

REMARKS FROM OPENING CONVOCATION 2013

September 3, 2013

As we approach this day each year, I think about what I wished someone would have said to me when I was in your shoes beginning a new school year.

My youngest daughter, Cabot, who is three years old, and I enjoyed an early, quiet breakfast this morning. She said that she wanted to come to Pingree today. When I asked why, she said “So I can BLAH, BLAH, BLAH with you.” She exposed my fear in one short sentence. Only you will be able to confirm if my words offer any meaning today.

School openings are often a blur of announcements, anxiety, and confusing directions. A little too much blah, blah, blah, perhaps, and not enough helpful advice. So this morning I seek to share three STICKY statements for you to consider as we begin.

On your seat today is a sticker with three short statements that I hope you will reflect on each morning as you enter school. Your teachers and I have pledged to do the same. I encourage you to put this somewhere that you can see it, perhaps in your planner, on a binder, or near your alarm clock. And a big thank you in advance for NOT sticking these on the floors, walls, and tables around school

The “sticky” concept is a little tacky (pun totally intended), but your teachers and I reserve the right to use strategies that have the best chance of resonating with you beyond the ethereal words of a speech. For those interested in learning more about such strategies, I encourage you to read Chip and Dan Heath’s book *Made to Stick*, which gave me this idea!

First, a little background.

This summer, I spent significant time with my four children. I am not sure what behavior-shaping strategies your parents used with you when you were in kindergarten, but my disciplinary method when things breakdown involves counting to three, followed by timeouts of varying lengths and in different locations. The more troubling the violation, the farther your timeout location is from humanity.

This year, we welcome three sets of twins to Pingree, so I begin with my own twin story.

After bonking her brother on the head with a massive rainbow-colored Lego truck, I sent my four-year-old, Reid, to timeout for what I thought was an obvious reason. This was my first and biggest mistake.

While Mica, her twin brother, lay screaming on the couch, Reid crossed her arms, looked me in the eye, and firmly said “NO” to my request to sit on the stairs, explaining stridently that Mica had taken one of the important Lego pieces from her, which, of course, provoked JUSTIFIABLE violence with her newly-constructed Lego weapon.

Reacting in the moment, her violence was strike one, but her disrespectful response to me was a major strike two. While the timeout was growing in length, Jasper, her very happy 6-year-old brother, who was thrilled for once not to be on the short end of the timeout stick, made a passing comment that Reid needed serious time in a RESPECT MUSEUM.

What a great idea, I thought, a literal place where we could go to learn about the perspectives and experiences of others. IMAGINE an empathy museum to share stories, listen, and interact with others who do not think or behave exactly like you. Sounds like Pingree.

With the empathy museum as my guide, I return to our guiding statements this year, which I am asking each of you to consider on your own terms.

I am kind.

How do we demonstrate kindness? Or I should say how do you demonstrate kindness when you don't feel like being kind?

I thought a lot about you this summer as I read the news: How were you thinking about the Trayvon Martin case? The Riley Cooper video? The Texas Supreme Court case on affirmative action? The stop-and-frisk procedures in New York? The immigration reform debate? The fascinating exchanges about Beyonce's haircut and Miley Cyrus' MTV performance? And recent speeches by President Obama and John Kerry about the use of chemical weapons in Syria and a call for Congress to go to war?

At the core of each of these stories and events is how people are behaving and/or treating each other. It turns out that kindness is hard work. It usually starts out as kitty cats, hot cocoa, and warm hugs, but it quickly expands to include all forms of messy interactions.

Perhaps you thought about this while reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which to me seemed eerily more relevant now than when I read it over 25 years ago, as issues of class, race, gender, justice, courage, and identity jumped off the pages.

Your advisors began a conversation about the book last week and we look forward to your thoughts when we meet in advisory groups later this week.

George Saunders, whose book *Tenth of December* I recommend, spoke to the graduates at Syracuse in June, and his sole message as a goal in life was try to be kinder.

I jumped out of my chair when he spoke about “the cyclical quality to ambition today.” He read, “You do well in high-school, in hopes of getting into a good college, so you can do well in the good college, in the hopes of getting a good job, so you can do well in the good job so you can...” and so forth. As a father and educator, I am still learning that the key is not to be in a rush to get to the next stage all the time, TO BE PRESENT, but I am foreshadowing our next guiding statement and want to first finish on kindness.

As Mr. Saunders stated, “if we’re going to become kinder, that process has to include taking ourselves seriously – as doers, as accomplisners, as dreamers. We have to do that, to be our best selves.”

“Succeeding,” whatever that might mean to you, is hard, and the need to do so constantly renews itself. He framed this beautifully by commenting that “success is like a mountain that keeps growing ahead of you as you hike it, and there’s the very real danger that ‘succeeding’ will take up your whole life, while the big questions go untended.”

Saunders goes on to identify “the confusion in each of us,” called selfishness. You know this in your own lives as “there have been High Kindness periods and Low Kindness periods, and you know what inclined you toward the former and away from the latter.”

This is why education is so critical. We learn about the infinite number of intelligent people before us who have struggled with these same questions and left behind clues and answers for us.

Kindness extends to cultural competence, which is a learned skill. We must develop an awareness of our own cultural identity and views about difference, which includes the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of those around us.

It is the ability to understand and value our differences and similarities that make each of us and our school community special and unique.

I am asking you, to the extent that is possible, to *err in the direction of kindness and inclusivity*. Let’s catch each other doing good every day!

As Mr. Saunders shared with Syracuse graduates, “Do those things that incline you toward the big questions, and avoid the things that would reduce you and make you trivial. That luminous part of you that exists beyond personality – your soul, if you will – is as bright and shining as any that has ever been. Bright as Shakespeare’s, bright as Gandhi’s, bright as Mother Teresa’s. Clear away everything that keeps you separate from this secret luminous place. Believe it exists, come to know it better, nurture it, share its fruits tirelessly.”

Kindness matters most when it is hard. File this away as a responsibility this year. We on this stage have high expectations of you! To be kind, we need to PRESENT, which leads to our second reflective statement.

I am present.

Are you really present right now? What were you just thinking about?

We cannot be in the future and we cannot be in the past, we can only be present. Yet all of us often fixate on the past and future, squandering opportunities that are in front of us. Let's strive to be open and available to each other this year. Each moment of your life is unlike any other. How will you emotionally detach from the past AND willingly thrust yourself forward into the unknown? You must open yourself to trying new things, especially those that you may previously never have thought of doing, or had been too hesitant to attempt. This is how you open doors of opportunity for positive growth.

I am asking that you think about whether you are fully present for such growth experiences each day.

There is a small gem of a book called *The Music of Silence*. In it, the authors David Steindl-Rast and Sharon Lebell share the routines of the monastic life, a life where time is reframed. Every hour and every experience offers a message and an opportunity to those who value what the Buddhists call "the beginner's mind." To those who simply pay attention. The experiences occur when we least expect them, and we should expect that change is indeed the only constant.

I will not make you join me in a Gregorian chant, but I will ask you to consider the purpose of the chant conceptually -- the universal call to enter the now -- to stop, to listen, and to heed the message of this moment.

Time is not scarce, which is often how we see it in our daily scramble. Time flows naturally and is in proportion to the task at hand. Changing your orientation to time and your tasks will free you to be present. Excellence lies in the untiring striving to be present.

And third, Let's begin each day with Purpose.

I have purpose.

If you accept that we cannot be in the future and we cannot be in the past, and that we can only be present, having focus in those present moments will afford you incredible advantages. The smaller daily decisions will determine your destiny.

Researchers Barbara Frederickson of UNC Chapel Hill and Steven Cole from UCLA have just released a study revealing a strong link between living one's life with a sense of purpose and enjoying a robust immune system. While on the other hand, they report that shallower forms of happiness such as "simple self-gratification" produced the opposite result, weakening the body's immune response. To simplify and summarize their findings, as reported by Tom Jacobs in *Pacific Standard*, we may feel terrific when our own immediate needs are met, but our genes seem to be telling us that optimal health requires something more: a genuine sense of meaning.

John Dryden once wrote, "We first make our habits, and then our habits make us." What habits will you form this year that will make you?

Each one of us on this stage is rooting for you, and we are united in striving for these elusive goals with you as well.

In a few minutes you will walk to the theater, led by our seniors, to begin the process of participation that will define this learning community. What will your role be and how will you define success for yourself a year from now?

Moreover, what mark will you make on the Pingree community before we gather again for final events in June?

So, if all you heard from me today was

...blah, blah, blah, KINDNESS;

...blah, blah, blah, PRESENCE;

...blah, blah, blah, PURPOSE;

then I have succeeded beyond my daughter's expectations for this event and have given you three buoys to guide your work this year.