



High School Graduation

June 11, 2017

Speech by C.A. Pilling, High School Principal

Good afternoon parents, relatives, faculty and staff, distinguished guests, and of course, Class of 2017.

So my message to you today is simple. In fact, it can be summed up in just two short sentences: It's Not About You. It's about everyone else around you. So this might seem odd on a day that seems as if it's tailor made for being all about you. Everyone here—your parents, your relatives, your friends, your teachers—is here because of you, but I'm asking you to think beyond these next few hours to what lies ahead -- your life -- and how you might not only positively improve that, but also the world around you simply by making it not about you. I know. Wait a minute. Didn't she just say it's not about me? But didn't she also just say I'd have a better life? What happened to the other part -- it's about everyone else? Isn't my having a better life actually about *me*? The answer to these questions is both yes and no.

When I first started thinking about my message, I had a hard time figuring out where to go next. How could I convince you of what I knew was true in my heart -- that life really is about others? And being GDS students, I knew you'd be thinking critically, wanting to see the data, and questioning my thesis at every turn -- and I would expect nothing less as these are all hallmarks of a GDS education. So I was stuck.

I realized I needed to arm myself with some proof to back up those two simple sentences. Making your life about others sounds nice, but where was my evidence, my data or the hook that would convince you to live your life with others at its center?

So I did a little research. And what I discovered is that there is a whole body of knowledge and more recently -- studies with actual scientific data -- that seemed not only to support my point, but also to provide me with that hook that I was looking for. And that is -- those who give, receive back in turn. By being generous, we ourselves flourish. It's known as the Paradox of Generosity and it's been around in various forms for thousands of years.

An ancient Hebrew proverb, for example, teaches "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but ends up impoverished." A Hindu proverb holds that "They who give, have all things, they who withhold have nothing." And from the prophet Muhammed, "A person's true wealth is the good he or she does in the world."

So across recorded history, these wise observers of human life may have taught different versions of the generosity paradox, but overall, they were all pointing to what I have been trying to say -- that it's not about you; it's about everyone around you -- but with that added piece that I needed -- that by being generous with others, it will come back to you in spades.

Ok, but these are again just words. Where's the evidence, the proof, and what is it exactly that you say I'll get back in spades by making it about others, by being generous?

A number of these questions are answered in a new book by Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson two sociologists at Notre Dame. Smith and Davidson set out to explore the power of generosity to determine if it was something beyond just a nice idea born out of philosophical or religious teachings. In other words, could empirical findings from social-scientific research bear out the same message that has been past down through human history by these philosophers and religious teachers?

Would the paradox of generosity hold up under the scrutiny of scientific research?

Their study, known as the "Science of Generosity Initiative" found that indeed the paradox is more than just a nice idea. Greater generosity, measured in various ways – from giving money, to time, to being more emotionally available to others – clearly correlated to higher levels of happiness, health, purpose, and growth.

They also found the opposite or a *second* paradox – that is, those who are not generous are less happy, less healthy, more stressed and likely to be more stagnant in their lives.

How is it that these paradoxes can be true? Shouldn't it be that if one spends resources on others that there is a net cost to the giver? Shouldn't generosity result in a relative deficit for that person?

And wouldn't it seem that holding onto one's resources would result in just the opposite? A material gain for that person?

Time and again, the answer was no. Not at all. Contrary to what would seem to be common sense, people actually grow by giving themselves away. By caring for other people, we care for ourselves.

But who's to say that it isn't the other way around? That happy, healthy, less stressed, more engaged people are those things *first*, which *then* either causes or *allows* them to be more generous?

Well, for all the naysayers, such findings are now being supported by hard science and more objective measures – like brain scans. Neuroscientists are finding that the "reward areas" of the human brain "light up" in MRIs when people give generously to others showing positive neurochemical processes.

At the same time, a *lack* of generosity stimulates negative neurochemical processes.

So from these studies we can see that the paradox of generosity is more than just a philosophical or religious teaching. It is a sociological and scientific fact.

So understanding the paradox at this point, I hope, is relatively easy. More difficult is learning how we can actually become more generous. Interestingly, Smith and Davidson also discovered two main themes that coincided with individuals who received benefits in return for

their generosity.

First,

it has to be a practice, it has to be something that is sustained over time, that one engages with regularly. One-off things just don't affect us that much, whereas things that we repeat, things that are sustained, have tremendous effects on us. So being an organ donor, for example, seems generous, but that one-time check of the box when getting your license, just doesn't do it.

Second,

it has to go beyond those with whom you are the most intimate -- your family and good friends. Helping your family and friends, which I know you do everyday, is of course a good thing, but the dynamics of generosity are such that people need to increasingly expand their circle to where there is a helping of "the other," and not just those with whom one is most familiar.

So generosity is not a simple, one-step way of life that is easily learned. But again, for those who are willing to learn and actually live generously, remember that doing so is genuinely good for you.

Many of you in the Class of 2017 have already crossed both of these important thresholds -- sustained over time and beyond your family and friends.

A large number of you have worked with our Tuesday Night Tutoring program, our Tuesday Night Art Program, and our Super-Science Sessions every week. One of you volunteers every *Sunday* at Food and Friends. Two of you put on several magic shows for the kids at The National Children's Inn at NIH, and then devoted your senior quest to raising more than \$6,000 for the same organization.

One of you visited your grandmother at a rehabilitation center and saw a need for companionship as well as assistance and dedicated dozens of hours in order to fill those gaps while several more of you logged dozens of volunteer hours at Sibley Hospital.

A handful of you began a partnership with Nationals' Youth Academy -- a baseball program that also runs an after-school tutoring program -- while another handful of you painted a mural for Monument Academy to beautify their newly founded school.

And finally, a number of you participated in our Summer Policy Institute and gave back in meaningful and lasting ways. You organized a summit on consent and sexual assault; you created online resources for people who are unemployed and homeless. You partnered with local law schools and Starbuck's to increase legal aid for homeless veterans, and you developed an online platform called "Life Resettled" to promote learning about the resettlement process by sharing stories of refugees and the advocacy groups who try to help them.

And I could go on and on.

But, you already know, you all met the service requirement for graduation. But what you might

*Speech by C.A. Pilling, High School Principal
June 11, 2017*

not know, is that on average, you exceeded that requirement by over 50% or more than 4,400 hours – that's more than two years of a normal full-time job.

So there it is again – the quantifying, the data, the science. I've been appealing to your mind. But I'll stop. Because really -- it's not about your head, it's about your heart.

So embrace the paradox. Listen to it. Care for yourself by caring for other people. Grow by giving yourself away.

So Class of 2017, get out there and make it *not* all about you.

Thank you.