COMMONWEALTH SCHOOL

Graduation Remarks 2001

So here we are in the midst of what anthropologists call a rite of passage—you've dressed...unusually, gathered in ceremonial surroundings, and are participating in arcane rituals to mark a transformation from one state of being to another. Listening to these words is our version of the aboriginal scarification that marks the passage to adulthood: the words you hear today are meant to tattoo your souls, so "listen up."

There used to be a September tradition at Commonwealth that, on the second day of faculty meetings, teachers would speak for a few minutes each about their summers, their thoughts, their plans and hopes for the year, or their reasons for being in this line of work. The anticipation of these talks filled many with dread. But we all spoke. We also used to have a teacher, Dane Morgan, who buzzed around the school like the Tasmanian Devil and loved making his points dramatically—he would embellish fire safety announcements with grisly descriptions of what would happen to you if you didn't get out of the building quick when the alarm sounded.

At the faculty presentations in my second year here I spoke just before Dane. As I have been known to do, I waxed philosophical in articulating my hopes that we would cultivate virtue in the souls of our students, citing the 15th-century Florentine Platonist Marsilio Ficino, who said, "Let them study to be good rather than learned.... Let them study, not how to injure men, but how to remove vice." Mrs. Chatfield, who then taught Renaissance history, beamed, whether pleased by the reference or delighted that the new classicist was such a nice boy, I don't know. But I felt good when I finished, liked I'd passed some test. As I puffed up, Morgan, next up, bellowed "Hell no! It's a tough world and if you're nice they'll eat you alive. No really, guys, it's nasty out there, and if you don't know how to fight the bastards you're a goner." Those beside me may have been able to hear the hiss as I lost air.

But it would take more than that to stop an amateur philosopher. So here's another reference. Empedocles said that the world is a mixture of elements—earth, water, fire, and air—alternately drawn together by love and pushed apart by strife. Greek thinkers had a wonderful way of describing in the same language worlds we moderns separate into the physical and moral. (Heraclitus, for instance, said that the sun's straying from its course would be an act of injustice.) Nowadays, we prefer instead to talk of our human experience in terms of impersonal forces. With all due respect to our biologists, I fear we lose something by this. I prefer words like love and strife to hormonal attraction and repulsion—the language invites us to poetry, a word I use in its broadest sense. Poetry in Greek means creative action. If we look at our world as a play of love and strife, we are invited to participate in the drama, not only by playing our roles but by writing the script.

We've spent a good part of the last semester discussing the ways that strife is let loose on the world. We've read about the recent havoc in Bosnia and Rwanda, also about My Lai and, most recently, about Senator Bob Kerry's fateful hours in Thanh Phong. Glover's book *Humanity* is a grim chronicle, but he maintains a fundamental hope that the better angels of our nature may prevail.

Dane Morgan was right: we must certainly be tough-minded enough to recognize the reality of strife and violence. But I would caution you against believing that the nightmares and follies you've met in history class or The New York Times are the sole reality, that the hopes and efforts of many for a more just and humane world are a happy dream. Earlier this year, confronted with such a sentiment, I wrote to some of you the following, "To call hypocritical or naively idealistic all efforts to create a place where civility and cooperation are the rule is a capitulation. It denies one of the central

projects of civilization—to create a reliably safe and humane setting for the life and work of a community, where to a large extent cooperation supplants, or at least tames, competition... One of our central projects as a school is to turn out young people who are smart enough and tough enough to carry on a wide variety of efforts to build a more just, less violent world. Saying that violence is a given about which nothing can be done is a cop-out."

So here's my thesis: the forces that bring us together are more powerful than those that divide us. And the best name for those forces is the one Empedocles used—(brace yourselves) love.

This is a big claim. Because we've spent the last four years teaching you the difference between an opinion and an argument, I'd better present some evidence. I'll invoke our four years together. Despite the pressure, the countless frustrations, the stress, the rivalries and confrontations, the petty exclusions and jealousies, we now belong to each other. You may have felt it in your final days with us, most recently at Wednesday's party, and this feeling will grow. In a few years when you meet classmates who were not in your circle of friends, or even friendly with you while here, you will warmly greet each other in the acknowledgement of all you shared. I've seen it with former students. It'll happen to you.

It will happen because our own work and cooperation have forged these bonds. Think about this year's prom: Danya and Alex toiled thanklessly for months, encountering indifference or even scorn in their efforts to raise money and pull the dance off. But the evening on the boat was glorious. Their efforts led to something you shared and will never forget, and for that they deserve our gratitude.

I've met, among our alumni/ae, a venture capitalist in San Francisco whose work focuses on new ways of delivering health care and a doctor at Berkeley who researches the psychology of disabilities. They speak about their work with deep conviction, and though successful people by worldly measures, I would suggest that they have prospered not because of their pursuit of lucre, but because of their love for their work and their dedication to goods beyond their narrow self-interest.

All those accomplishments I thanked you and the teachers for a few minutes ago were, in fact, acts of service (I can assure you that your teachers aren't in it for the money). As your teachers will attest, serving others or a community often has little to do with charitable feeling or sublime sentiment—it can be difficult and frustrating. Sometimes you want to wring the neck of the beneficiary of your kindness. But, in some mysterious way, you become very fond of whatever or whomever you serve (ask your parents), and one of our jobs is to awaken you to that fact. So we have been involved these last four years in the business of creation (poetry again): the formation of a school is an act of love.

This then is my argument. As I thought about it over the years, I've concluded that Dane and I were talking about the same thing, the good fight. He was just emphasizing the fight against all that is unjust and wrong-headed in that nasty world out there, while I with youthful enthusiasm focused on the good we should look to in all of our efforts.

As Mrs. Keenan reminded seniors every year, your attendance at Commonwealth renders you privileged—you've been privileged these last four years to work closely with the folks across the aisle, and with these remarks I hope to encourage you to use all you've learned for the good fight, to supplant strife with love. It's a way of giving back all you've received; it's what we've been working for; it's now up to you to make the choice.

Thank you, and go with our best wishes, and our love.