

Valedictorian Address

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Mothers, Fathers, Guests, Faculty, Staff, Administrators, and of course, my Fellow Graduates of the Class of 2013, after an arduous yet ultimately enlightening journey, we are assembled here today for one last time to celebrate not only the pride we take in our triumphs, but also the lessons we have learned from our defeats. On this wonderful day, as we graduate, let us not forget how blessed we are to have had our lives touched by the love and friendship of our dearest classmate Jackie, our inspiring teachers Ms. Mittelstet and Mr. Near, our brilliant counselor Ms. Padgett, and our beloved visionary Mr. Nichols. You may think that I have been chosen, as the Latin verb *valedicere* means, “to say good-bye” to you all because of my academic excellence, but in my mind, I am standing here today because I have managed, **without fail**, to propel myself forward, even though I have fallen flat on my face in a good two-thirds of the endeavors I have pursued thus far. Indeed, what makes me so proud of our accomplishments is our ability to prevail in the adversarial situations that have, in some way or other, beset every one of us.

I came into this world seventeen years ago, littered with health problems. After having had several febrile seizures, my pediatric neurologist gave me, a mere toddler, quite a dire diagnosis. He told my frightened parents that at the age of five, my cognitive skills would be that of a two-year-old. How I wish this neurologist were now in the audience, watching us graduate. You would agree that we have all endured some sort of traumatic experience like my own, so the question that remains unanswered here is, “By what means did every one of us manage to triumph over our tribulations?” The answer is trivial, but perhaps just so obvious that we take it for granted and dismiss it as we do **the universal law of gravitation**. Let me give you a hint: teenagers **affectionately** refer to “them” as “pests.”

I mean our **parents**, the people who, to start with, have given us life, who have spent a fortune to give us a wonderful education, and who will, in the coming years, drain their wallets in paying for that rather expensive experience called **college**. But in addition to merely providing us with an endlessly expansionary fiscal policy, their unconditional love and support are the iron girders upon which we have laid out our dreams. I was terrified that I would lose this support when my own mother was diagnosed with cancer three years ago. Fortunately, with the help of

our affectionate Harker family, one that includes Roshan's father, Dr. Murali Daran, and Samantha and Jacob's father, Dr. Andrew Hoffman, my mother has successfully braved the terrible tides of cancer and continues to provide me with much-needed guidance as I leave home for college. It goes without saying that every one of our families has been plagued with such testing times as these, only to make us understand how vital our parents are as regards making our existence meaningful. In the words of basketball legend Michael Jordan, "*My heroes are and were my parents. I can't see having anyone else as my heroes.*" Therefore, in graduating today, let us vow to continue to treat our parents as our heroes, let us vow that our behavior in college and beyond will not be a cause for them **to shed any tears**, and let us vow not to neglect them at any time, but especially **in their old age**, when they need us most.

It is undoubtedly important to recognize that in the past twelve years of our lives, a sizeable portion of our parenting has been undertaken not by our biological parents, but by a group of individuals who lavished their infinite patience on us, who instilled in us a desire for discerning the truth in all that we learn, who forgave our shortcomings perpetually, and who simultaneously uncovered the promise hidden within all of us. For the sake of brevity, let us call these individuals **teachers**. Until I entered high school, I had imagined myself as one who would specialize exclusively in mathematics and science. But Mr. Janda proved me wrong. In his world history class, we certainly did amass quite a comprehensive understanding of the historical events that have shaped our geopolitical stage in these past millennia. My apologies, Mr. Janda, but I have no doubt forgotten a goodish bit of the similarities and differences between Imperial Rome and Han China. What I do **vividly** recall, however, are the numerous discussions we had about the moral and ethical underpinnings of our history. As a way of capturing the essence of these underpinnings, it is only fitting to invoke the quote of Mahatma Gandhi that is tattooed upon Mr. Janda's left arm: "*Be the change you wish to see in the world.*" You would agree with me that our teachers have throughout the course of our studies striven to highlight the import of this insightful quote, which in many ways serves as the **nucleus of our value system**. Therefore, in graduating today, let us vow to fuel the fires of our passions with the catalytic power of this adage, let us vow that no matter how testing our future situations might be, we will never compromise on the value system that our teachers have established for us, and let us vow that we will never cease to be grateful to our teachers for all the sacrifices they have made toward our well-being.

For a moment, let me direct your attention to what has arguably been the most heated debate in our school, one in which members of our community have taken to reproving each other for possessing a tendency to indulge in unhealthy competition. You might very well jump out of your seats and exclaim, “Ashvin, you are guilty as charged!” It is no secret that I enjoy competition, but I enjoy it not because of the occasionally favorable outcome itself, but because of the **lessons** I learn whilst arriving at the outcome. In resolving our debate, we must recognize that it is not competition that is the issue but how we deal with the outcome of the competition that should be our concern. Every time I lose, my parents and teachers help me put the outcome in perspective by reminding me that my effort takes precedence over the outcome itself, and so, I am able to accept my defeat gracefully and move on almost immediately. Allow me to invoke one of Mr. Keller’s poignant remarks in his conversation with the Intel Science Talent Search spokesman at one of our special assemblies. When the spokesman asked whether our school placed great emphasis on winning awards, Mr. Keller retorted, “*No, we’re about the process.*” It needs no mention that every one of us is in accord with Mr. Keller on this point, but somehow, in the heat of the competition, we seem to **lose sight of** this important observation.

Now you might say, “Ashvin, that’s all very well about the significance of the process, but what if one *hardly ever* wins?” Although it is a cliché to note that no one wins all the time, I find it ironic that the saying “no one loses all the time” is not quite so popular. We must recognize that every one of us has been gifted with a unique palette of talents and that it is our responsibility, with the aid of our loved ones, to uncover that palette and use it to paint a successful future for ourselves. As Eric Liddell, the protagonist of the film *Chariots of Fire*, so aptly commented in explaining the reason why he temporarily abandoned his priesthood to participate in the 1924 Olympic footraces, “*I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel **His** pleasure.*” Therefore, in graduating today, let us vow to participate in competitions not for any extrinsic rewards, but for our own intrinsic pleasure and satisfaction, let us vow to make it a point to appreciate the diversity of talents, from the academic to the athletic to the artistic, that constitute our humanity, and let us vow not to **individualize** our successes and failures but rather to celebrate them together, as a community, as we prepare to embed ourselves in the greater fabric of society.

My dear classmates, permit me now to dwell on our impending life journey as adults. As we leave our family’s nurturing nest, we should not abuse the freedom that will be given us.

Invariably, we will be bombarded with a multitude of temptations that do not resonate well with the value system that our parents and teachers have **so painstakingly** inculcated in us. Indeed, as Ralph Waldo Emerson aphorized in his incisive essay *Self-Reliance*, “*To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.*” In such situations, we must employ our sense of rationality, and we ought to comply only with our conscience and with our intrinsic sense of right and wrong. We must identify those acquaintances of ours who do not see value in our ethical values and eschew those individuals forthwith. This is perhaps what Abraham Lincoln meant when he asserted, “*I must stand with anybody that stands right, and stand with him while he is right, and part with him when he goes wrong.*” Therefore, in graduating today, let us vow not to succumb to peer pressure, and let us vow to maintain our identity in the face of social constructs.

I would now like you to consider extending this notion of social nonconformity to deal with the issue of modern materialism. The Hindu traditions and customs that my family adheres to are built upon a **strong philosophical foundation**. The part of this profound philosophy that has most influenced my own perspective on life is best summarized in Plato’s quote, “*The greatest wealth is to live content with little.*” You would agree that, with materialism in **complete control** of our lives, even money has become a means of communication, as interpersonal discussions are often limited to such questions as, “How much money do you make? And, how much more money is yet to be made?” Although I do recognize that money is essential for living, this degree of obsession with money puzzles me. In lauding Grigori Perelman, a young mathematician who turned down a one-million-dollar prize awarded him for his settling of a major open problem in mathematics, Fields Medalist William Thurston made this startling observation about human needs: “*Our true needs are deeper – yet in our modern society most of us reflexively and relentlessly pursue wealth, consumer goods, and admiration. We have learned from Perelman’s mathematics. Perhaps we should also pause to reflect on ourselves and learn from Perelman’s attitude toward life.*” Therefore, in graduating today, let us vow to ride the waves of minimalism to attain Plato’s heightened sense of wealth, and let us vow to share our **leftover resources** with those who are not **as fortunate as we are**.

The time has come, my friends, to receive our diplomas; the time has come to end the beautiful scholastic safari that we have enjoyed together these past four years; and yes, the time has come for me to end this address. Before I do conclude, let me present you with Mother

Teresa's hitchhiker's guide to leading a happy and virtuous life: "*People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway. If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway. Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway. For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.*" And now, I am sure that my English teachers, who have been hounding me about being concise all along, might be disappointed that I still have not learned my lesson, so I had better wrap up this address. In closing, I would like to repeat a brief emotional comment from the film *Gandhi* that Mahatma Gandhi himself makes in parting with his friend, the British clergyman Charlie: "*There are no goodbyes for us, Charlie. **Wherever you are, you will always be in my heart.***" Thank you!