

Fountain Valley School Commencement Address, June 26, 2012

By Patrick F. Bassett, NAIS President

Mr. Larimer, distinguished board members, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, family, and friends, and the honored Fountain Valley School Class of 2012: Thank you for the privilege of addressing you. I'm a bit winded from climbing the hill from the Frautshi Center to the Commencement tent, but surely it's a symbolic march representing the scaling of the mountain that is the Fountain Valley School experience.

I have to say that the Class of 2012 has an interesting recent tradition when it comes to inviting a Commencement Speaker: Any senior can nominate someone he or she thinks might be a good choice, then a campaign begins by the various factions in the class favoring one speaker over another. I'd like to thank Lulu Maher for nominating me (since she is second cousin to my granddaughter Avery Maher, who will be a freshman at FVS next Fall).. This is the first time in 42 years of public speaking that I was ever required to submit an audition tape. I think there were 12 candidates for the speaker job, and I barely made it out of the primaries, but when the dust settled, late in the campaign, there were only two of us standing, in a dead heat. Somehow Lulu pulled the rabbit out of the hat, and I became your Commencement speaker. So I know the Class of 2012 has high standards that members of the class apply to themselves, and apparently to potential Commencement speakers, so for the first time in decades, I'm actually a bit worried about delivering an address.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging those who made this day possible, the faculty and the parents, and then speak to the graduates about both some clear stretches and some bumps on the road you may experience as the next journey begins.

First, I should acknowledge your faculty and staff and this great school which they embody, and for which they are the creators and stewards of its "intentional culture" that has shaped you. Faculty and staff labor in the vineyards, where it is sometimes hot, humid, tiring, and tiresome. I know from experience that the faculty and staff labor under the intense heat of daily scrutiny and demands. I would note that for my first year of teaching in 1970 at an all-boys prep school in Virginia, I would return at the end of a very long day of teaching, coaching, monitoring study hall, and checking on lights out, and collapse in a chair at home to read the employment classifieds section of the *Wall Street Journal*, believing that there must be some *other* job for me that wasn't quite so enervating as teaching in an independent school. The low point for me occurred about November of my first year, when I came home, particularly morose, and my wife asked, "What happened today?" I replied dejectedly, "I'm sorry to report to you that our advisee Charlie just ran away from school," to which my wife, exclaimed, "Oh my God! I saw Charlie hitchhiking with his backpack, so I gave him a ride to the train station." So my wife was an accessory to the crime. Somehow, we finally got the memo on how to be independent school teachers, and we've been so ever since, in one incarnation or another.

Why do faculty and staff labor in the vineyards so tirelessly? Because the harvest is bountiful.

Last year, I was at a meeting at the Executive Office Building in DC, where Vice-president Joe Biden was speaking to about thirty of us from the independent school world on the government's

education policy. It was dry stuff, and the vice-president was eloquent but uninspired in his delivery. He ended rather abruptly, and asked, "Are there any questions?" Pregnant pause, and then I leapt in to ask, "Did you have any teachers in school that changed the course of your life?" From that point forward, he went on an animated tear talking about an 8th grade nun who encouraged him to overcome his stuttering (hard to believe he had that malady), and a 9th grade priest who taught religion and encouraged him to challenge authority, even the authority of the church, by starting the first day of class with asking this question, "Is anyone here skeptical of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation?" The Vice-President attributed the success of his life to those two teachers. So my first point is to the Class of 2012 is that you are here today, in part, because of some teachers and coaches and advisors who made a difference in your life. It would be nice to thank them today, rather than wishing you had done so, decades from now, reading their obituaries, but if not, then let me plant the seed that you are beholden to them and to your school, even if you don't recognize it until decades from now.

Second, I should acknowledge your parents. The age of adolescence is very trying, for adolescents, *but even more trying for the parents of adolescents*, because this is the time that young people start to separate and individuate from their parents in the journey to try on various personae and identities in their search to find out who they are and what The Greater Power's plan for them might be.. I remember trying to figure this out myself during my adolescence and young adulthood and how vexing it was for my parents. When I was a sophomore in college, with an awakening interest in philosophy, I took to writing prolix epistles to my father explaining the foundational reasons for our growing clashes; that is, I had gained the epistemological insights to be able to announce to my father that "I now know who I am; I am an existentialist." Apparently, I found out much later, it was my father who was the existentialist, since he never responded at the time to my philosophical ravings, preferring just to hold on to the letter, mailing it to me twenty years later with no comment, upon the occasion of my daughter's departure for college. So I want to thank your parents for staying the course with you, now and for the next few years, and to ask on your behalf for their continued patience with you when you lecture them about some matter or another, since, as the poet Alexander Pope has warned us, "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing."

Third, I wish to acknowledge the Class of 2012 collectively, and the individuals within it. Schools like this one are demanding and rigorous in every way, and therefore stretch you to the limit every way: academically, athletically, artistically, and spiritually, at just the time in your life when you are far more interested in your social networks than in your homework, in what your peers think rather than in what adults think. Count yourself among the blessed for staying the course, because your experience here is the foundation for future success, being successful is the other thing beside friends that adolescents worry about. After today, the numbers now fall in your favor. In America, only about 50% of adolescents matriculate to a four-year college, and only about 50% of them graduate in six years. So if you're tracking the math, that means only about 25% will get a B.A. or B.S. degree by age 24. You are statistically very likely, in fact almost guaranteed, to be in that special group to earn the ticket for future success economically and professionally. Why? Because you are better prepared and more self-disciplined than the vast majority of students for the academic rigors of college. And accordingly, you won't be as scared as most of the kids you'll find there. That doesn't mean you won't be intimidated, because occasion, you will be. Witness my first college class, Philosophy 101, Monday morning, 8:00

am, first day at Williams college, when my Philosophy professor entered the class, glowered at us, then spoke the first words I heard in a college classroom: “Bassett, tell me all you know about the Peloponnesian Wars the Peloponnesian Wars, producing my second thought in my first college class: “Oh Lord, someone has made a terrible admissions mistake, and I’m really outgunned here.” But after a while, thankfully, I had what you must have in similar circumstances, what Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset,” a predilection that if you work hard and keep trying, as you learned to do here, you’ll be prepared for the next tough question, and succeed.

Lastly, being in the education business for all my adult life, I’d like to share with you just four recommendations on how to maximize the experience of college and prepare for later success in life:

1. ***Be the first one to ask a question in class***, and even more importantly in large lecture halls. You’ll get noticed by your professors...and, eventually, develop a relationship with your professors.
2. ***Exercise every day***: 30% or more of college kids are on anti-depressants at some point in their college career because they internalize the pressure. Get help if you need it, but taking care of yourself by daily exercising releases the endorphins, the brain’s natural anti-depressant.
3. ***Take the lead to form study groups*** for one or more of your classes: The annual *Harvard Freshmen Study* shows that students in study groups are happier and achieve higher grades than those who do all their work alone.
4. ***Be a hero to someone***. I’m already working on this theme with my 7th grade grandson, Carter, whom I asked to identify his top three career aspirations, to which he replied #3: rock star; #2: magician; #1 Ninja warrior. Everyone loves a hero. (That’s why *The Avengers* is so far the biggest blockbuster film rollout, ever. And why Corey Booker, the mayor of Newark, NJ, who ran into a burning house to save a neighbor, is so popular.) But I mean be a hero in a quieter way:
 - i. ***Be a hero in the sense of making a difference in someone’s life*** through a random act of kindness,
 - ii. ***Be a hero in college as you have been here, through community service*** (like Grab the Torch Camp here this summer at FVS, inspired by the efforts of Kiera and Bryce Walsh).
 - iii. ***Be a hero by standing up for someone or some principle needing defending***.
 - iv. ***Be a hero by being morally and socially courageous***, through confronting boorish, sexist, and racist jokes and behavior by your peers in college, by writing an op ed in the college student newspaper, by resisting peer pressure to do something stupid and wrong.
 - v. ***Be a hero by becoming a leader for the larger challenges facing the world***. The world has huge challenges needing creative solutions. You are a member of the Millennial Generation, and so your older brothers and sisters are revealing a

penchant for this generation to take on problems on a global scale. Be “glocal,” as we say at NAIS: i.e., think globally, act locally.

Remember the words of Horace Mann, “the father of American public education,” in his last commencement speech in 1859: “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.”

So here’s to a strong start and a clear destination on the next leg of your journey to discover yourself and your place, and a call out to be heroic on the journey by leaving the path cleaner and clearer for the generation that follows you.