

McCALLIE

— HONOR TRUTH DUTY —



Authenticity in an Artificial World

Commencement Remarks

by Head of School Lee Burns '87

Sunday, May 19, 2024

As we approach the conclusion of a school year for the 119th time in our history, we present diplomas to McCallie seniors, signifying that you 193 seniors succeeded in meeting our high standards. On behalf of the faculty and staff, I express to you our admiration and affection for your service and leadership, for your hard work and humor, for your accomplishments and achievements, for your character and camaraderie, for your passion for one another and our school. You have strengthened McCallie and leave a lasting legacy.

I hope you leave here with the sense of having been challenged, supported, nurtured, and loved. I hope you leave here with a greater and growing sense of who you are, who you can become, and the positive difference you can make in the world. I am confident that each of you, in your own ways, will lead and leave your mark on our world with your unique stories. I wonder, though, what your stories will be, and what will follow and unfold in your lives.

In 1938, Harvard University wondered what would unfold for their graduates in the upcoming decades, and a research team, led by professor William Grant at Harvard Medical School, began to enlist 268 Harvard students, all men, to follow for the rest of their lives to see what would lead to their flourishing and life satisfaction. They would eventually add more men to the study. Sometimes referred to as the happiness study, but formally called “The Harvard Study of Adult Development,” it would prove to be one of the most famous and extensive longitudinal studies ever done, running over 80 years with regular interviews and updated data in many categories with the aging men. What would predict or correlate with a fulfilling, happy, flourishing life—in short, their well-being? Would it be career choices, marriages, having children, reputation, exercise, money, where they live, hobbies, intellect, lifelong learning, travel, or something else?



You would expect the Harvard graduates to achieve and succeed and lead comfortable, happy lives. After all, they'd been blessed with innate intelligence, extraordinary teachers, abundant resources, talented classmates, a culture of excellence, an elite credential, and a lifelong network to leverage. Like you have been given at McCallie.

Not surprisingly, these 268 men achieved some remarkable things. They led companies and communities and even one, our country. They were generally wealthy and had many luxuries. They had among the best opportunities, choices, and resources. Some of these alums were consistently satisfied, happy, and fulfilled throughout their lives, while others were disenchanted, dispirited, and depressed. Some men's lives were littered with anxieties, cynicism, despair, and regret, while others were characterized by stability, smiles, and satisfaction. Why the difference?

The answer to that question is both simple and surprising: relationships. Those men who made and maintained warm relationships with others were far happier and healthier in their lives.

There are profound advantages to being in close, warm human relationships and devastating effects if these relationships are absent.

Studies document the link between a lack of warm relationships or loneliness and a weakened immune system, change in brain function, disruption of sleep, and shorter lifespans. They also note the tendency of lonely people to be anxious, suspicious, fearful, mean, and bitter.

But surely with the brotherhood you've experienced here, and with the blessings and opportunities you've been given, and the upward trajectories of your lives, you won't fall prey to a life of loneliness and all the pitfalls that accompany it. I doubt any of those promising Harvard graduates anticipated a life of such pervasive dissatisfaction and unhappiness. No one sets out to be disconnected. We drift toward it, perhaps slowly or subtly.



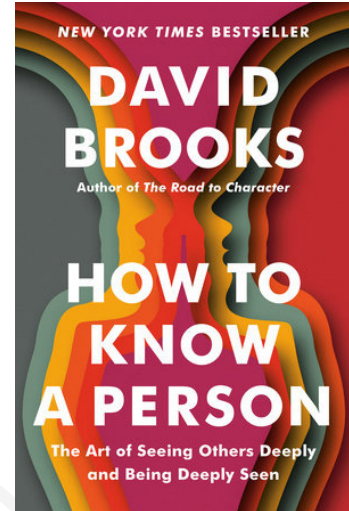
A 2019 study in the United States, as cited in a recent article in "The Atlantic," reports that 75% of American adults say they are moderately or highly lonely. Surely that won't be me. No one would want or expect that, and yet that's what most adults are experiencing.

During your years at McCallie, you've intentionally learned about science. And about how to write well. And about blocking on a football field or acting in a play. Be as intentional about learning and practicing the intricacies of relationships as you have been about formulas and formations. It's a mindset that can be embraced, a skill that can be honed.

Relationships don't just happen and automatically get better. It's arguably harder today than before

to develop genuine relationships when we are so busy, so goal-driven and performance-based, when our heads are buried in our phones or screens for so much of the day, when it's easier to create and curate a persona online than to be authentic and vulnerable in person. It takes intention, commitment, and work to develop and deepen relationships. It's not something that can be downloaded, upgraded, or outsourced. Relationships don't work that way. In a fast world, some things must still be slow and sustained. There are no shortcuts to relationships. Developing relationships is still analog in our digital world.

Author and commentator David Brooks recently published a book, "How To Know A Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Seen Deeply," that captures the need and hunger that we all have for meaningful relationships. He describes the powerful benefits of relationships and the destructive nature of loneliness. He laments that families, schools, and other social institutions do not teach the importance or practice of developing and deepening relationships, and as we grow older, our relationships often atrophy and, as a result, our lives diminish, even fall apart. I think many men especially struggle with friendships as they age.



You graduate here with a lot of relationship capital. It's among the best things we do, and this may be the best community for naturally fostering relationships of which you will ever be a part. You leave here with a band of brothers who have the ability and potential to be lifelong friends—to bring you strength, support, and sympathy for any and every season of life. Yet you live in a world with growing pressures, temptations, and tendencies that can undermine your relationships and destroy broader social relationships. You may be tempted and drawn to be so busy, so career focused, that you will not make time for friends. Or your family life, or civic life, may allow for few margins for time with friends. And then, following a season or pattern of disconnection, it can seem awkward to reach back out to renew relationships.

Broader social trends can also lead to relationship loss. Social media can be isolating, addictive, and myopic. It can be dehumanizing. Be a critical and cautious consumer of social media, aware of how it may shape or change you and our society. We live in a time when it's so much easier to post or pontificate than listen or learn, when it's easier to judge than ponder another perspective. It's more common to hurl grievances than to extend gratitude, to have enemies than to extend empathy, to be snarky than to be substantive.

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As Brooks writes, relationships are built on taking the time to see each other, to sit with each other, to be present, to ask open-ended questions, to hear the stories of others, to value the inner dignity and complexity of the other, and to be open-hearted and open-minded.

Deep relationships are authentic. There is a vulnerable sharing of stories, of fears and failures, of hopes and dreams. There is a mutual curiosity, a desire to see and share the real you, the real me, and say, "I see you. I want to know you. I value you."



It's hard and scary, though, to do authenticity in an artificial world. We are accustomed to filters and photoshop, Siri and silk flowers, spray tans and sweeteners, processed foods and polyester and plastics, Botox and branded personas. It's possible, even preferable, to create an artificial you. ChatGTP can make a new me for others to see.

Relationships can't flourish if they are built on deceptions, including self deceptions. Brooks quotes 17th century French moralist Francois de La Rochefoucauld who says, "We are so used to disguising ourselves from others that we often end up disguising ourselves from ourselves."

Don't disguise yourself...or hide...or put on a mask—even a mask of achievement, power, and money. Even those masks are artificial, superficial, temporary. Be authentic. Your authenticity is the deep part of you, the core, your essence. It's your heart and soul. It's faith, character, and values. It's your purpose and identity.

Authentic intelligence is far more valuable than artificial intelligence. The former is wisdom, grounded in Truth with a capital T, a reverence for God and His purposes and design. Artificial intelligence is mere knowledge, important and impressive for sure, but ultimately faux rather than foundational.

You must first and fundamentally know who you are, what grand narrative you are a part of, and what your story is. During your years at McCallie, we've often said that you were created in the image of a loving God and that you therefore have inherent dignity and worth. You don't need to create an artificial you. You don't need a particular accomplishment to gain your love from God or your dignity. Authentic you is the best you. We've often said that you have an overarching purpose: to glorify and enjoy God forever. We've often said that you have duties, including to love and serve others. We've often talked about treating others with dignity, kindness, and respect in close relationships with each other in a community of brotherhood. And we've shared that God is not simply an abstract, distant God, but He is relational, taking on human form in the person of Jesus Christ so that we might see and experience Him in a personal, grace-filled, redemptive relationship.

Beyond these general themes at McCallie, each of you will build your own future story and will forge your own path. I hope you do so with a strong foundation of identity, purpose, and values.

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As you leave McCallie, I hope you will commit to being an authentic you—not an artificial you—and sharing yourself and your stories with others in deep relationships.

And as you venture beyond the Ridge, I hope you will sustain and even strengthen your relationships with each other. You will need each other. You will be healthier and happier with each other. Keep group chats. Have periodic Zoom calls as a class. Pick up the phone and call a classmate you haven't spoken to in a while. Find out how's he really doing. Tell him what you appreciate about him. Take group trips. Show up for weddings. Drive to see a friend who's struggling or sad or sick. Have a class fantasy football league. Come to reunions, even when you live far away.

And we as a school, and as teachers and coaches and advisors and administrators and staff, will be here for you, too, as a lifelong companion, resource, and friend. We will miss you, and we will be waiting for your return and cherish a lifelong relationship with you as you join the long blue line.

