

Canterbury School Graduation Address

5 June 2009

I am riding in the second row of a bus headed south down Interstate I-85 with Canterbury's eighth grade- this graduating class- sitting in the rows behind me. We are coming home from our trip to Washington, D.C. I am staring at a blank computer screen just as I have for the last hour, with the deadline for my graduation speech- this graduation speech- growing closer with each passing minute. But the more I stare, the more I concentrate, the more difficult this task becomes.

Just when it seems that I am at the point of a break through, just when the random thoughts flitting around in my head begin to converge into something coherent and something, perhaps, profound- Luca Della Santa tells a joke in the back of the bus, the students erupt in laughter, and my concentration is broken.

This task, the task given to me by this eighth grade, is a difficult one. What do you say to a group of graduating students that they will remember? What do you say that will motivate them to accomplish great things in life? What do you say that isn't being said by any of the thousands of other graduation speakers who are addressing the millions of graduates throughout the country this week? I remind myself that the opportunity to give this graduation address is an honor that has been given to me by this class, and I must do a good job, so I stare again at the blank screen.

Staring into a blank computer screen is, at times, like staring at one of those 3D images. If you stare at long enough, and if you cross your eyes just right, an image miraculously pops out of the screen and hovers in the foreground. I am hoping for a

similar phenomenon to happen now. I am hoping that by staring hard enough and by crossing my eyes just right, a marvelous idea will pop out of the screen and catalyze the greatest graduation speech ever given.

And suddenly it begins to happen. Out of the dark recesses of my brain emerges the mere hint of an idea. Though I can't quite make it out, I get the sense that it will be a wonderful, a profound, a glorious, an earth-shattering idea that will motivate this eighth grade to do wonders and achieve miraculous things in the world, that will compel the staff at Canterbury to believe that there is more to me than just great hair, that will prove so inspiring that those in attendance here today will begin writing checks to Canterbury for vast sums of money simply because of the sheer brilliance of my speech. It is just at this point that I hear Murphy Holmes' voice rise above the chaos at the back of the bus as she says to Mary Claire Hurley, "Oh my god! Did he really say that?"

The bus immediately grows silent in anticipation of Mary Claire's response, and this idea, this brilliant idea that would certainly result in either a McArthur or Nobel Prize fades into oblivion as I, too, begin to wonder along with the rest of the bus who "he" really is and whether MC will reveal to us what "he" really said.

Darn it, I have a graduation speech- this speech- to write, but there is no order to my thoughts; and the images that swirl in my mind seem random and unrelated, so I give up and just listen. My mind clears, and slowly pieces of conversation begin to rise above the din and filter to the front of the bus. "Do you remember that time in fifth grade. . ." "Remember in kindergarten when Mrs. Parker. . ." "Does anyone remember who. . ." "Do you guys remember when William. . ." Typically, these statements are followed by explosions of laughter- that's one commonality- but in virtually every case, I discover,

conversations begin with questions, and the questions begin with the word “remember,” “remember,” “remember.”

Slowly, as I begin to listen to these fragments of conversation, the memories and thus the history of this eighth grade class are presented to me in a verbal collage of facts, fiction, and shared experience.

Scholars tell us that history informs our understanding of the present; that a knowledge of the past- a knowledge of where we were- explains the present- where we are and who we are now. What I realize is that it is history- this class’s series of shared experiences- that will bind them to this school and bind them to their classmates for the rest of their lives.

This is a history that began in the year 2000, when Canterbury School, then in its seventh year of existence, opened its doors to 40 kindergarteners, 29 of whom are members of this year’s 8th grade class- Shannon Arnold, Elena Andia, Avery Auman, Alex Boyko, McKibbin Brady, Elizabeth Brewington, Greg Bristol, Marianna Broome, Council Dawson, Brown DuBose, Ellie Holleman, Murphy Holmes, Nicky Fenger, Grace Holbrook, Mason Kendrick, William Johnston, Samuel Lankford, Dean Little, Jenna Livingston, Carson Mayes, Anne Bennett Osteen, Tommy Rapp, Baker Saslow, Andrew Smith, Caroline Smith, J Summerell, Jordan Taavon, Megan Theall, and Christopher Tice. 73% of this graduating class began at Canterbury in kindergarten.

Canterbury was a lot different when you started. When you arrived on campus, Fry Hall was little more than, perhaps, a set of blueprints, and your classrooms were in portables often euphemistically referred to as “cottages.” Chapel services were held in

Ketner Center, which was one of only two permanent buildings on campus; and Phillips Chapel- this magnificent building that we are in today- would not arrive for three more years. Berry Hall, Fry Hall, and the Stafford Arts Center were years away from construction.

But what your parents realized at the time was that the true merit of a school resides not in the bricks and mortar that distinguish the campus, but in the people and personalities who work with the students. It has always been and will always be the people who make great schools and who make this school great.

Thus, when you arrived on campus, the school was a lot different than it is today; but the world was a lot different then, too. William Jefferson Clinton was your president when you started kindergarten. And just a few months after you entered Canterbury, George Bush and Al Gore would engage in the closest presidential election in the nation's history. A little known Islamic fundamentalist group called *Al Qaeda* would bomb the USS Cole in Yemen that fall, killing 17 crew members and injuring 39 others. Mad Cow disease would plague Europe; and the song "Who Let The Dogs Out," with equal ferocity, plagued radio stations right here in the U.S. To this day, I don't know which was worse the disease or the song.

As you grew up and changed, so too did your class, and so too did your world. Owen Rightsell and Erin Jackson joined the class in the first grade, and Suejette Black came to Canterbury in the second grade.

It would be a few more years before new editions were made to your class, but in the interim, Canterbury would experience radical growth. Phillips Chapel was constructed

in 2003. Do you remember that time that Mr. Bristol pulled everyone out of class to make hand prints in the wet cement that had been poured for one of the walkways? That same year, Fry Hall would become your lower school building. Berry Hall would be constructed two years later in 2005, and slowly the trailers- “the cottages”- that had served as the campus buildings since the school’s founding would disappear.

While you were in lower school, the world continued to change. The World Trade Center was attacked, and the U.S. began its war on Terror. The Olympics were held in Salt Lake City; and in Athens, Greece, Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake created a scandal during the halftime show at the Superbowl. Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf coast, and Roy Williams became the basketball coach at Carolina (that’s North Carolina for all you South Carolinians in the audience).

Luca Della Santa joined your class in the fifth grade. Mason Kendrick, who had left during your second grade year, rejoined the class in the sixth grade along with Robert Chou, Eryn Culmer, Hanna Debnam, and Grace Robbins. Mary Claire Hurley and Rachel Cox would come to Canterbury during your seventh grade year, and Aaron Wilson would join your class this year. The same year we added the most recent building- the Stafford Arts Center- to the growing slate of permanent buildings on campus.

If what historians tell us is true- if our past does, in fact, shape and inform the present, then you are a class whose identity is inextricably linked to this school and to the world in which you live. All told, your class has spent almost three hundred school years at Canterbury. For the vast majority of you, Canterbury is the only school you have ever known. You have never lived, really, in a country that is free from the threat of

international terror. Therefore, as you have grown, so too has your school; and as you have changed, so too has your world.

Your memories, your history, make you who you are - both as individuals, and as a class. By sharing your memories with one another as you did on the bus you are, in fact, reminding yourselves that you are *members* of this class. I hope you will treasure your time together and your membership in this class for the rest of your lives.

But your time at Canterbury should not be relegated merely to a set of memories; your education should not be limited, simply, to the past. It is really about the future. Historians also tell us that by understanding history we can both anticipate and influence the future. And that is really why we are here today. Appreciating your history is important, but history can be demoted to mere bullet points on a timeline or mere facts in a graduation speech. History has already been set and cannot be changed.

Your time at Canterbury is really about your future. Unlike the past, the future has yet to be written. And it is at this point, where life's biggest questions are, hopefully, raging inside you; and when your future weighs in the balance that we decide to send you off. We do so with every confidence in your ability to be successful, because you we have prepared you, we feel, to influence the future, rather than to be influenced by it. Your time at Canterbury- weather one year or nine- is intended to allow you to make a difference in the world, and now is your time to do so.

So, I am sitting on the bus, listening and learning more as my brain processes each new piece of information, and suddenly a male voice- maybe it was Robert's, or Christopher's, or Jordan's- rises above the din and makes its way to the front, and this time

the question is different. “What are we going to do tomorrow?” That is a question that I cannot answer, but the beauty of the question resides in the fact that the answer is left entirely up to you.

And I have every confidence that the answer- your answer- will be remarkable. I have every confidence that because of your past, the future rests well within your grasp.