COMMONWEALTH SCHOOL

Graduation Remarks 2004

Last week I returned from announcements — which only a few seniors had attended — to find my office door strangely shut. When I opened the door, I found some hundred balloons of many colors covering floor and ceiling, along with the following note: "Dear Mr. Wharton, Congratulations on your illustrious first four years as the distinguished headmaster of this superb institution. In honor of your many accomplishments and exemplary leadership during this great time in our school's history, we offer you this token of our most sincere appreciation. Love, The Class of '04."

It is the tradition at Commonwealth for the Headmaster, on behalf of the faculty, to deliver some final words of wisdom to the graduating seniors. As the tone of the note suggests, it would be foolish of me to expect to be taken seriously. Not least because the tradition also calls for two seniors to follow me, one generally speaking more eloquently and movingly, and the other utterly deflating this ceremony's solemnity with more of the kind of wit you heard in the congratulations.

So I will be brief.

You guys have worked hard and overcome considerable pressure to make it here today. Almost thirty years ago, Charles Merrill, Commonwealth's founder, wrote the following about pressure.

"I believe in attainment. If you want to accomplish something—to play a Beethoven sonata, to sew two severed nerves together, to nurse a sick child, to manage an infantry battalion, to organize a neighborhood—you have to have the skill, you have to have the will. You must be ready to pay the price. In taking on a task that is tougher than you think you can handle, you learn the depth of your resources. The work has entered your body, as the German phrase puts it. You don't retreat from the objective demands of the job to protect your personality. You express your personality in the proper performance of the job, or you transcend your personality so that you are no longer at its mercy... You are taking exams, stringently graded, all your life, which may include your first dinner with your sweetheart's parents and concludes with the way you face up to your own death. The ability to succeed comprehends the ability to fail."

Commonwealth was founded with the belief that young people, when joined with inspired teachers and challenging, interesting material, could discover the deep satisfaction that comes when the "work enters your body," teaching you that so many of the limits you'd set for yourself—about how hard you could work, how much you could learn—are imaginary. In such engagement we hope you have discovered what you are good at. And it seems that you have—all of us who wrote recommendation letters for you managed to highlight talents that blossomed at Commonwealth. You have passed many tests, stringently graded. Congratulations.

But Mr. Merrill's last sentence, "The ability to succeed comprehends (i.e., includes) the ability to fail," suggests an equally valuable lesson. I hope that over the last four years you have discovered a few things you are not very good at.

This is a funny thing to hope for at a graduation ceremony. After all, your parents have given quite a bit—time, money, patient support, not-so-patient support, and anxious support—to get you here, largely because they want the best for you, and in proper measure this is a healthy part of parental love. But the lessons to be learned from recognizing and facing our shortcomings are vitally important, and are growing harder and harder to understand in a world that worships individual success and seeks it with a vengeance.

Michael Sandel, Professor of Government at Harvard, penned a piece for April's Atlantic Monthly entitled The Case Against Perfection: What's Wrong with Designer Children, Bionic Athletes, and Genetic Engineering.

Sandel writes about our culture's Promethean aspiration to remake human nature. Drugs that were developed to remedy medical problems are now regularly employed to enhance performance. Athletes, as we know, use steroids, and Human Growth Hormone, which used to treat a hormonal deficiency that led to shortness, now is used regularly where no such medical cause exists. Sandel discusses memory enhancement, both genetic (now achievable with lab mice) and pharmaceutical — Viagra for the brain, he calls it. This drive to enhance what in the past has been simply a given he calls hyperagency, a push for dominion, and examples of this drive abound.

Any of you seniors worried about careers, or even financing college, may be interested to learn of the ad that ran a few years ago in Ivy League newspapers offering $50,000 for an egg from a woman who was at least 5'10" tall, who was athletic, had no major family medical problems, and had a combined SAT of 1400 or above. Ms. Rome said she saw such ads regularly when she was at college.

People will pay good money to create children who have an edge, and to remake themselves to gain the edge. Granted that it is a fuzzy line that separates remedy of medical conditions and enhancement where no medical problem exists, but the psychology of this drive for perfection is disquieting, and it has some unsettling consequences. When our normal limitations are seen as hurdles that to be overcome with makeovers, pills, or, crossing generations, the optimization of children's genetic material, "it would," Sandel writes, "be difficult to view our talents as gifts for which we are indebted, rather than as achievements for which we are responsible."

He goes on. "A lively sense of the contingency of our gifts—a consciousness that none of us is wholly responsible for his or her success—saves a meritocratic society from sliding into the smug assumption that the rich are rich because they are more deserving than the poor...perfect genetic control would erode the actual solidarity that arises when men and women reflect on the contingency of their talents and fortunes."

I would suggest that the awareness—and acceptance—of our normal human shortcomings are, first, a healthy tonic against the arrogance he warns of. In addition, insofar as this self-knowledge makes us more fully conscious of our dependence on each other, because our various talents complement each other, it makes us more fully human. We are, to paraphrase Aristotle, social animals: only the gods are self-sufficient...and perfect.

To put it a bit differently, this quest for perfection, rooted as it is in a culture that makes a fetish of the individual and individual success, is founded on a fundamental nearsightedness about our achievements and ourselves. So much of who you have become and what you have accomplished stems from the efforts of your teachers and the encouragement and inspiration of your classmates. Your education has been a cooperative venture, a community enterprise.

Let's translate that. Community is not a warm, fuzzy abstraction, but the play of a variety of gifts. Some of you have livened up history class with your energy and insight; some have impressed with math prowess, some draw and paint or sing like demons. Some of you have been effective and generous tutors. Some of you have starred in sports or on stage, some of you have published The Lit Mag and The Leek. Two of you roller-skated in the halls, and some of you kept warm the Dartmouth Lobby couches. Most of these talents have made the school a more interesting and healthier place for everyone, and elicited respect for and delight in the shared enterprise.

Over twenty-five years ago, the late Lewis Thomas, a prominent physician and a magical writer, published an essay called The Medusa and the Snail. In it he described in detail the symbiotic relationship between a jellyfish and a snail. Each, at various times, must feed off each other to survive and reproduce. I paraphrase: They have evolved a unique relationship that makes it hard to talk about them as separate entities — where does one self end and the other begin if, without each other, they are incomplete and perish? Good metaphor. And, as I said at Thanksgiving, probably with Thomas in mind, "Commonwealth's institutional commitment to the community and social justice rests on the

acknowledgement of such connections — there is no self without symbiosis."

If we were honest, we would have to recast our recommendation letters. An accurate account of your abilities—whether you can sew a severed nerve, nurse a sick child, manage an infantry battalion, or organize a neighborhood—would require a story that includes the efforts of teachers, the encouragement and engagement with interesting friends, and support and love of family. It would also require a story of your failures and the way they have made you more fully human.

So we hope that you have learned how to face and accept your shortcomings. We also hope you've learned to recognize, and respect, abilities others have that you don't. We hope this has made you more properly humble about and grateful for talents you have, and spurred you take full advantage of opportunities to use them for others.

Accepting your shortcomings and failures is also consonant with the deeper wisdom of the universe — those seeking genetic perfection have it wrong. Again, Lewis Thomas,

"The capacity to blunder slightly is the real marvel of DNA. Without this special attribute, we would still be anaerobic bacteria and there would be no music."

We will be eager to hear about your work, and the new communities you now go off to join and shape.

Go with our best wishes, and our love, and thanks for the balloons.