

2017 Commencement Address

“Of Paul and Walden”

[The following is taken from the speaker’s notes.
Any variance from standard syntax is intentional]

Nick and Kerry, my charge to you will rest on two passages: The first is from Scripture. The second is from a somewhat pretentious book that is, nevertheless, pretty fascinating. The first passage is inerrant and authoritative. The second passage is not authoritative at all, but intriguing.

First, to the first passage. My final assignment to you is to make a mental list of how many things this passage tells you to do.

Romans 12:9-21

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit,[g] serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.[h] Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it[i] to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20 To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

So, hold these truths in mind as we proceed. in

Now to the second passage. It comes from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. You know, the man who built a shack deep in the woods by Walden Pond in 1845 to live deliberately, and to be frank, pompously. *Walden* has inspired many, especially those who live lives of quiet desperation.

You should know that there is much about the mystique of Thoreau’s *Walden* that is patently untrue. First, Walden Pond is only about a mile from Concord and was situated by a few main roads. Furthermore, the woods did not amount to an untamed jungle. He was situated in the back 40 of a property owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau was pretty

open about these details in the book, but those who are obsessed with *Walden*, tend to exaggerate how profound it is.

Regardless, much of the book is worthwhile and there are nuggets within that are good for a graduation speech.

In the book, Thoreau talks a great deal about what it means to live, to be a man, to appreciate life. He is also really proud of the shack he built. So proud in fact, that he wants the experience of building a shack to be writ large over all of mankind:

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*:

“There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? But alas! we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built, and cheer no traveller with their chattering and unmusical notes. Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?”

So, what is the connection between the two passages?

It helps to know that Thoreau's point is broader than just building houses and disrespecting cowbirds. He romanticizes, but nevertheless, effectively uncovers this notion:

That man's poetic faculties (that is, our capacity for fully expressed joy and wonder) are unleashed through “doing.” Through **fashioning, creating, forging, crafting** something with our own two hands. Put another way: the working man is a whistling man and a whistling worker inspires his neighbor to work and whistle, and so on.

But sooner or later, the house is built, the garden is planted, and the rest is the life we live.

Thoreau's points are vapid and meaningless unless there is something we are living for beyond the things we build.

After reading *Walden*, we are left without a moral compass and we are left asking the questions: What kind of doing ought we do? Why ought we do it?

That is where Paul comes in. Paul is also calling for us to be zealous and active. To live deliberately, to forge a life: Hear how kinetic the Christ-centered life is: **Abhor** evil, **bless** those who persecute us, **contribute** to the needs of the saints, **overcome** evil with good, **feed** the hungry, **show** hospitality. This is *doing*. This is *living*.

But what we are building through this kind of activity is not a shack in the woods, and certainly not a shrine of self-promotion. Rather we are engaging in a kind of spiritual

disappearing act. Through God's grace alone, this kind of spirit-wrought activity dismantles our pride and results in a life joyfully obscured by the cross of Christ.

The "song" or "poetic faculty" that this kind of building inspires is not a "Song of Myself" (That's Whitman, to be clear), but a song of self-forgetfulness.

If we were to define life from what Paul writes in Romans 12, we would conclude that we live our lives in the sight of an Almighty Judge who commands that we eagerly expend all of our energy in the service of others: caring little for our own comfort, and killing our pride through service.

Let's put a pin in that for now and examine the present moment:

This will be true for the rest of your life: Every major milestone will inspire you to look backward.

There is something about completing a segment of our lives that casts all of that segment's component parts into one cohesive drama, draped in sunsets and tuned to the perfect soundtrack.

The newly completed phase of life never felt perfect when we were living it:

You can testify to this. Your experience at Paideia was full of late nights, difficult exams, stressful defenses, and taxing performances. There were days that found you bleary-eyed in first period and exhausted by third period.

But today you sit on the perch of age (as Maya Angelou calls it), looking back on all of that and it feels manageable, poignant, and gone too soon.

But it's always the next phase that feels stark and unsure.

A Lesson from Kindergarten:

Sometimes, out of pure self-preservation we idealize the next phase of our life until we stand on the edge of it.

I remember Kindergarten. (I was thin as a rail with a high squeaky voice, but fortunately my head was about the size that it is now. As you can imagine, I had to develop a self-deprecating sense of humor at an early age.)

Anyway, I remember that, in Kindergarten, I had an idealized view of 2nd grade. I had no interest in 1st grade. This was for two reasons:

1) I remember the second graders walking by my Kindergarten class and I heard one of them say, "Hey, there's Kindergarten. They still take naps." I surveyed my Kindergarten colleagues and thought: "Kindergarten, man. This is for the birds."

2) Later, I walked by the 2nd grade classroom and one of the boys was reared back in his chair with his feet on his desk, hands behind his head like an elementary tycoon. I remember thinking, "Second grade is *not* for the birds. Second grade is where *boys* become *men*."

But then I got to second grade. I quickly learned that Mrs. Gregory did not suffer fools, and tycoons were most assuredly not welcome. It was serious business and nothing like what I had imagined.

Here's why I regale you with that memory. You, too, are reaching a new phase that, **to this point has been idealized in your imagination**. And now that you stand on the edge of it, things might feel a little different than you imagined.

But here is what I want to tell you in no uncertain terms:

You are ready. God has gifted you and prepared you. You are sharp, well-read, witty, responsible young people and I am honored to have walked alongside you these last few years. No doubt, you still have a lot to learn, but you have learned so much already. We are all immensely proud of you and you will take this next phase by storm.

Nick: When I first met you, I asked you a question, and I could tell that I disappointed you. I looked up to you and asked, "Do you play basketball?" Your face said it all, "Oh. He's one of those people. Super." But your response was perfect: "At P.E."

Since that first misstep on my part, I have enjoyed learning more and more about your personality.

- 1) You are funny. Not the kind of funny that gets pity laughs. Your wit reveals a keen intelligence and insight.
- 2) You are confident. You get a settled poise to your demeanor when you are speaking from conviction.
- 3) I have always been impressed with how you receive correction in my classes.
- 4) I see in you a desire to stand for what is right. In Great Ideas, I saw you stand your ground against an entire room full of fellow students who disagreed with you.

Kerry:

My first interaction with you was in Apologetics. I remember saying something in class that you disagreed with. You turned your head to the side and raised your

hand deliberately. And I remember thinking, "This is a young lady to be reckoned with."

That proved to be true. But you are also a young lady of immense talent, poise, and a ninja-like sense of humor. You are respected by your peers and your teachers are honored to have had you in their classes.

You are both tremendously gifted.

I say that to honor you, but also to warn you.

People with gifts like yours ***run the serious danger*** of living self-reliant lives of accomplishment that would make Thoreau smile.

You can build, you can think, you can debate, you can persuade, you can win over a crowd, you will land jobs easily, climb the ladder, and if you are not careful, you can fashion a kingdom unto yourselves, whistling all the way ...

If you are not careful, you will reach the end of your life, leaving behind you only beautiful monuments to yourselves.

But there is another way. Even if you reach international fame, you can still choose a life of joyful obscurity, promoting someone other than yourself. Serving others with the gifts you have received, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

"I take, O Cross, thy shadow as my abiding place. To know no other sunshine than the sunshine of thy face. Content to let the world go by, to know no gain or loss. My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross.