



# HEAD OF SCHOOL BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

Saturday, May 23, 2026

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## ON PROGRESS

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*  
– From “The Second Coming,” by William Butler Yeats



Dear Mr. Nadeau:

*As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time. I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock, as a contribution to order and steadfastness.*

*Sailors have an expression about the weather: they say, the weather is a great bluffer. I guess the same is true of our human society — things can look dark, then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed, sometimes rather suddenly. It is quite obvious that the human race has made a queer mess of life on this planet. But as a people we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time waiting to sprout when the conditions are right. Man's curiosity, his relentlessness, his inventiveness, his ingenuity have led him into deep trouble. We can only hope that these same traits will enable him to claw his way out.*

*Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day.*

Sincerely,

E. B. White, from “Letters of E. B. White”



*Because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation. Our blunders become their burdens. But one thing is certain. If we merge mercy with might and might with right, then love becomes our legacy and change, our children's birth right.*

*So let us leave behind a country better than one we were left with, every breath from my bronze pounded chest, we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one. We will rise through the gold-limbed hills in the west, we will rise from the windswept northeast where our forefathers first realized revolution. We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the Midwestern states.*

*We will rise from the sun-baked South. We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover; in every known nook of our nation, in every corner called our country, our people, diverse and beautiful, will emerge battered and beautiful.*

*When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid.*

*The new dawn blooms as we free it, for there is always light if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it.*

– Amanda Gorman, “The Hill We Climb”

When I was a freshman in college, my roommate and I took a drive up into rural Vermont to pay a visit to the old homestead where his father had lived many years earlier. While there, we bumped into Mr. Bloom, a spry farmer well into his 80's, who had been a neighbor and known his father before he died. And he took us on a walk around his small property where he grew his own food and kept himself busy with projects.

The first stop was “the smithy.” Mr. Bloom explained that he had found an old crank bellows in the woods, all seized up with rust. He took it apart, cleaned it, and made it work. He had likewise found an iron sink, again, in the woods, which he had fashioned into a forge. He then showed us how he had cast all of the fittings, hinges, and door fixtures that he needed around the farm, by melting down bits of scrap metal.

A little further on, he showed us his sawmill, set up with a large circular saw blade — that too, salvaged from a junk pile. With an engine taken from an old abandoned car, he had rigged up a belt drive to power the saw.

Finally, he showed us a cabin he had built entirely by hand without a single nail. Most of the wood was scrap lumber, carefully pegged or fitted with dove — tail joints. And the door handles and hinges — all crafted just a few steps away, using the forge.

As an 18-year-old college kid, I was in awe of Mr. Bloom, or more accurately, envied him, with his remarkable Yankee ingenuity and self-sufficiency, and the simplicity of his life. The modern world had passed him by, and I think Mr. Bloom was happier, and better for it.

At the same time, as I have reflected back on this memory over the years, I have come to think that the allure of this simple life may be more complicated than it first appears. To be clear, such a lifestyle can be a deeply satisfying and meaningful commitment — whole communities like the Amish have sworn off certain technologies, and have freed themselves from the frenetic pace of life that so many of us are resigned to, and that indeed is a laudable, principled choice.

And yet, practically speaking, all humanity cannot flee modernity, dwelling on small subsistence farms, heating their homes with wood burning stoves, and tinkering in their barns. Given the world's population, we need the efficiency of modern cities, where people are housed in relatively small spaces, where water supply, energy, and waste disposal can be managed at scale, and which in turn frees up the space for larger farms to produce the quantities of food needed to even have a shot at feeding the world, an elusive goal at best, but one that for the first time in human history, may be attainable.

Now, make no mistake, cities bring their own considerable set of problems with which we must contend. And as for food production, are we necessarily better off with genetically altered strains of wheat that allow for greater quantities of bread?

Is “progress” then, for every “two steps forward,” we take “one step back”? Or at times, is it even, “one step forward and two steps back”?

My point here is neither to be an apologist nor a skeptic for ever-advancing human technologies. It is simply that I have come to think that what we call “progress” is neither good nor bad — at least not inherently. It's what we make of it. Wishing things would stay the same, wishing things would stay reassuringly familiar, is unrealistic at best, and can even leave us woefully unprepared to manage the change when it does happen. And inevitably change will happen, for better or for worse.

Human history, from the dawn of time, is filled with countless, significant challenges that societies have had to confront when faced with progress. The lesson here, and the source of my enduring faith and hope, is neither about blindly embracing progress, nor is it about rejecting innovation because it often has a downside. It is more about the remarkable resourcefulness and resilience that the human spirit has shown over time, helping us not simply to persist in spite of the challenges, but to thrive.

In his fascinating and somewhat counterintuitive book, “Sapiens,” Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari makes the case that humans were worse off after the agrarian revolution, that humans previously had a better quality of life as hunter gatherers: they apparently had a shorter work week, a more varied and healthy diet, and fewer ailments.

With the onset of agriculture, we became tied to the land. The diet of the average peasant, for thousands of years, consisted narrowly of gruel of one sort or another, which led to malnutrition, and for much of this time, we were far more vulnerable to periods of drought and famine.

And yet, as compelling as Harari’s assessment may be, the stability of farm production is in part what allowed enduring civilizations with rich cultures to emerge and to inspire us.

Can anyone imagine making a serious case that all humanity turn back the clock on farming and resort to hunting and gathering?

Here’s another example. Consider the transition from a largely oral tradition to a world where paper was readily available, writing became widespread, and eventually the printing press made it easy to produce books.

Once upon a time, the mark of a learned person was the ability to memorize prodigious amounts of material, including extensive village genealogies, vast lore about edible plants and medicinal herbs, and lengthy epic poems. “The Odyssey” was composed with repeating rhyme schemes and refrains in order to make it easier to commit to memory — originally, the only way to preserve it and to pass it on.

As paper became increasingly available, and things could be written down more easily on parchments and scrolls, and eventually bound into books, there was tremendous resistance and anxiety, that this was a shortcut, that the discipline of a sharp mind would be lost, that we would all become soft, and that learning would become a lazy enterprise.

Of course, this did not happen, but things did change dramatically. In fact, patterns of intellectual reflection and language use evolved significantly. The ability to commit thoughts to paper opened the door for Greek thinkers to write lengthy, logical, philosophical essays that did not need to be memorized, and for Persian scholars to compose enduring works of tremendous scientific and metaphysical importance. Who would make the case nowadays that the printed word, or that books, have weakened human culture and hastened the decline of civilization?

Our ability to write things down gave rise to the first great collections of human knowledge that could be easily and widely shared. Before it burned in 48 BCE, the ancient Library of Alexandria is believed to have held hundreds of thousands of scrolls. During the Islamic Golden Age, the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, in the ninth century, is believed to have been the world’s largest repository of books at the time.

Mark Kurlansky, author of a history of the impact of the invention of paper on human civilization, writes: “The debate about the written word continued for centuries. First-century Romans complained that because of the written word, the great Roman art of oratory was in decline.” He goes on to say that “[t]he controversy over the written word was still alive even into the Middle Ages. Saint Thomas Aquinas pointed out that Christ never used the written word because great teachers never use the written word.” (Kurlansky, p.37)

Now I grant you that we may well have conceded ground on our capacity for prodigious memorization, orators may not be what they used to be in ancient times, and it is truly the rare professor who lectures without notes, and that I suppose is a loss of sorts, but does anyone actually long for the days before paper existed or believe that we are diminished by our reliance on books?

Let's try a more recent example of unintended consequences:

The tragedy of World War I trench warfare was exacerbated by the disruptive changes stemming from the 19th century Industrial Revolution: large-scale production of modern armaments in factories, along with significant concentrations of urban workers who quickly transitioned to being soldiers, greatly increased the scope and duration of that war.

But that was only a precursor to an even greater calamity as the war was ending, again, made worse by recent advances in technology.

The Spanish Flu pandemic, immediately following World War I, was by all accounts the deadliest contagion of the modern era, rivaled only by bubonic plague in the Middle Ages or more recently by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Estimates of world-wide fatalities range from 25-50 million. During the two years from 1918-1920, it is believed that roughly one-third of the world's population contracted the disease.

And why was this flu so efficient in spreading and so virulent to those who contracted it? In a word, progress.

At the close of the war, the flu tore through the large concentrations of troops in camps throughout Europe as they prepared to return home. At an earlier time, travelers would have taken months in transit — and in the process, either succumbed along the way, or gotten better, before they arrived home.

By 1918, steamships were crossing the Atlantic in five days, and steam locomotives delivered travelers to their hometowns, whether in Central Russia, or across North America, in even less time. With symptoms just beginning to show, millions of troops arrived home, and the disease exploded across the world.

Even at the time, however, do we think that anyone realistically called for the elimination of steam ships and steam locomotive railroads?

But what then did we do? We put our energy into better, more scientific approaches to vaccine development and their mass production. In the ensuing decades, small pox, polio, and measles were all but eradicated, tetanus and HIV are readily treatable, and we continue to make significant headway around the world with malaria. And as tough as COVID was, the rapid development and large-scale production of a vaccine, which would have been considered near-miraculous in an earlier time, dramatically mitigated the impact of that pandemic.

Indeed, even if new human innovations often bring a downside, our ability to take it in stride and find a better way forward is actually, to me, deeply encouraging.

So let's try to put an even more positive spin on where we are and where we are heading, because it is a natural human trait to focus on the negative.

This tendency "...is what Nobel Prize-winning economist, Daniel Kahneman, called availability bias. In short, what we see or read every day skews our perspective. And since 'bad is stronger than good' — we pay more attention to threats than positive news — the threatening news passes more easily through our mental filters,"<sup>1</sup> and this deeply colors our perspective.

And here is what I mean: while we often dwell on the bad news, it is important to note that over the past 200 years, the quality of life across the planet has improved significantly:

- People living in extreme poverty and rates of child mortality have both plummeted.
  - In the case of abject poverty, it is estimated that in 1820, 96 percent of the world lived in dire circumstances — as of 2015, that number had been reduced to 10 percent.
  - At that earlier time, 43 percent of children died before the age of five, nowadays, that number is four percent.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminnegallo/2019/01/28/bill-gates-shares-his-favorite-infographic-that-shows-200-years-of-human-progress/>

- In that same period of time, basic education and literacy, along with routine vaccinations for diseases such as diphtheria, whooping cough, and tetanus, have all increased remarkably. The rate of literacy alone has climbed from 12 percent worldwide to 85 percent worldwide.
- In 1820, roughly one percent of the world lived in a democracy, more recently, estimates suggest we are closer to 56 percent.
- And what makes this kind of progress all the more remarkable and encouraging, is that during this very same time period, the world's overall population also increased almost seven-fold.

For such advances to occur, people had to confront the issues with relentless hope, and they needed to work to improve living conditions for its own sake. Educators who fought for literacy, soldiers who defended democracy, researchers who worked to develop cures for human diseases, and farmers who tested drought-resistant sources of food did so, not for their own self-advancement. What drove them was the idea that success was defined by the degree to which they could directly improve the lives of others.

**So what does this mean for you, our graduating seniors?** You are entering a world as complicated as it has ever been, at least as I have seen it in my lifetime: Politically, militarily, technologically — you name it — and the rate of change is dizzying.

As you are poised to enter your adult lives, the age of Artificial Intelligence is upon us — and we are only beginning to understand what such “progress” has in store for us. Some predict massive disruptions to the workforce, catastrophic strains on our energy grid, and a fundamental undermining of the distinctly human, creative spirit.

Nicholas Carr, author of “Superbloom: How Technologies of Connection Tear Us Apart,” writes, “If you use AI to ‘write’ something, or to ‘code’ something, or to ‘compose’ something, or to ‘design’ something, or to ‘invent’ something, then any true sense of accomplishment will be withheld from you. You will always know that you’re a fraud.”<sup>2</sup>

Others see extraordinary promise and transformative possibilities, leveraging and elevating human ingenuity offering doctors extraordinarily precise diagnostic tools, for example, or allowing researchers to spend less time seeking information and more time reflecting on that information, and bringing tools to inventors that can prototype solutions in a nano-second — if only the human asks the right question.

So perhaps all is not lost.

Journalist Ezra Klein wonders if some of our AI fears may be overstated. He writes, “In 1979, VisiCalc, the first electronic spreadsheet, was released for the Apple II. It could do in minutes what previously took teams of accountants days. There were predictions of mass unemployment for bookkeepers. Instead, the number of accountants quadrupled over the next 40 years. ‘The spreadsheet didn’t replace the accountant,’ (...)”

‘It unleashed latent demand for financial intelligence that had been there all along, waiting for costs to fall far enough to be satisfied.’<sup>3</sup>

Either way, we can debate such scenarios, for better or for worse, all day long — and to be sure, there are reasonable perspectives on virtually all sides of this complicated set of circumstances. So where does that leave us?

I come back to our three opening passages that Nelson, Destiny, and David read for us. I suppose we could give in to despair and futility, as Yeats’ lines of verse warn us, that “*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*”

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.newcartographies.com/p/from-homo-faber-to-homo-fictor>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/03/opinion/ai-jobs-unemployment-silicon-valley.html?campaign\\_id=2&cmc=edit\\_th\\_20260504&instance\\_id=175066&nl=today%27s-headlines&regi\\_id=28686681&segment\\_id=219322&user\\_id=66cde14e700fd1ae80d2d7d7b5afbccc](https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/03/opinion/ai-jobs-unemployment-silicon-valley.html?campaign_id=2&cmc=edit_th_20260504&instance_id=175066&nl=today%27s-headlines&regi_id=28686681&segment_id=219322&user_id=66cde14e700fd1ae80d2d7d7b5afbccc)

Or we can rely on simple, steady hope, as E.B. White reassures us in his letter: *“As long as there is one upright man, as long as there is one compassionate woman, the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate. Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time.”*

As for me, I lean toward Amanda Gorman’s assertive strength of heart and indomitable will:

*“So let us leave behind a country better than one we were left with... When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid ... there is always light if only we’re brave enough to see it...”*

**And why do I lean this way, what gives me this degree of faith in the future? To be honest, it is all of you.**

- I see your resilience, earned as you reemerged from COVID during the earlier years of your adolescence
- I see warmth and kindness in you — I see it every day in the way you greet each other on the pathways, comfort teammates who came in second, and support peers who demonstrate the courage to go to the podium in School Meeting to offer us a reminder about the respect that we each deserve.
- I am encouraged by your earnest efforts to hear each other, whether in the context of Let’s Talk About, or Civic Awareness Day, or an informed debate with Young Republicans and Young Democrats, or across the table at an Open Forum dinner.
- I see your strength of heart and integrity when walking through the handshake line of a game you did not win, looking your opponents in the eye and congratulating them.
- I am in awe of your intellectual curiosity, your technical expertise, and your problem-solving abilities when I wander through one of our Academic Showcase evenings.
- I see you spreading joy freely in theatrical and dance performances on stage or Midday Music recitals, where your talents lift our spirits and feed our souls.
- I am humbled when I have had opportunities to meet with so many of you in leadership positions reminding us that we can do a better job of living up to our ideals as an institution, that we can be a place where all students have a safe and secure sense of belonging.
- When I see the time and energy that you put into such endeavors, I see a core belief in doing the right thing for a higher purpose beyond your own selves.

You are now on the verge of heading out into the world, and you will without doubt confront the thorny dilemmas of advancement and change, and yes, progress, in one form or another. And as you do, you will bring with you this generosity of spirit, this belief in each other, this sense of hope and possibility, and you will indeed find a way, not simply to persist, but to thrive. Of that, I am sure.

Thank you very much.