

McCALLIE

— HONOR TRUTH DUTY —



Gatsby, Nico, or Theo?: A Question, A Direction, A Portrait

Commencement Remarks

by Head of School Lee Burns '87
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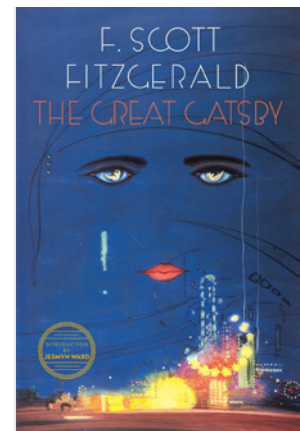
And now, as we approach the conclusion of a school year for the 120th time in our history, we present diplomas to McCallie seniors, signifying that you 184 seniors succeeded in meeting our high standards. On behalf of the faculty and staff, I express to you our admiration and affection for your service and leadership, for your hard work and humor, for your accomplishments and achievements, for your character and camaraderie, and for your passion for one another and our school.

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.

Your journeys from the Ridge will take you far and wide—around the country and around the world. This fall, 30 of you will be heading west; 53 further south; 58 northward; and 43 to the east. As you launch in these four directions, I want to suggest that they aren't just geographic treks, but these four directions are philosophical, perhaps symbolic, representations of the opportunities, choices, and challenges you will face.

In the classic American novel *The Great Gatsby* published 100 years ago, a young, well-educated, and ambitious Nick Carraway, upon his high school graduation, ventures from Minnesota east to Yale and then to New York City as he begins a career as a bond salesman on Wall Street in the early 1920s. He, like you, has a splendid pedigree, access to powerful people and resources, abundant career choices, and experiences reserved for the few.

Just like today, many in society in the Roaring Twenties were obsessed with image and self-invention, money and upward mobility. For the elite and well-educated, it was their American dream.





Nick rents a summer house next to Jay Gatsby, a mysterious, wealthy man who throws lavish parties in his mansion along the bay. Gatsby, though, despite his wealth and lifestyle, is seemingly discontent, even unhappy. From his mansion, he looks, with jealousy, east across the bay at East Egg, a long-established, socially prominent, wealthy community he longs to join. He not only longs to join this community, but he longs for his former girlfriend Daisy Buchanan, whose green light shines at the end of her dock on the

opposite side of the bay in East Egg. Gatsby throws these parties to impress her and try to win her back, essentially to buy her back, even though she is married.

Nick runs that summer in this fast society of money, parties, romance, and greed. He sees people whose lives and identities are built on their worldly successes—their jobs, social status, possessions, reputations, power, images, cravings, and happiness. Though a young man, Nick also begins to see the shallowness and selfishness, the elusiveness and impossibility. And then he sees it all crash—lives shattered, like a broken egg.

The pretty world of Gatsby's east was a false and cruel facade. His journey east was a dead end, figuratively and literally.

Around the time your parents were born, Led Zeppelin released the classic song, *Stairway to Heaven*. Though the song, like *The Great Gatsby*, points to the eventual emptiness of materialism and buying happiness, its geography is to the west and not to the east. The band sings, "There's a feeling I get, when I look to the west, and my spirit is crying for leaving." And they also sing, "...[it] makes me wonder."

The journey to the west is often associated with exploration and adventure. Some of you seniors have trekked to Montana in the last few summers with Dr. Ritchey and Mr. Wallin and others to trace some of the steps of Lewis and Clark as they charted and opened a new course for our country in the early 19th century. You've seen the majestic mountains and rustling rivers and canopy of spectacular stars in the night sky, and perhaps been overwhelmed with a sense of awe and wonder in the American west. Yes, it makes you wonder.

As you leave here today, I hope you carry that spirit of awe, adventure, and wonder with you. I hope you have the impulse to explore like Lewis and Clark did. I hope you have been fortified with bravery and resilience. As American author Horace Greeley said about western expansion, "Go west, young man."





But also, beware of the west.

As some of you may know, I am a Tennessee Vols fan. Earlier this spring, Vols' quarterback Nico Iamaleava decided to go west, packing his bags in Knoxville for UCLA via the transfer portal. He didn't show up for the last day of spring practice with the Vols and skipped the spring game. Various media outlets reported his family had been demanding more NIL money or he'd leave.



We live in an era of me. Give me. Give me. I want. I want. We live in a society of selfies. Of selfishness. Of shortcuts and short timers. Of transfers and the transitory. Of images. Of Hollywood. Of money more than morals. We like glory and glamour without the grit or guts. It's still a Gatsby world.

It's easy to complain, transfer, or quit. It's uncommon to serve or sacrifice...to be a true teammate.

It's easy, but unwise, to trade the Smoky Mountains for the Hollywood Hills, to be a Nico rather than a Peyton.

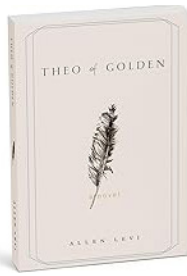
But I hope you've learned at McCallie about the primacy of commitment to others. About the duties we have to each other. About honoring your word and commitments. About being truthful. About living out your values.

One of my favorite books I've read in recent years is *Theo of Golden*, written by Allen Levi. It's about an 86-year-old man named Theo who boards a private plane in New York to fly south to live for a year in a small city in southern Georgia called Golden, based at least roughly on Columbus.

Theo is a well-educated, sophisticated, Renaissance man fluent in five languages who has lived in Portugal, Paris, Florence, and New York. To the residents of Golden, as well as to the readers, it is unclear why he would possibly move to this city.

Early in the book, he wanders into a coffee shop, where he sees 92 portraits hanging on the wall, each for sale. He learns they are portraits of some of the people who live in Golden. A man of curiosity, he studies their faces and wonders about their stories. He believes they should all have their own portraits, so he decides to buy each one and give it to that person.

He sends a handwritten note to each person requesting that they meet him on a bench by a fountain in the town square so he can bestow the portrait upon them. Over the course of the year in presenting them with their portraits individually, he comes to know each person deeply. He hears their stories—their struggles, their sadness. They share their brokenness and dreams, their tears and



fears, their laughs and longings. And in ways unique to each person, he affirms and encourages them, often reframing narratives they have about themselves and their past. He describes what he sees in their portraits...and in them—usually more than what they see in themselves. Over the year, he finds specific ways to support and serve them, to help them see a better version of themselves and a brighter future. The city is stunned by his kindness and generosity. The city is even transformed.

Theo approaches his latter years wanting to be present for other people...for strangers—strangers from all backgrounds. He befriends an eccentric homeless woman with her bicycle; a young man who loves to play the cello; an artist; a barista at a coffee shop; a bookstore owner; a custodian; a lawyer; a professor; an immigrant from Guatemala; and a high school student. He wants them to know of their goodness, their beauty, their potential. He wants them to feel beloved and that they belong. He loves and serves them through his time and attention, his empathy and connection, and through his thoughtful gifts and messages tailored to each person. It's a beautiful story of a man with a sense of selfless purpose that brings him and others great fulfillment.

Gatsby, Nico, and Theo all have great talents, resources, and opportunities. So do you. You are graduating from one of the world's great high schools. You leave here not just with the knowledge, habits, skills, and mindsets to thrive in any college or profession one day, but you also have the name and network of a McCallie alumnus, membership in the long blue line. You will have opportunities to lead communities, companies, civic groups, and charities; to earn substantial incomes; to travel and explore in any direction; to accumulate power; and to influence others. But what will you do with all that? More specifically, will you be a Gatsby, a Nico, or a Theo?

Gatsby, Nico, or Theo?

East, west, or south?

The answer to that question depends on what your North Star is. Your North Star is your guiding star, your navigation point in the sky, your stable and fixed point around which you chart your paths and steps. It's your worldview, your core guiding principle, that inspires and animates you.

What will your North Star be?

Will it be your impressive performances and achievements, making a name for yourself with your seemingly self-made successes through a supreme work ethic?

Will it be your happiness, as you pursue a journey of upgrades and transfers to enjoy ever-evolving, exquisite experiences, places, people, and possessions?

You will have opportunities to lead communities, companies, civic groups, and charities; to earn substantial incomes; to travel and explore in any direction; to accumulate power; and to influence others. But what will you do with all that? More specifically, will you be a Gatsby, a Nico, or a Theo?

Will it be your independence, your desire to chase whatever your mind may conceive and whatever passion may burn in your heart?

In today's world, any of those north stars would be expected. But I hope yours might be different.

The McCallie motto answers the question of our design and purpose: man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. We were all made in the image of a loving, relational God and are meant to radiate that love—and enjoy that love—as we honor Him. We do so as we worship God and serve others.

That's a very different North Star that leads us in a different direction than much of society. It leads us away from the pressures, anxieties, and exhaustion of constant striving and proving. It leads us away from the emptiness of mere happiness and materialism, from thinking, as Led Zeppelin sang, that "all that glitters is gold." It leads us away from the folly and arrogance of being the god of our lives or worshipping the worldly idols we create.

Instead, as Jesus says in Mark 12:30-31, we are called to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

It's a simple yet profound approach—one that Theo embraced in *Golden* in a myriad of ways. At the close of the book, Father Lundy, a resident of Golden, eulogizes Theo at his overflowing funeral with the following words, and I quote:

"We all walk roads of various descriptions in life. The long and winding road. The road to ruin. Easy street. The road less traveled.



Along the way, there are questions, there is news, there are concerns and fears and uncertainties that furrow our brows, trouble our souls, and break our hearts. Death terrifies many of us.

But God, in his sublime goodness, has always sent others, mysterious others, to walk with us—prophets, preachers, friends, teachers, artists, storytellers, wives and husbands, children, songbirds and rivers, even hardship and loss—to help us see clearly. They are the ones who make our hearts burn within us, who call us out of our indifference, our lethargy, our death and defeat. They call us to be fully alive, or at least more alive than we were before we met them.

And so...Theo.

The McCallie motto answers the question of our design and purpose: man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever...We do so as we worship God and serve others. That's a very different North Star that leads us in a different direction than much of society.

For a year, he was in our midst and now, looking back, can't we say that, when we were with him, our hearts burned within us, our souls stood on tiptoe, our eyes recognized something good and true, and our minds could believe, if not fully, then ever so slightly, that love and heaven and forgiveness are the most real things that we can know in this world?

I think we are only beginning to understand and appreciate what a unique man Theo was. Can you call to mind any man who quite so beautifully integrated the concrete and the spiritual? Who lived with such a winsome commitment to the seen and unseen, the ultimate and the proximate, the wide grace and the narrow way?

Theo was a playful man in the best sense of the word. But it seems more and more certain to me that his lightheartedness was deadly serious and steeped in purpose. It was one more way in which he spoke to us the language of another place. His every kindness was a signpost, meant no doubt for the present but pointing to the up ahead, aiming at the still to come.

Like you, I wonder why Theo chose our city...But how fortunate we are that he chose us, that out of the whole world available to him—and apparently the whole world was—he settled among us, moved into our neighborhood, adopted us as his children, and made us the objects of his affection and the beneficiaries of his thoughtfulness.

We all long to be seen,
known, valued, and loved.
I hope that, during your
years at McCallie, you have
experienced and felt that...
and I hope that has helped
to fortify you, helped you to
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strong foundation for years
and even decades to come.
But more importantly and
perfectly than our ability to
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do that.

Theo could have come to us with great fanfare. He could have flaunted his importance and impressed us with his great wealth and long list of accomplishments. Instead, he came with anonymous handwritten letters and no last name. Instead, he came, as did his Lord, not to be served but to serve."

We began this school year reading and discussing David Brooks' book, *How to Know A Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. Theo beautifully modeled knowing and seeing others deeply as he listened, empathized, and served—not with fanfare or grand gestures, not with parties and mansions, but with small and humble acts of kindness, affirmation, and love.

We all long to be seen, known, valued, and loved. I hope that, during your years at McCallie, you have experienced and felt that...and I hope that has helped to fortify you, helped you to grow and flourish and be a strong foundation for years and even decades to come.



But more importantly and perfectly than our ability to know and see and value and love you is God's ability to do that. I hope it is His perfect love and extravagant generosity for you that you most deeply feel; that you know deeply in your hearts and minds that you bear His image; that He redeems your mistakes and missteps; that He reframes your story and your life; that He offers you a peace and joy that nothing else will; and that He calls you to a life of grace and generosity.

One day, you, like Theo, will be 86. Perhaps sometime in your 86th year, you will, once again, return home to McCallie. Perhaps that morning, under a McCallie blue sky, you will sit on a bench somewhere on this campus and amidst the hustle and bustle of busy teenage boys and teachers and others, your mind and heart will wander back to your days on the Ridge. Perhaps you will recall teachers and advisors and coaches and classmates who were your Theo's...who loved and mentored and supported you during the turbulent teenage years. Perhaps you will say a prayer of gratitude for each of them...and for your school.

And then perhaps—I hope—as you widen the lens of your life, you will that morning recall how you became a Theo to others throughout the different seasons of your life—each season of your life—bestowing blessings on others in small and simple acts of kindness. I hope you will see that you used your privileges on purpose for other people, and that you will take great satisfaction in the impact of your generosity and the investments you made in others.

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And finally, perhaps on that morning on the McCallie campus, you will catch a glimpse of yourself in a window, or on the water of the lake, and perhaps you will stop to stare at that image of yourself. Your own portrait.

What will you see in your face, your portrait, that fine morning?

As you look at your portrait, I hope you won't, like Gatsby, long to relive your past, or reinvent your past, or fight the currents pushing you back ceaselessly to the receding past. I hope you will focus not on the youth you have lost, but embrace, with enchanted wonder, what you have gained... and what you have given...and that you have been a Theo to others for every season of your life.

And as you continue to contemplate your portrait, I hope you will see past the wrinkles and spots and bags to see a man of honor and truth and duty...a humble man ambitious for the benefit of others...a man of significance and service...a man of adventure and exploration...a man with a spirit of gentle boldness... a man of grace and generosity...a man who has glorified God and enjoyed His blessings...a man beloved by God—an image bearer of God.

And after you study your portrait, and as you reflect upon your life, I hope that you will bestow that portrait of you upon yourself and internally hear the words of Jesus from Matthew 25:23: “Well done, thy good and faithful servant.”

Until then, and in all your days, young and old, down all your winding roads—east, west, north, and south—may you be a Theo, a faithful servant, an image bearer of God. And may God bless you, this class, and this our McCallie School, our McCallie home, our McCallie family.

