

Commencement 2009: Headmaster's Address

So here we are again. Another year, another graduation. Hardly anything new, especially at this season when graduations are taking place by the thousands all over our country and the world. Even at Waring we've been doing this graduation thing now for 30 years. Sooner or later the bloom wears off even the most hallowed events. You graduates, of course, have already witnessed as many as six of these Waring graduations yourselves. Little wonder if it seems like the same old stuff and a little tedious to get through.

And yet, isn't that the point? It is the "same old stuff"—yet again. The essential idea of graduations has changed very little since the middle ages. As if to remind ourselves of this fact, we even dress like they dressed in the middle ages. It is the "same old stuff" all right—the robes and hoods, the processions, the bagpipes, the *Pomp and Circumstance*, the speeches, the banners, the bouquets and wreaths of laurel, the tears, the boxes of Kleenex, the endless receiving line—all recycled for the gazillionth time. And yet, somehow, somewhere, there is always a magic present, a kind of alchemy, that transforms the "same old stuff" into something new and glorious and joyful that bursts upon us and fills us with hope, as "rosy-fingered dawn" burst anew each day upon Odysseus and his men.

It is this transmutation of the "same old stuff"—the same old base metals of everyday life at Waring—into gold that qualifies and sets apart this graduation ceremony as a big event in our life together. And it is the moment of this transformation that we have all come to witness and to be part of today. In doing so, we step out of ordinary, chronological time into a moment that transcends time, into what I have often referred to as a "high time and a high place." In this moment, the lives of the graduating seniors intersect with the lives of all the rest of us to become part of something that is unique, something that has never happened before and will never happen again, something that is ours alone to share for all time.

But my guess is that at the moment the Class of 2009 is not feeling quite so poetic about all this. Yes, they are happy to be at the center of this joyful event where we as a community are recognizing and celebrating their achievements, and yes, they feel an exuberant and justifiable pride of their own in what they have accomplished, and yes, they are eager to step beyond the cozy confines of Waring and out onto the big stage of life with its big opportunities and big challenges.

But, the graduates themselves, I have noticed, are generally the least sentimental of all the participants in a graduation. It is the rest of us who deplete the Kleenex supply. The graduates tend on the whole to be much more realistic about what it all means, which is surely a good thing given all that they are about to encounter. My guess is that, amidst all of today's sweet and sonorous triumph, our graduates may be feeling vaguely uneasy. They know that something is amiss. As busy as they have been as Waring seniors, they have not failed to notice that the future's formerly bright and glistening prospects appear to have dimmed noticeably during the course of the past year.

They may be wondering if the world out there is as chock full of opportunities as they were once led to believe. They may have some misgivings about this “flat world” that New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman was extolling only a couple of years back: maybe it is not quite so flat, maybe it is still curved in places concealing new hazards that we do not fully understand, maybe the rules are changing. There is uncertainty abroad in our land, even with our nation’s bright and bold new leadership firmly at the helm. As well-informed products of the Waring Humanities program, our graduates today are surely aware of all this.

What to do? I struggled with this question for some time, but in the end I fell back on my standard remedy for all the world’s ills: give advice! Being middle-aged, male, a head of school, and a father of four, I am in the highest possible risk category for giving unsolicited advice. Ask my children! So, seeking the forbearance of all, with malice towards none, on behalf of worried parents everywhere, and because I can’t help myself, I offer to you graduating seniors one last, breathless parting word as you walk out the door and into your new worlds. Actually, three last parting words! I like things in threes—ask my children!!

First, **do your own thinking**. Well, you may say, hardly advice that is necessary for us Waring students. We have been taught to do our own thinking all along. True enough. You are each amazingly well equipped as thinkers. And you have shown us again and again your willingness to engage that capacity on virtually every subject. But it’s not now that I am concerned with. It’s in the months and years to come. I have noticed a remarkable and alarming willingness of thoughtful people to cede sovereignty over their own thinking to others as the years go by. Doing one’s own thinking takes time and effort. As life gets more complicated and time becomes a scarcer commodity, the temptation will grow to let others do your thinking for you. And there are plenty of others out there who will be quite willing to render you this service. Every question, every issue, every subject has its cohorts of experts and professionals who are happy to think for you and to present you with their conclusions. These conclusions may even be true and useful, but not as a substitute for your own thinking. Perhaps surprisingly, this trend often begins in college. Given the fine institutions of higher learning that you have chosen to attend, you will surely be surrounded by brilliant, superbly-informed professors who are very persuasive. Listen to them, of course. Learn all that you can. But don’t be overwhelmed by their brilliance. In the end they may well be right, but make them prove it. Require them to earn your approval and respect by doing your own thinking.

Second, **engage your enemies as well as your friends**. Here I am construing the word “enemies” broadly to include all those with whom we do not agree or share identical values. It is ironic that in this new “flat world” in which everything is interconnected, we seem to have become more balkanized than ever into competing groups based on socioeconomic, cultural, religious, political, ideological, and national identities. It is always, of course, easier and more comfortable to remain safely ensconced within the safe confines of our affinity group than to engage with others across the lines that

separate us. As a result, real discourse withers and mutual distrust thrives. Our new President seems to be on to this. He knows that since we are unlikely ever to abolish all the differences that separate us, we must be willing to own and understand them in order to share the same world. But to accomplish this we must be willing to engage across “enemy lines,” as uncomfortable as that may seem at first. In going about this, it might help to remember that “No human being is ordinary.” However much we might disagree with someone, however much we might disapprove of a course of action, the person holding that opinion or making that decision is fully endowed with worth and dignity as a human being, and is worthy of our full consideration. By engaging your enemies, you invest them with human worth and may even end up winning them over to your side.

Third, and finally, **take the long view**. The current state of our economy furnishes abundant examples of what happens sooner or later when you don't take the long view. The once proud and dominant American automotive industry is currently struggling for its very existence as the result of generations of short-term thinking. So, at one level, this last of my three “words” of advice is the easiest to get across: don't do what Chrysler and GM did, don't operate from quarter to quarter and think that everything is just going to fall into place. Think ahead. If you want a future, think about and invest in your future. This much has not changed in today's confusing world. The first major investment on the horizon for you graduates today is your college education. You have made wise choices in the fine colleges and universities you will be attending. Now, continue to make wise choices in the way you realize the educational opportunities you have before you—wise choices in the courses you take, of the friends you choose, and wise choices in the way you spend your time. Invest yourself in your college years in the way you have invested yourselves at Waring, and you won't go far wrong.

But, there is something more, something deeper, about taking the long view that I feel the need to say, something that goes beyond mere tactical or even strategic considerations. It is this: **find your vocation**. Okay, you say. Easy enough. I do plan at some point to enter a profession, to get a job and to support myself. Your parents, of course, will be relieved to know this. And, speaking for the Waring School, I heartily approve. For one thing, penniless alumni do not produce much in the way of Annual Fund contributions!

But when I speak of a *vocation*, I am not thinking here merely of a job or even a profession. I am thinking of something vastly more important, something that can give shape, meaning, and fulfillment to your life as nothing else can. I mean a vocation in the sense of a *calling*, and I think that everyone is better off when they have one. Your calling may or may not be the job that puts food on the table, but your calling is something that will sustain you throughout your life in ways that go beyond mere physical sustenance, as important as that is. Someone has defined a calling, or vocation, as the place “where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.” I don't think that I can improve on this. So, Waring graduates of 2009, I bid you final farewell with my deepest wish that you go forth from *this* place to find in your lives *that* place where your deep gladness is fulfilled in serving this world's deep need.