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The Harker School

Baccalaureate 2008

The Don't List

Good evening. I would like to thank the class of 2008 for giving me the honor of addressing you tonight. I would like to dedicate my remarks this evening to Howard Nichols who, thirty years ago took a chance and hired a young, inexperienced history teacher and who is currently fighting his own battle against cancer, to the memory of our dear friend and colleague, Cheryl Cavanaugh who was, and continues to be my inspiration and to the two most important people in my life who sustain me on a daily basis.

I had a difficult time this year deciding what I wanted to talk about. I had kernels of ideas but nothing was really coming together into a cohesive whole. Then, a few days ago, I read some remarks from political satirist P.J. O'Rourke. He said that if he ever spoke at a commencement ceremony, his advice would be to ignore all the advice you've ever been given at commencement ceremonies and just go out and make a lot of money. Now, I'm not going to go quite that far, but it did give me the idea of presenting an "anti-advice" speech, which I guess is in keeping with your "anti-prank". So, I have created a list of three things you shouldn't do after you graduate. I learned from our very first graduation speaker, Guy Kawasaki, the value of using a list...it helps an audience follow along and, most importantly, it will let you know when I'm almost finished. So, with that, I give you my "Don't List."

Don't #1 – Don't "Do Your Best"

This is a phrase I've thought about for a long time. It sounds so benign. I mean, what could be more understanding than when a parent, or teacher, or coach says "I don't care what grade you get" or "I don't care if we win or lose"...I just want you to do your best. First of all, how many of you believe it when an adult says that to you? The problem, as I see it, is not so much the phrase itself but how we, too often, choose to define it. What exactly does it mean to "do your best?" If I get a 95% on a test but could have received a 100% if I stayed up studying for an additional three hours, did I "do my best?" One of my freshmen advisees told me that she feels guilty because she doesn't think she works very hard and she goes to bed early every night. Now, this student is taking our most challenging courses and getting straight "A's". I consider her one of our healthiest students and yet she already feels guilty, I'm sure partly because she senses that, compared to others, she isn't "doing her best." When we establish working until you get it absolutely right as our standard for doing your best, we are asking for a tired, stressed out population. And, technology certainly hasn't helped. You know, the stuff that was supposed to make our lives easier. In my view, what it has done is just give us even more time to do our best. So, if I don't want you to do your best, what is the alternative? Maybe we need to redefine doing your best. For me, I guess it would be developing the ability

to stop and say, under the circumstances that is the best I can do... “that’s good enough”. I recognize that that phrase is also fraught with potential danger. Some would argue that approach would inhibit drive and ambition and “getting ahead.” But, while I see that to a point, I would ask, when did life become a race and what price will you pay for winning? When I first started teaching, I substituted one day at my old junior high. One of my former teachers, upon seeing me and realizing I had become a teacher, actually said to me, “Oh, I always thought you could have done so much more.” I guess in her mind I hadn’t “done my best.” And, maybe by her standard I hadn’t. I would suggest that you find a different standard because I wouldn’t trade my life or career for anyone’s.

Don’t #2 – Don’t “Make Every Minute Count”

This is one you hear all the time and is often the “lesson” we learn from people with life-threatening illnesses. Life is short, time is precious, so don’t waste a minute of it. I wholeheartedly agree with that sentiment; what I object to is the notion that we have to “make” every minute count. Popular culture gives us movies like “The Bucket List” and songs like “Live Like You Are Dying”, which seem to impart the message that jumping out of airplanes and traveling to exotic parts of the world bring meaning and adventure...that they bring life to our lives. The implication is that most of us waste time with the boring drudgery of day to day existence. A year ago, my oncologist suggested that if there was anything else I wanted to do in my life, now might be a good time to do it. I was taken slightly aback, partially because of her obvious implication, but mostly because it never even occurred to me to do anything else. I don’t need to jump out of an airplane to find meaning or to bring life to my life...teaching and spending time with my family provide all the meaning I could ever want so why would I do anything else? That’s why I prefer the message that comes from Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*. In the final act, Emily Webb, who has died, is given the opportunity to go back to her life for a day. She is disappointed to see how little her family appreciates the preciousness of daily life and she ultimately says to the Stage Manager, “do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?” Now, many students who read *Our Town* find life in Grover’s Corners to be pretty boring, but there is a lot to be said for boredom. When I was in college, my favorite novel was *Catch-22* and for some reason I was always drawn to the character of Lieutenant Dunbar. Dunbar cultivated boredom because he was convinced that it made your life longer. Now, that obviously isn’t true...after all, if he were right, faculty meetings alone would have already added years to my life. But, boredom does have its place. I recently read a fascinating article that was a defense of boredom. It argued that in our constantly engaged, plugged in society no one has time for quiet, reflective thought any more, that time where, it can be argued, many of our great ideas originate. The problem is we are all way too busy making every minute count. So, maybe we should all slow down just a bit and recognize that you don’t have to make every minute count, because they already do count...you just have to learn how to appreciate them all, every, every minute, even the boring ones.

Don't #3 – Don't "Be Optimistic"

Now, don't get me wrong...I'm not advocating pessimism and, maybe I'm splitting hairs, but optimism is another word I'm not crazy about because, too often, what I see associated with it is a blindness to reality. Its uncompromising assurance that everything will be great no matter what just doesn't work for me. Unfortunately, many people who claim to face reality become pessimists or cynics and I don't want you to go there either. There is, though, another option. Rather than being optimistic, I would ask that you be hopeful. Some may find optimism and hope to be synonymous, but for me, I find that hope acknowledges reality in a way that optimism may not. One of the frustrating things about my current situation is the lack of control that I have. The one thing, though, that I absolutely control is my level of hope. It is hope, not blind optimism, that keeps me going. It is hope that will keep me fighting when the reality of my situation says I should quit. And, it is hope that will keep me confident about your future and the future of this country. Whether you agree with his politics or not, isn't the appeal of Barack Obama that he inspires hope? I mean, from a historical perspective, how else can you explain how a relatively inexperienced, African-American man is on the verge of becoming the Democratic Party's nominee for President of the United States? Now, I know that his critics will say that he is selling false hope and, while I find his mantra of "yes we can" a tad too optimistic for my taste, I don't think it is possible for hope to be false. Hope is hope...how can it be false? I have absolutely no idea if he would make a good president or not, but I refuse to believe that inspiring hope in people, especially people your age is a bad thing. George Bernard Shaw once said, "democracy is a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve". The other night in Laguna Beach many of you optimistically proclaimed that this class was going to do amazing things in the future...it is my sincere hope that you are right and that you can help create the kind of society that you all deserve.

So, in the end, I guess I did end up giving you advice. But, the beauty of a baccalaureate address is that you can take P.J. O'Rourke's advice and ignore everything I said, or you can find whatever elements of truth that you like from what I said and apply them to your own life. After three don'ts, I would like to close with one "do". My students all know that my daily ritual is to put a "quote of the day" on my board. My closing quote for the Class of 2008 comes from Plato. Its simple sentiment has always appealed to me, but it has gained additional meaning in the last year. Plato said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle".

My best wishes to you all.