



High School Graduation

June 12, 2016

Speech by C.A. Pilling, HS Principal

Good afternoon parents, relatives, faculty and staff, distinguished guests, and of course, Class of 2016.

So rarely a day goes by without someone commenting on how much the world is changing. And while you may have had a shorter span of time during which to watch this unfold, you've undoubtedly heard your parents or someone else in your life with a little more time under their belt in this world, say something along these lines. And yet, no matter how much or how fast the world is changing, there is one thing that is timeless. And that is goodness. Goodness is timeless.

In a recent book entitled *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the 21st Century*, author Howard Gardner calls upon us to sustain the Platonic ideals in today's world where moral relativism is rampant and digital technologies triumphant.

His incisive examination reveals that although the cultural terrain is changing faster than ever before, goodness is and will remain a cornerstone of our society—but only with a careful and attentive stewardship.

To quote Gardner, "The first and primary sense of 'good' has been with us over the millennia: it refers to how we treat our relatives, our friends, and our neighbors: are we cruel or kind, generous or selfish, fair or unfair?"

Gardner also goes on to say that goodness is imperiled especially in the virtual communities we form online. As he writes, "in a way that could not have been anticipated 25 years ago, people, even when very young, are finding themselves members of large communities via the Internet; any participant in the digital media is necessarily connected to an indeterminate number of others."

In other words, our acts can be spread faster and wider than ever before, and when one adds anonymity to the mix, we have the potential to do real damage to one another.

So what is it that determines how we will treat another? What is it that has us deciding whether we will be cruel or kind, generous or selfish, fair or unfair?

Some justify their morally questionable behavior by saying that it is the times that are placing us all on these slippery slopes. In other words, morality is culturally or historically defined—instead of it being universal and timeless.

This really isn't surprising, right? It's easy to see how we can get caught up in such a place; we

feel pressure to fit in, we feel pressure to follow what seems to be in front of us every day. From politicians and pundits to celebrities and comedians, to anyone who garners the spotlight these days, we see an endless stream of examples of what can only be considered the opposite of goodness.

We see those around us behaving this way, so why shouldn't we? Rather than making our own judgment based on our own "goodness code," we allow the times that we are in or the culture that surrounds us to dictate our actions.

So how can we avoid this? How can we continue to steward goodness in our relations with one another so that this cornerstone of our society is not lost?

Well, I'm not sure I have an answer for you. But I do have an observation of just one small area of my life that relates to what Gardner has written about. I know that I respond to faces and keyboards very differently. Because I know that behind the eyes meeting eyes, that there is a living human soul who has to live with what I'm about to say. And when I'm at a keyboard, and I can remember that there is a living human soul who has to live with what I'm about to say, I seldom regret hitting send.

As it becomes ever more difficult to uphold our obligation to treat others as ends (rather than as a means to an end), to treat them fully with fairness, generosity and kindness, we must keep our eye on the basic tenets of what binds us as humans to one another and on what will ensure our survival as a species.

Now that may sound like a biologist talking, and I'll own that, but the root of that word is someone who studies life. And now, among the many miracles of the technological age, each of us with a few keystrokes can touch more lives than we can easily call to mind. But if we don't call them to mind—and not just while we are at a keyboard, but in every moment when we engage with one another—our moral lives and I would argue indeed life itself, are in peril.

What I'm asking of you—that you embrace goodness by treating others as ends and not as a means to an end, that you treat them fully with fairness, generosity and kindness first and above all else, that you actively shepherd goodness by pushing back on what surrounds you—may seem as though it is beyond human ability within the context of today's culture.

But I know you. I know your capacity. You've practiced goodness in so many ways. On your senior overnight last August one of you spoke up against the belief held by so many seniors that have gone before you—that you need to teach the underclassmen to show you respect and even to bow down to you—the seniors—because you were now in charge. Rather, you said, your job was to make them feel welcome, to be role models for them, and to help guide them.

Your work in the Policy Institute in developing Military Mondays—a program launching this summer that will allow vets to receive free legal help in accessing their benefits at area Starbucks locations—as well as your impassioned plea for GDS to do good in its own immediate community by increasing the number of affordable housing units in the future development of the Volvo site are two additional examples.

Your leadership in Student Voices where no topic is off limits—no matter how

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controversial—and through which you navigated and guided all sides in a way that exuded trust, openness, and a welcoming of all opinions and ideas. The formation of Loquacious Lunches and Wednesday Walks, one of you grabbing the hand of another runner so that you would share a first place finish, rather than claiming the spotlight for yourself, your consoling of a player who missed a key penalty kick in a crucial game. Your refusal to allow Tuesday Night Tutoring to disappear even though we had lost our long-time partner, followed by your efforts to rebuild it to where it is stronger than ever before.

And your diversity work went far beyond what we have seen to date and has been felt ever so deeply. From the Student Diversity Leadership Conference, to your partnership with the University of Pennsylvania and the YPAR program, from your work during our own in-house diversity leadership retreats, to the student affinity group leadership council, under your careful stewardship, you have cultivated healthy and ongoing conversations throughout this community.

And finally, after initially getting excited about a construction project in the forum that you might support with your class gift, one of you pushed back and spoke so eloquently about your desire to share the GDS experience and you rallied your classmates to where you were able to garner overwhelming support for the gift to go solely to financial aid instead.

Class of 2016, I could go on and on. But there are clearly too many ways in which you have defined goodness to enumerate them all.

Again, I know you. I know your capacity. You can do this and you can show others how to do it. So do good and be good. Thank you.