this speech, I tried to recall the most important moments of my time here at Andover. And when I couldn’t remember anything, I tried looking at Facebook for pictures of me from the past four years to jog my memory. And since I was there I decided I would also do some newsfeed perusing, I mean, c’mon, I needed a break. But after an hour of casual Facebooking, I was no wiser a man. I couldn’t even remember what I was doing on my computer in the first place. “Oh yeah, this speech,” I thought to myself.

Nothing was coming to me. So I did the one thing that all great speech writers do; I wrote about writing my speech. And then there I was, still no wiser for it.

I don’t know why, but I figured it would just come to me. That all of a sudden, I would just know what I wanted to say about the past four years of my life. That maybe, just maybe, divine inspiration would strike, and all my thoughts about Andover and what it meant, would just flow out onto the paper in perfect and natural iambic pentameter. (in rhythm) Alas, my hopes and dreams fall short today.

Because I come to you all, still not quite sure what I am talking about, not completely sure what Andover was, is or will be for me and for us all. I feel kind of like I did when I finished the last season of the TV show Lost. Lost.

In the first line of his prophetic novel, The Sirens of Titan, Kurt Vonnegut writes, “Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself.” Although the story is science fiction and the “now” he is speaking of is the 22nd century, there is a ringing truth to his
overarching statement... I cannot speak for everybody and of a universal Andover experience, because there isn’t one. To know what it meant for you would mean to have spent my time at Andover in your shoes. Each one of us will have unique memories of Andover, whether positive or negative, and we will all have been impacted by Andover in different ways and to varying degrees. But what we do share is a common background, a location, and a time in our lives defined by our existence at a little academy on a hill north of Boston.

It was the first day of Andover orientation, and my face was plastered to the backseat window of our car as I stared out at the campus that was supposed to become my home for the next four years. It was raining, which at the time seemed a little too foreboding for my taste. My mother and father, as usual, had dressed me in a manner that made it seem like their sole goal was my public embarrassment.

Soon enough, I was trapped playing orientation name games in a room appropriately called The Cage. If there is one thing that I learned from those first few days, it was that my name is Hemang Kaul and my favorite flavor of ice-cream is mint chocolate chip.

But before I knew it, I was right there, in the throws of PA life. English first, then Geometry, then conference period, third period history, Latin fourth, fifth lunch, music sixth, and biology seventh. Since I was a day student, I didn’t initially feel like I belonged. Driving home served as a constant reminder that I was perhaps missing an essential part of an Andover education. By the end of the first week though, I had found a sort of home away from home with the wonderful boys of Tucker House. We bonded over a mutual love for Xbox, unhealthy snack foods, and a desire to take this school on head first.

But still I longed for a sense of true belonging. I assumed the role of freshman representative, with the hopes that this would affirm my place in the system, to no avail. I worried less about who I was, and more about what I was. Amidst all the talk of spending the next four years finding out more about ourselves, I found myself just wanting to fit in more with the collective.

My lower year, through a combination of luck and coincidence, I joined
the improvisational comedy troupe, Under the Bed. The always eccentric Alec Weiss, who had been a role model for me in middle school as well, encouraged a young Hemang to show up one Sunday morning for auditions. Through Under the Bed I experienced and learned from the generous leadership of both Alec and the sweet and effervescent Patrick Brady, I bore witness to the brooding genius of Andrew Schlager, and found a group of people that I could trust with my life on a stage. In an article in the New York Times, Jason Zinoman compares improv comedy to a high wire act. He writes, “Imagine a team of tightrope walkers chained together. Then every few seconds one daredevil must make a sudden dramatic move.” There was not a moment I spent with that group of metaphorical tightrope walkers that wasn’t filled with excitement, drama, laughter and meaning. I longed for rehearsal to go on and on, and for the scenes that were acted out and the real life stories that were told to never end.

The summer before our senior year we were left with only four returners. We questioned how we could lead a group that would be made mostly of new members. When we had joined, we were surrounded by the experience of those around us. But as the year progressed, our worry turned to wonder and amazement, as each new member taught us something worthwhile, and instead of leading, I found us moving together, as a group.

The Class of 2013 approached senior year in a similar way. Together, we lead. And it is experiences like these that remind me of the extraordinary talent, the resilience and the leadership within this student body, and the good fortune I have had to be surrounded by these people for four years.

In many ways, Andover students walk a very fine line. It is a dangerous and unhealthy assumption to believe that we are all here, at this elite and selective prep school in New England, on a solely merit based system. We must remember that for each one of us that receives a diploma today, there are many others who could have been there in our place, who were not so fortunate to have the opportunity to attend Andover. At every turn of the way, we must recall that no matter what disappointments we face in our lives, we have also been provided with an enormous amount of good fortune in the parents, siblings, relatives,
friends, faculty, or others who have helped us reach where we are today. To them, we owe a tremendous and unquantifiable number of thanks.

However, to deny ourselves the pride that accompanies our own accomplishments, and the unity that comes from that sense of a shared experience, feels insufficient and distant from us now, especially on this day of celebration. And graduating from Andover is certainly a moment we all ought to be celebrating. But this joy of completion should be tempered with the gratitude for the privilege that has been given to us, this rare and indescribable opportunity that we as young adults have been provided, and the enormous amount of luck and chance that have brought us here.

As Andover students, that lingering sense of an elite education can leave us with a fear of failing to meet the expectations of some general and vague idea of success. However, our time here can not just be defined by the sixes, fives, fours, threes, twos, and yes, Mom and Dad, ones and zeros that we got on our tests; or the number of not AP but PA classes we took; or the college decisions that we have seemingly waited our entire lives for; or the awards and accolades and positions that we piled up with the hopes of achieving something greater than ourselves. That is not to say that these results and experiences are unimportant, but to make Andover a timeline and to mark each significant point in our lives here would be futile. The subtle changes in character, speech, understanding... these are all products of a unique and individual Andover experience. To delineate Andover would be to make discreet events of something that only makes sense as a whole.

We owe our memory then, not only to the moments of our successes and individual triumphs, but to our failures as well. To the long nights spent talking to friends about our dreams for the future and to the days we wished would go by faster because life couldn’t be worse than in that moment; the seemingly endless need to balance our schoolwork, our social lives, our extra-curriculars, our expectations and our parents’ expectations. We all will remember the vague feelings of victory, the three seconds of glory after scoring the winning goal in your JV3 soccer game, even if it was against a middle school. But we should also strive to remember the hours and days of misery when we could not bare to write another word of our history papers, chemistry papers, and English
papers that were all due on the same day.

We owe our memories to those who played important and active roles in our lives here, and also to those who shaped us without us even knowing. To the geometry teacher who challenged you to understand the math at a higher level than one should ever really understand math. To the friend you called when you were crying and you knew why but you didn't really know why. To the young girls from a school in Lawrence you helped teach improv, that claimed to have fallen in love with you and screamed with delight every chance occasion you got the time to see them. To the teaching faculty, both those who will stay long after we go and those who leave with us this year, and have left during our time here. To the generous staff who worked through nights of blizzard, and missed out on time with their own families to provide us with the amenities that we so take for granted.

So remember, as we leave this all behind, to give thanks to those people who have meant something to you in your time here, and thank them over and over again. So thank you to Paul Murphy for your honest, insightful guidance and for being a friend when I needed you to be. Thank you to Tasha Hawthorne for scolding me at times when it was more than necessary. Thank you to Fernando Alonso for laughing with me about the meaninglessness of it all. Thank you to Kevin Heelan, the professor, for his incomprehensible way of making anyone feel like they are Paul Newman on a stage. Thank you to the amazing mother we all have in Rebecca Sykes, for the generosity and compassion that she spread to each person she encountered here. Thank you to Lewis Robinson for reminding me how to love writing. Thank you to Tucker house for accepting me as one of your own. Thank you to my carpool crew for not leaving me stranded when I slept in five minutes too late. Thank you to all of my friends for listening to my problems, reminding me again and again that I, in fact, was not as funny as I thought, and for simply being my friends. Thank you to my family, my sister for making me who I am and never taking any credit for it, my mother for her unparalleled compassion and goodness, and my father for teaching me how to enjoy life at every step of the way. Thank you to my role models in the senior classes before me. And thank you to my very own class of 2013 for affording me the opportunity to speak today at our graduation, and for the everlasting gift of a sense that I belong.
As we set out from high school to experience whatever lies ahead of us—college, gap years, and eventually the real world—we begin what will hopefully be a long and fulfilling journey for us all. When I first heard the word commencement, I was confused. What were we commencing? Wasn't this the end? It finally came to me in a conversation with a friend after the Senior Faculty dinner that what we were “commencing” was our lives as graduates of this institution. It was a bittersweet realization though, because as alumni, although we were beginning a new chapter of our lives with Andover that would lead to new memories with old friends, and unexpected friendships with our former colleagues, we would never again be together in the way we are now. Living, laughing, crying, dancing, enjoying, breathing and dying together in unison. Our lives will be insufferably separate, and each of us will soon call a different place home.

So, look to those around you and cherish these last moments that we have together as a class. Congratulate each other and remember the idea of this purposeful community, the one that held us all closely together during our time here. I am truly proud of everything that we, as a class, have accomplished and the mark that we leave on this Academy. I offer my sincerest congratulations to the Class of 2013, that has given me so much, and wish us continued luck in the many, many years to come.

Thank you.