Pingry

Remarks from Head of School Tim Lear
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I recently learned that some of my favorite movie lines were not scripted — they were completely improvised. Famous lines like "Leave the gun, take the cannoli" from *The Godfather*, "Here's looking at you, kid" from *Casablanca* and "You talkin' to me?" from *Taxi Driver* were ad-libbed and delivered off the cuff while the cameras were rolling.

How many other well-known movie lines were ad-libbed, I wondered? Fortunately, this is exactly the sort of high-level, strategic question that Heads of School are required to investigate.

And given how relatively slow and calm (wink) the month of May is on our three campuses, I immediately cleared my calendar and went looking for Mr. Bugliari, whose memory for movie trivia runs almost as deep as his memory for Pingry history. Indeed, there is an unconfirmed (but highly credible) rumor that OpenAI modeled ChatGPT off of his unique brain processing powers.

We spent hours talking about our favorite movies. And by the end of our conversation, I had forgotten to eat lunch, had inadvertently purchased two belts and a toaster, was halfway through Season 2 of *The Office*, and was staring at an angry group text from my wife to our children which read, "Who just opened another Paramount+ account? We already have one!"

Seniors, I should mention that "talking with Mr. Bugliari" is really code for "surrendering to A.I.," and since you're never allowed to boo Mr. Bugliari — especially during graduation — I'll now share what my lost weekend of internet research taught me:

I discovered that some of the most-quoted lines in movie history are ones that were never in the script. Instead, they were spontaneous, split-second decisions.

Like the punchline — "I'll have what she's having" — in *When Harry Met Sally*. And the reminder that amplifiers "go to eleven" in *This Is Spinal Tap*. Lines as memorable as "I'm the king of the world!" and "Alright, alright, alright" all happened because someone was prepared enough, and present enough, to respond in the moment.

Interestingly and thankfully, however, the highlight of my research was decidedly analog and old-fashioned: it was a Harrison Ford interview on NPR's *Fresh Air* — one where he was discussing his breakout role in *Star Wars* with Terry Gross, who has been interviewing people for over 50 years.

They were analyzing his famous scene with Carrie Fisher, the moment when Princess Leia tells Han Solo that she loves him and he responds with a cocky, "I know," instead of saying "I love you too,"— which is what he was supposed to say, according to the script.

Ford explained that while Director George Lucas wasn't happy that he didn't stick to the script, Ford believed strongly that his improvised reply was more in character for Han Solo and insisted they keep it in the movie.

That unscripted line was unexpected. It got a laugh from the audience. And somehow, because of that laugh, the scene opened up emotionally and quickly became a fan favorite.

At this point in the NPR interview, rather than dwelling on Ford's confident ad-lib, or on his incredibly successful, still-going-strong 50-year career, the conversation shifted to his intense shyness growing up, on the many years of struggle and uncertainty that preceded (and ultimately led to) that iconic moment from *Star Wars*.

While I knew Harrison Ford had worked on-and-off as a professional carpenter before landing that breakout role as Han Solo, what I didn't realize was that he was already 33 years old when filming began on *Star Wars*.

And while it is tempting for me to think that Ford was born a "mini-Indy," wearing Indiana Jones's brown leather jacket and signature fedora, I learned from this interview that he actually spent much of his teens and twenties completely unsure of himself and of his place in the world.

He wasn't a student-athlete or in student government in high school. During his junior year at Ripon College in Wisconsin, he felt isolated and alone, like he was failing. And he wasn't exaggerating. He was expelled just four days before graduation and never received his college degree.

So what was the turning point for Harrison Ford? When and how did that insecure and lost person become the "star" we all know, the person comfortable on Hollywood's biggest stages and screens?

In his words, the transformation happened once he stopped judging people he didn't know and, "found the company of people putting on plays, the people I once thought were misfits and geeks. These people turned out to be my people. And I found a calling, an identity, a life in storytelling because of them."

Just a few weeks ago, at our annual Achievement in the Arts Award ceremony, talent agent David Bugliari from the Class of 1997 described a similar path — a career built on a willingness to adapt and ad-lib, and a desire to be surrounded by incredible collaborators and artists.

In David's words, "Champion the artist. Believe fiercely in them, in their potential, and help create the space needed for them to create."

Harrison Ford called this experience "finding your tribe." And where Ford was willing to spend years sweeping up floors and working as a carpenter on various movie sets just to be near "his people," David Bugliari was equally comfortable telling his parents that he was passing up law school to instead get up at 5:00 a.m. and spend his days in a Hollywood Starbucks — for months — in the hopes of sparking a conversation with the talent agents waiting to pick up their coffee every morning.

Seniors, so many of our alumni guest speakers this year shared some version of that same lesson — that meaningful lives are rarely linear, and that the people beside us often shape the courage we find within ourselves.

As you head off to college, I would argue that those two things — the willingness to adapt and improvise, and the habit of listening carefully to what other people have to say — will always be more important than mastering A.I., picking the right major, or securing the best internship.

While it makes sense for all of us to spend some time wondering how best to prompt Claude or how best to react to what Gemini has to say, a no less important question for us to consider is how we can best champion and support one another; how we can most effectively react in the moment, partnering with others to experience (and to perhaps build) something that lasts.

There are key things that we cannot outsource or discover remotely, and as each of you defines for yourself what those are, I urge you to prioritize people and invest in relationships; surround yourselves with people who challenge and champion you, who not only see your potential but who make you want to reach it.

Success is not linear, easy, impersonal, or individual. Each generation of graduates feels the pressure to succeed — to achieve liftoff in life even sooner than the previous class did. But life is, ideally, long, and a successful life and career require chance, creativity, and most importantly community support.

Careers don't happen overnight, and the trust and talent needed to go off-script and feel comfortable reacting — and leading — in the moment can take years to build.

At a time when emerging technologies seem to be expanding what's possible while simultaneously narrowing humanity's role in its creation, I would encourage you to push back on that notion and look for ways to show up (in-person) and find ways to connect with classmates and colleagues, strangers and family, as often as possible.

To quote Roy Scheider's improvised advice in the movie *Jaws*: "You're gonna need a bigger boat."

As tempting as it is to turn our decision-making powers over to A.I. and relax as the autopilot takes over, one Pingry parent recently shared a powerful reminder about A.I. that has stayed with me:

“I think the pilot analogy is the best one I have seen. You need to actually learn to fly a plane and how it works and the science behind weather. Otherwise, when something goes wrong with the automated systems or you’re put under significant duress, you are toast.”

Fortunately, Pingry has trained each of you how to fly the plane very well. We have taught you to value the common good, to honor the rights of others, to strive for personal excellence alongside academic excellence. We have prepared you to not only work hard, but to consider how your actions impact others.

But work, at its best, is not merely a private pursuit. It is one of the ways strangers become collaborators, and collaborators build things none of them could have built alone. It is one of the ways we discover what we value, what we are willing to practice, and who we want to become.

Though he is now decades into his film career — and well past his own 50th high school Reunion — the nearly 84-year-old Harrison Ford isn’t interested in retiring anytime soon:

"Without my work, I really wouldn't know what to do with myself. I really do love the work … It constantly changes, and the people change, and the mission and the opportunity change, and it just makes for an interesting way to live your life."

We certainly live in interesting times. And you are fortunate to be surrounded by families, teachers, and friends who are rooting for you, whose interest in your happiness and success is as constant as the change that will define your professional and personal lives.

As you take your next steps and some inevitable missteps, as you choose to sometimes follow the script and sometimes leave the script behind, may you always remember that the best stories are rarely written alone — and that Pingry will always be part of your story.

Congratulations, members of the Class of 2026 — and may The Force be with you.