

Faculty Charge
By
Dr. Stephen Johnson

Class of 2019, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. It is a privilege and humbling experience. Thinking about you and doing my best to try and recall my own situation and world view when I graduated from High School...rather than coming up with advice, I found myself marveling at how much more accomplished, self-confident, and thoughtful you are than I was when I graduated from HS. Yes, Sophie, as you have on occasion reminded me, the difficulty, in part, stems from the fact that that period in my life was a very long time ago! Looking back at pictures of the long straight hair that went well beyond my shoulders, other than rebelling or trying to get my father's recognition one way or another, I'm not sure what I was thinking about. It looked worse than if I were somehow to have dyed my hair blue.

When I look at ChenKai, Jerry, Cici...all of our international students, yes, Enrique, you too. You have not only completed York's rigorous program, but you have accomplished this task while immersed in and embracing a new culture and reading, writing, listening, speaking—truly thinking in a second language. As recently noted by the renowned theater critic extraordinaire, Mr. Brady, Andrew Simpson is able to express more nuanced thought with a single facial gesture, gesticulation, or movement of his fingers than most of us can express in words. As much as we all enjoy Mr. Daniel's repertoire of Broadway and Disney musical classics, thank you Max Rosenblum for broadening our musical horizons at York during dances

and H&F with the introduction Latin Musical rhythms. Adam Shapiro, Tristen Laney... Can any of us imagine more focused individuals already actively pursuing their dreams! 10, 20 or more years from now, I am confident that when you hear an airplane flying overhead you will not only think about York, but you will think of Adam and a smile will light up your face. I won't be surprised if thanks to Adam, Catherine, Alex Shi, Alex Warzycki or another one of Dr. Hanna or Mr. Johnson's inspired engineers that the airplane flying overhead will be radically different than the planes flying overhead today. As evident in your coming together, organizing, and participating in last year's rally against gun violence, you are united as a class and have espoused the admirable idea that changing the world is not utopian or crazy but rather justice.

Reflecting back on my own experiences, as part of my charge to you, I would like to make a few points quickly with you today before sharing some personal experiences and observations: First, as Mr. Harmon has reminded us on more than one occasion. It is not "who" you know in life that is important, it is "whom"! In addition to the importance of thinking about the people in your life, knowing the difference between who and whom is always a nice, easy way to demonstrate your literacy; Second, please look out in the audience where your parents/families/guardians are sitting, some in that group helped you get this fabulous education at York. Dedicate time today, before your leave here, and thank that special person for the incredible gift they gave to you; Third, now consider the group behind me, York faculty, administration, and staff. Someone in the group behind me helped you attain your goals. They taught you, reviewed with you, struggled with you, offered you extra sessions or even an independent study, they coached you, cajoled you, and lovingly pushed you to success. They are

not paid what they are worth but while your generous class donation was very much appreciated, all they REALLY want is a sincere “Thank you” from you for their efforts. Dedicate time today to do so before you leave. And after you thank them, remember to come back and visit them. Return to York and tell them about college or classes or sports or life. You will make their day, week, and month for doing so, and the teacher will be re-invigorated to work closely again with future students.

Like you I was blessed with an independent school education. And I benefitted greatly from my upbringing, parents, great educators, camp counselors, coaches, etc. Many of you have asked me over the years how, when, and why I started learning Spanish. Most of you, certainly those of you who have studied Spanish already know far more Spanish than I ever knew at your age...you are off to a great start, you are finding your path. But new adventures await you. Don't hold back. As Miguel de Cervante's immortal character Don Quijote says “one who doesn't know how to take advantage of adventure, should not complain when it passes”. Be thoughtful about your life and make active decisions. Not making a decision or taking action usually brings negative consequences.

I was an intended biology major when I started college, but in the back of my mind I had always wanted to teach. From the time I was little I had also always wanted to learn a different language. I never gave up on those two interests. Although I grew up in a suburb of Milwaukee, from a young age I was surrounded by visiting surgeons from around the world and their families. My father was a pioneer in cardiac surgery and welcomed visitors to observe his work, scrub in with him, and stay at our home. Working 7 days a week, most holidays, and performing at least 2 cases a day, with some operations lasting as long as 20 hours, most of the visiting

surgeons came home before my father, and I often spent more time with them! Dr. Hariola (Sp?) from Helsinki entertained me and taught me how to draw dragons, a surgeon from the Soviet Union taught me how to ice skate, and I had my first experience as an interpreter or translator, helping him to understand some of the more colorful expressions that my father apparently used during moments of surgery when things were not going well and weren't in the doctor's dictionary...Not sure how I knew them, probably better not to ask! I spent one summer in Milwaukee with the children of a Belgian physician and the next with the children of a South African surgeon. As a child it was exciting to see different clothing, learn about different customs and celebrations, try new types of candies, and listen to different music and strange sounding languages, and collect coins from around the globe. Most importantly, I learned that as human beings we all share far more commonalities than differences and, secondly, I discovered that people see the world from distinct perspectives. I learned about socialized medicine in Sweden and Canada—

Imagine, some 40 years ago there were countries trying to figure out a way to provide all of its citizens with affordable access to health care. Before I finished grade school, I had met surgeons from nearly 40 countries and throughout the United States.

As I grew I was able to visit many of the medical families abroad. I observed first hand how coronary bypass surgery spread around the world and I learned from my father how he had benefitted from the experience and knowledge of an Argentine physician at the Cleveland Clinic and a Canadian surgeon who had made previous surgical discoveries and advances. Thanks to more open and welcoming immigration policies in the 1960s, Dr Rene Favaloro from Argentina, arguably the first surgeon to perform coronary

bypass surgery, was able to travel to the United States. As a son, I am proud of my father's participation in the development of Heart Surgery, but I am sharing this with you as an example of the value that international collaboration and communication has played in the development and spread of important medical treatment throughout the world. My father and his partners helped to prolong and improve the life of well over 8,000 people, but through sharing their experience and findings and international collaboration, 100s of thousands of lives have been changed around the world. Regardless of the career path you end up pursuing, keep in mind the importance of communication and collaboration and try to view things from multiple perspectives.

Finally, follow your heart, try new things, and experiment. Push a few boundaries. Tristen, be safe, keep climbing, and even though you've already been there in your mind, even helped transport your classmates there, make that journey to Barcelona. Although I worried that moving away from a career in science would disappoint my father, I have never regretted pursuing my own interests and, perhaps because of doing so, eventually earned the admiration and respect of my father. Although I wasn't yet planning on majoring in Spanish, I did want to become fluent and decided to study Spanish during the intensive summer program at Middlebury College in VT and I discovered a true passion for Spanish and teaching. I'm not sure if it was simply the inspirational instructors or the discovery that I was one of three male students in a class of 20, but Spanish studies helped me to see the world through a new lense and enhanced my appreciation of life and its complexities. Transitioning between Wisconsin weather and sunny Spain was relatively easy and understandable, but moving from a somewhat socially reserved Midwestern family with Scandinavian, protestant roots

where one seldom displayed public signs of or discussed emotion, a family where everything was meant to have a somewhat utilitarian purpose—even food, to the land of impassioned Flamenco music and dancing, Easter Week pageants, large family gatherings, and a culture and language where there is even a special word that enables one to selfishly seize and enjoy the last cookie or tasty dessert left on a tray without any sense of guilt—“La verguenza” or shameful one—did require some initial adjustment...not just for me but for my better half as well! To this day, my wife expresses her exasperation at how I remain calm during challenging events, telling me that I make her nervous, but her maiden name is, as my younger son was careful to point out in his 3rd grade family tree presentation, María de los Angeles Ronda Cienfuegos... As he went on to explain, and I quote, “Cienfuegos means 100 fires in Spanish...and believe me you never want to make my mom angry!” Well, in spite of its challenges, my sons and I wouldn’t trade that passion for anything in the world.

Class of 2019, congratulations on your accomplishments up until now, remember to thank the important people here today, welcome, learn from, and celebrate the multiple perspectives and voices from the diverse but interconnected world that surrounds you—they will enrich your life as they have mine, and listen to your heart and mind as you find your path forward. Endeavor to make the world a better place, one kind act at a time. To quote again from Don Quijote as he remarks to his companion Sancho, “Ningún hecho bueno sale sin recompensa” ...no good deed goes unrewarded.

Thank you, and congratulations again, class of 2019.