



Graduation Remarks 2003

At Ms. Nesson's house Wednesday night Mr. Davis told me to keep it short. I'll try.

This is a day that invites us to pause from the breathless rush of the exams and papers of the past few weeks and to give thought to some larger considerations about where you've come from and where you are going. It is a chance to talk about what we've learned in our little school, and about what we hope you will take with you. This is your last class, and this material will be on the exam.

We are in a church in which Ralph Waldo Emerson served as minister for three years in the 1820s. (The Second Church was an earlier incarnation, located nearby.) Memorial Day this year happened to fall on the bicentennial of Emerson's birth, so I'd like to mark this ceremony with a nod his way. Emerson left the ministry as part of a more general break with formal religious institutions of his time, rejecting narrow doctrine because "sensible men and conscientious men all over the world were of one religion." He became the leading thinker of a loosely affiliated group we call the New England Transcendentalists, and he enjoyed a long, distinguished career as a speaker, essayist, poet, and abolitionist. Emerson's mind had an incredible capacity to synthesize the visions of traditions as widely separated as the English romantics, German transcendentalists (via the English), Platonism, and Hindu philosophers (he liked the Bhagavad Gita). You most likely have not read him at Commonwealth – his prose is, at times, overwrought – but you should, sometime, at the very least read his essays "Self Reliance" and "Nature."

All of his writings contain remarkable passages and sentences, which have an edge that cuts true. At some point in your time at Commonwealth you probably felt that "In skating over thin ice our safety is our speed."

Now that you are leaving your familiar surroundings of school and home for strange new settings, you might be interested to hear what Emerson wrote in his journal at age 17 in, I believe, his second year at Harvard.

I find myself often idle, vagrant, stupid and hollow. This is somewhat appalling and, if I do not discipline myself with diligent care, I shall suffer severely from remorse and the sense of inferiority hereafter. All around me are industrious and will be great, I am indolent and shall be insignificant. Avert it, heaven! Avert it, virtue! I need excitement.

There's a good valedictory exhortation in there. The coming year may well contain some daunting moments of doubt, but may you see your way through with discipline, industry, and virtue. (Careful with the excitement.)

But I'd like to send you off with another Emerson quotation. In his essay "Intellect," he wrote, "God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please; you can never have both."

We know that you've seen little repose in the months from September through May over the past four years. But the statement invites consideration of what we've been working for.

So much of your teachers' efforts have aimed to equip you to see clearly and understand, as much as the

moment allows, the truth of the matter at hand. What does the page before you really say? How can we more clearly see and think about historical or political questions? What does the language of math teach us about the power and beauty of reason? How, allied with science, can that language teach us to understand more fully the phenomena of the natural world? What can a foreign language, its literature, and culture tell us about human differences and what we share? And how through the arts can we gain fresh insight into the world around and within us.

We hope you've learned the genuine rewards that such inquiries, and the occasional discovery, have to offer.

We also hope you've learned to mistrust claims to have the final answer, and to suspect the arrogance such claims give birth to. A few years ago a graduation speaker at St. John's College cautioned against intellectual hubris:

Knowledge can ally itself with the slightest weakness of character and with any unexamined prejudice, transmuted unjust, intolerant, or self-centered attitudes into the figures of intelligence and ignorance... Egotism, above all, joins readily with knowledge, leading to the empirical observation that no one is quite as intelligent as we, and to the logical conclusion that everyone needs to be inoculated with ample doses of our own personal wisdom.

Claims to have the final answer generally tell us more about our own conceits than they do about the facts.

Were those answers attainable, we could look forward to truth and repose. That is the allure of dogmatism, the luxury of knowing without having to think any further. The moment we're sure we've figured things out we stop looking and thinking. And, as the deadly clashes of dogma we've recently seen have taught us, such certainty is dangerous.

This intellectual humility, however, must be tempered by the faith that there are answers. (Emerson's assertion that God gave to each mind its choice reflects his confidence.) Without the conviction that there's something worth finding, our efforts can seem pointless or, at best, narrowly self-serving.

We hope you believe in and care deeply about justice, beauty, and wisdom even as you recognize that your understanding of them is imperfect. That faith will give you the strength to take a stand when confronted with lies, cruelty and ignorance. I do not want to make today's talk a political statement, but whatever one's belief about the war, I find deeply troubling the relative complacency of the response to the growing revelation that we were taken into it on false pretenses. There is either a tremendous failure of the moral imagination – repose? – or a corrosive cynicism, that posture of intellectual superiority, when we know better than to be conned by caring deeply about anything. Cynicism, especially about such notions as integrity and justice, is in the end a capitulation to the liars and cheats.

If you don't care about truth, those who do will prevail, because ideas matter. Witness the political shift of recent years – last night on NPR one liberal commentator asserted that the right today is intellectually much more vibrant than the left. You can ask Mr. Young if that is true.

You should also care because our honest pursuit of truth demands that we make the utmost use of our energy and talents, and that ennobles us. It saves us from remorse and inferiority, from indolence and insignificance.

Finally, we have to care deeply because our lives, and life on our planet, is tenuous and fragile. Let me close by turning from Emerson to Franz Wright, whom most of you met when he read his poetry at an assembly just a few weeks ago. This is from his poem, "The Only Animal."