TVS CLASS OF 2026

BEN COURCHESNE'S COMMENCEMENT SPEECH
HEAD OF SCHOOL

Graduation season is one of my favorite seasons. And it's not because it signals the end of school or because I get to wear this incredibly flattering Columbia blue gown. And it's not because we finally get the wily and untamable senior class out the door.
A little bit of that.

It's because this is the month, all across America, when people in robes and regalia step to podiums to deliver a crop of commencement speeches, attempting to braid the zeitgeist with lasting wisdom in the hopes of launching graduates into the world. And it's one of my favorite genres. It's a kind of secular sermon.

Now, I predict this year's speeches will land on the same themes they often do: uncertainty and change, resourcefulness and adaptability as the skills of the future—which, by the way, are also the skills of the past. They'll be right and wrong at about the same rate as anyone who tries to predict the future.

Right now, I want to cue that Michael Jackson meme where he's eating popcorn, because I'm just totally here for all these commencement speeches that are gonna land in the newspapers.

Earlier this week at Senior Sunset, I shared with the class of 2026 copies of one of my favorites, David Foster Wallace's *This Is Water*, the speech he gave to the Kenyon College graduating class in 2005. And his thesis, put plainly, is that the job of being an adult is choosing what to pay attention to.

We all know the landscape now: phones out of the classroom, AI doing the reading and writing we used to do ourselves, an attention economy that pays its bills on rage bait, dopamine, and infinite scroll. Few of us, kids or adults, can sit with a single idea for more than 90 seconds anymore. And the people who built these tools know it. Wallace saw it 20 years ago. So I predict some of the most stirring speeches will focus on the formative value of intentional, disciplined focus, about not offloading to AI what is most crucial to human formation, about the sacredness of effort, work, and thinking. All of this is on my mind as I think about you and the future of TVS. But somehow, it doesn't feel like the most vital thing to share with you.

I cannot say for certain whether what's ahead looks more like heaven or hell. More likely, it'll look a lot like how the world has changed before, just at a different speed and to a different degree. There are no maps for uncharted territories, and it's better to have a compass anyway. Commencement formula: gratitude, anecdote, lesson, blessing. And I will hit those marks more or less. But I want to start somewhere else.

Today, I want to talk to you about something more certain than the future.

When I arrived at TVS, I asked our teachers to hold two duties sacred: to witness and to role model. Witnessing means paying full attention to who the students are and how they're growing up. Witnesses do not always interfere or intervene. They listen. They hold what they see. They reflect back. They show up to your

performances and your games.

They cheer you in victory, and they bolster you in defeat. Your parents have borne witness to nearly every milestone and every struggle of your 18 years. They were there for the first bite of real food, the first wobbling steps, the first morning you walked into a school building without them and didn't look back. They have glowed at your artwork in our hallways, leaned in for your bird-like voice in the lower school choir, lit up at the bravado that overtakes your face when a shot rips past the goalie. They have witnessed the harder things too: the friendship that ended in a way you couldn't explain, the role you didn't get, the election you lost, the night you sat in your room while the group chat lit up without you, the morning you couldn't get out of bed.

When we are at our best—parents and teachers—we do not interfere in those moments. We witness them. We stand by, more lighthouse than tugboat. We let you find your way, and in doing so, we tell you we believe you can. Role modeling is the second duty.

And it rests on a hard truth: children pay more attention to what we do than what we say. James Baldwin put it very cleanly: "Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they never fail to imitate them." Your teachers know this. They know that the way they speak to a struggling student, the way they handle a bad day, the way they treat a colleague in the hallway—all of it is being clocked.

I've tried to model it myself this year, with mixed results. I've turned up at your games and your plays and slipped into your classrooms. I've tried to be in dress code. The dress code part on your end has not always gone so well. But the principles hold. We love you by making sure our actions don't betray our words.

Now I'm going to read you a poem that illustrates some of this. You may not know that I love poetry because I just got here and I haven't given a lot of speeches, but they will almost always have a poem. And for those of you who have trouble paying attention, here's a little pre-work for you to help you with the poem. Picture a father, 18 years out, looking back on one ordinary morning. He had taken his young son to school and stood at the edge of the field watching him play his first game of football.

And the speaker is British, so he means soccer, but being in Texas, if you wish football to mean football, that serves just fine. After the game, the boy drifted off into a scatter of other kids and disappeared into the rest of his day, leaving his father behind. The speaker has been turning that moment over in his head ever since, trying to figure out why it still won't leave him.

Here's the poem. It's called *Walking Away* by C. Day Lewis.

It is eighteen years ago, almost to the day –
A sunny day with leaves just turning,
The touch-lines new-ruled – since I watched you play
Your first game of football, then, like a satellite
Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away

Behind a scatter of boys. I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where the path should be.

That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something I never quite grasp to convey
About nature's give-and-take – the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

The poet is C. Day Lewis. Some of you may know that name through his son, the legendary actor Daniel Day-Lewis—*Lincoln*, Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood*, Bill the Butcher in *Gangs of New York*, three-time Oscar winner, one of the greatest performers of our lifetime. But this poem is not about Daniel. It's about Cecil, the other son, the one nobody outside that family will ever know.

The famous son got the world's attention. This poem is what it looks like when a father pays attention to the other one, to the quiet one, to the boy walking away into a scatter of other boys on an ordinary sunny morning. Love is paying attention. That's all it is.

That's all it's ever been. And the people in this room have been showing you what it looks like for as long as you've known them. G.K. Chesterton wrote that men did not love Rome because she was great; she was great because they had loved her. Loving comes first. The greatness comes after.

Seniors, look at the people in this room: parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, teachers. We did not love you because you earned it. You became who you are because you were loved first, before you had done anything to deserve it. Teachers and parents share an aim that almost no other relationship shares. We are both, from day one, working ourselves out of a job.

Thomas Carruthers said, "A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary." Parents do the same work, with more years on the clock and more skin in the game. The first day of kindergarten was a rehearsal for today. Today's a rehearsal for the rest of your life. Every time we did not intervene when we wanted to, every time we watched you struggle and stayed in our seats, every time we let you walk into a building without us, we were practicing.

C. Day Lewis has a phrase for these formative moments: "the small, the scorching ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay." The election you lost in seventh grade was small by any adult measure. It was also scorching. And it's part of how you got here. The failures and the indignities—*per aspera*—that precede the *ad astra*.

The discipline teachers and parents exercise lets those moments happen because we know the goal is agency, autonomy, letting go, and letting you walk away on your own two feet. Before I go further, I do want to recognize the central partnership we promised to you parents at TVS. Our teachers have walked beside you in this work—different from you, with different intensities and motivations, but engaged in the same essential work.

They've loved them day after day, year after year, sometimes when they were hard to like, and occasionally in

moments of disagreement, when we saw the student differently, but no less truly, often in moments that you didn't see and may never know about. Today is for them too. Class of 2026, I've only been your head of school for one year, but here's what I've paid attention to.

I remember Hub Nichols arranging to meet with me my first summer before he had to, to welcome me to TVS and offer candid, leaderly feedback about how we could be better. I'll remember Sydney Fewins sitting outside my office in the morning to catch me as I arrived so she could share her concern about something happening at school.

I'll remember the powerful, evocative voice of Dahlia Chandler as the curtain opened on *Hadestown*, and the poise and artistry she carried through the exposition of that musical, and how she just held us with her voice. I'll remember the buoyant, unstoppably positive Lylah St. Peter and her field hockey teammates bringing an absolute pop-infused vibe to the lower school drop-off. The precision of Julian Gerstle and the Trinitones tapping and humming through "White Winter Hymnal."

The glow of firelight on your faces around the fire at the ranch on your last TOE trip. Charlotte Goldman buried in her hoodie, totally enveloped by her friends, eating a perfectly roasted s'more. Will the members of the senior class who have won an SPC title please stand?

Will you keep standing if you won two? We're not going to clap because there are too many. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Thank you. TVS, where men are men and women are champions.

Eighteen of you donned the Columbia and Royal for our football team this year, the largest senior class we've fielded in a long time. And you were a really fun group to watch, capable of grinding out a win or slinging it in a gunfight.

You'll likely remember your season as defined by two extremely close losses decided by mere inches on gutsy goal-line calls, just short of two extra-point tries. And I will always remember Tappan Bailey and Charlie Bulaich walking off the field after those games, bowed but not unbroken. What I'll remember most is that the 18 of you played for coaches who believed in you. When the game was on the line and they could lay up for a tie or go for the win, they bet on you.

Hindsight is 20/20, and there is no easier position than Monday morning quarterback to suggest a safer play. But we see in you exactly what Coach Morrison sees: a group worth betting on. And I know he bet on you every time.

I met with every senior advisory group this year to ask for your impressions and your advice about TVS. A few of you confessed to me, "We're the bad class." We're a handful. I was curious about this self-fashioning. Sure, some of you made some stupid decisions along the way, even right up to the end with that questionable skip day last month. But those of us who have been in schools long enough know this is to be expected. Pushing boundaries, minor rebellions—that's the work of growing up. So is learning how to admit the error of your ways, reflect, and apologize.

So on this day, I want to take a moment to say: all is forgiven. You will be remembered not for your transgressions, but for your courage, your leadership, your service, and your wily ways. And I hope you will return year after year for reunions and reflect on all of this and all I blessedly know nothing about. We've spent 18 years practicing letting you go.

We started on the first day of kindergarten when we let you walk into a building without us. We practiced every time we did not intervene when we wanted to, and every time we watched you struggle and stayed in our seats, every time we let a hard moment teach you something we could have spared you from. Today is just the last and largest rehearsal.

Here's what I want you to know: you have been paid attention to for 18 years. From here on, you're the ones who choose what to pay attention to. And you'll be choosing in a world engineered every hour and every day to choose for you. The proof of whether we did this well is not in your resumes or your acceptances or your future titles. The proof is whether you can love something the way you have been loved.

Whether you can pay attention to a person, a place, a craft, a calling, the way the people in this room have paid attention to you. Whether you can stay when staying is hard. Whether you can witness without interfering. Whether you can love something before it has earned it. Whether you can pay attention so well that the next person learns from watching you. That's the inheritance.

That is one of the most important things we have to give you. Selfhood begins with a walking away, and love is proved in the letting go. In a few minutes, you will walk across the stage and away from us, and we will let you, and we hope you'll be back. Some of you in text chains or at reunions, some of you may make your lives right here in Fort Worth or even come here to teach at TVS.

But never again will this exact gathering, this class, and this configuration, with this light on it, ever happen again. Today is the day we admit you have always been visitors. And we watched you arrive, and we get to watch you leave. And the walking away is the proof that our love is real. Congratulations, Class of 2026.

Before I sit down, let me do what I should have done at the top and welcome you properly. To our parents, grandparents, friends, and the wider families of the Class of 2026, thank you for entrusting your children to us and for everything you've poured into this day. To our trustees and our distinguished guests, thank you for being here. To the faculty and staff of Trinity Valley School, thank you for the attention, care, and expertise that make this day possible.

And to the Class of 2026, one more time: this is your day.