



Ali Velshi

Commencement Speaker

I bring you greetings from Governor Hickenlooper, with whom I spoke on Monday. He sends his regrets for not being able to be with you today and asked me to pass on to you his simple personal mantra: “work hard, be nice and never quit.”

To his first point, I know from personal experience that you know how to work hard. My son, Eli, was a member of the Haverford School Class of 2016. He’s now a rising senior at Stanford and is a few weeks into his summer job in New York, where he leaves the house by 8am and doesn’t return, usually, until after 11pm.

Not a week goes by when he either doesn’t encounter someone from his ever-expanding Haverford network, spend time talking to a friend from his Haverford days, or think fondly of the training and education he received while he was here. Haverford continues to hold a cherished place in the hearts of my family members, and I know you know how lucky you have been to have spent these past years here.

Governor Hickenlooper isn’t here today because he has chosen to do what is inscribed at the entrance to this school – to be the Man in the Arena. That’s quite a calling these days – because a career in politics, which was once considered noble, today subjects you to criticism and ridicule.

You are entering a world in which complaint is a national pastime. But it is also an exciting time, in which so many people, including so many young people, have chosen to take their education and training, and enter the Arena.

I’m talking about some people who may have never even considered voting, now running as school board trustees and county commissioners and city counsellors and mayors and members of their state senates of the Congress of the United States or, like Hickenlooper, the Presidency

of the United States of America. One of your own family seeking the Presidency of the greatest country in the world. It's kind of amazing.

It doesn't mean you have to support him – he's one of about 24 candidates running for the Democratic nomination, and you might be a Republican. And even if you're not, Hickenlooper may not be your cup of tea. But you DO have to respect him, and hopefully, some of you will emulate him and seek public office yourselves one day.

But that's not the only way to be In The Arena. It's a state of mind and a philosophy and a discipline. I know you have read those words every day – maybe they became commonplace to you. So, on your last day here as students, allow me to remind you of those great words.

“The poorest way to face life is to face it with a sneer. A cynical habit of thought and speech, a readiness to criticize work which the critic himself never tries to perform. An intellectual aloofness which will not accept contact with life's realities. All these are marks, not of superiority but of weakness.”

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

That's what Hickenlooper, who is a bit of an understated guy, means when he says “Work hard. Never quit.”

But what do you make of Hickenlooper saying “be nice?” Do nice guys win? Do they finish first? These days being nice seems almost quaint, and out of place. In today's political arena, being nice is thought by some to demonstrate weakness.

But it's not.

You young men are graduating into a remarkable era of consciousness.

You are, I am sure, regardless of your socio-economic background, aware that you are graduating from one of the finest schools in the country, headed by a man who understands in stark relief how training and education come together to encourage growth. You are entering a world in which others, by virtue of where they come from or their economic situation or their gender, or their sexual identity, have had a different set of life and educational experiences than you have. And that is where the “be nice” comes into play. It means be open to the experiences of others. Be kind to them when others might not. Be sensitive in how you express your views, and about how they may be taken by others.

Be aware that criticism of privilege is a discussion we are having in the whole in society. It’s not meant to target you personally, but to target a structure that doesn’t always distribute opportunity fairly. It is useful for all of us, every day, to acknowledge the privilege that society, our education, our economic situation, the country in which we live and, possibly the color of our skin or the groups to which we belong afford us. There is no wrong or right answer here.

But it is a fact that society is easier on some of us than it is on others, and understanding keenly how advantaged or disadvantaged you are, as compared to others with whom you interact, is something that will guide your relationships, personally and professionally. Acknowledging and learning how to think about and talk about and manage and share your advantages will allow you to understand what an important discussion this is. The world will move forward, possibly at a faster pace than it was moving when I was your age. You want to do what this school has trained you to do: lead that movement.

Be nice means listen more than you talk, a lesson I am still learning. Listen to the experiences and perspectives of others. It doesn’t mean fall for nonsense. In a world where false accusations of “fake news,” and fake news itself, is rampant, it means being smart enough to discern what is real from what is false, but also acknowledging that there may be much that is real that you’d prefer is false because it doesn’t fit a narrative that you understand.

In the world of #metoo we are all learning that not doing a bad thing doesn’t automatically make you a champion of those who may suffer discrimination in society, so work hard to make

yourselves champions of those to whom society has not bestowed as much power as it has to you. Sharing your power, you will find, only makes you stronger.

Read the Constitution of the United States of America. If you don't have a copy, get one. You can get them for free from a lot of places or buy one for 10 bucks and carry it around with you like I do. Read all of it, often.

Commit some of it to memory but, particularly, the First Amendment: "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*"

Take your understanding of that Amendment with you to college. Engage in arguments with respect, with kindness, as Hickenlooper says, be nice, but win or lose on the strength of your ideas. If you lose, as I do regularly, learn from it. Was your idea flawed or was your argument flawed. Adapt, stand up, wipe the proverbial dust, sweat and blood from your face and get back in that area.

NEVER close the arena. Never make the Arena off limits to competitors. Never choose not to enter the arena. If ideas arise that make you fear for the future of this country or for your planet or for humanity, research them, find solutions, understand the perspective that fuels those ideas – even if the perspectives are unsavory, or antithetical to what you believe. If they are worthy of defeat, defeat them IN THE ARENA.

You young men are well equipped to provide the leadership this world and this country so desperately needs. I am so grateful that, across this country, young high school graduates are going out into a world of opportunity with so much promise and ability and enthusiasm to solve the myriad things that need solving. I am intimately aware of the perils we face, the challenges that must be overcome, and the possibilities that exist. And I am so proud that you young men are given the chance, starting right now, to be our salvation. I leave you with my slight variation on the closing lines from the poem "Invictus," by William Ernest Henley:

You are the masters of your fate

You are the captains of your souls.