

2016 Commencement Address
“The Difficulty of Living for a Far Green Country”
Dr. Tim Bridges

[This text is adapted from speaking notes. Breaches in syntax and structure are designed to give an extemporaneous tone to the address]

These seniors have been the sights and sounds of Paideia and I want to thank them for being such a rich part of this school’s history and culture.

Parents, we understand. This is one of those moments that you always knew would come. You have longed for it and dreaded it since the first day you dropped them off at Kindergarten. Even now – after a senior year that seemed to stretch on forever – I am sure that this moment has come too soon.

With all of these emotions swirling in the room, it is a complicated moment. The role of a commencement speech is to bring some sense of perspective, even in complicated moments.

I am honored to be the one to stand and give a charge to these young people.

Graduates, I would like to congratulate you on your first graduation ceremony. I thought I would let you know what lies in store when you graduate again.

I have graduated four times. It has become something of a pastime of mine. I remember my **first** graduation: A class of 444 and I was right up in the very ... middle of my class. The first graduation was a huge deal. There were parties, gifts, dances, streamers, and endless photographs. That is where you are now.

The **second** time you graduate, it will be different. Fewer relatives will attend, but your parents will still try to make it a really big deal. The most noticeable difference, the second time ‘round, will be that every congratulatory platitude will quickly be followed with a question like, “**How’s that job hunt coming along?**” or “**Have you found an apartment ... Can we help you look?**”

Having just made it through college and an obligatory Jack Kerouac phase, many graduates will say something like, “I’m going to be a writer and a musician.” Those graduates will notice a rather prodigious vein popping out on their dad’s forehead every time I ... I mean they ... say something like that.

The **third time** you graduate, **literally no one will care**. In fact, family members will be getting a little annoyed. You will send out letters asking, “Would anyone like to congratulate me on this amazing milestone?” “If I reimburse you for the streamers, would you all mind hanging them up to surprise me? Let me thank you in advance. I am humbled. You really should have.”

The fourth time you graduate, even you will be annoyed. I didn’t even attend the ceremony for my 4th. I was mailed a diploma. The only ceremony was when I made my wife and children hum “Pomp and Circumstance” as I unsealed the envelope. Sure, they did it, but I could tell they

were phoning it in. When they finished, I said, “Fine, you can all go back to bed. I’ll just tip the brass band.”

Well, you don’t make it through 3 graduations and a pitiful family sing-along without gathering a little graduation wisdom. Unfortunately, most graduation wisdom is fluffy nonsense.

There are the greeting card sentiments that simply caption the obvious:

“You are the future.” Which is a way of saying: in purely chronological terms, you will be alive after we are dead. Kudos.

“You have made us all very proud.” One would assume so. Otherwise this ceremony is a rather lavish way of expressing parental disillusionment.

“You will make a difference.” Well, walking into a room makes a difference. “Make a difference?” Thank you for saying that I will do what it is impossible not to do. It’s a bit like saying, “You will exist, interact with human beings, and, at the end of your life, we will say, she was noticeably present.”

Other speakers aim high. We hear the mighty and ubiquitous **“Invictus”**:

“My head is bloodied, but unbowed.”

This means that you have not learned lessons.

“I thank whatever gods may be for my unconquerable soul.”

That is the graduation speaker’s way of saying, “Dear graduate: be pompous. While you’re at it, throw in delusions of grandeur. Those are great. People find those adorable.”

Some speakers will brag about how many times they’ve graduated – oh wait. That one’s ok.

But as a graduation speaker, I have compassion on other speakers, because I know what runs through our heads: We love you and we want so desperately for you to remember what we are saying.

We’re like Jacob Marley visiting Ebenezer. Every quip, every homespun bit of wisdom, every poem, is our attempt to reach you with truths that we can see more clearly than you can. We envy your youth, but not your inexperience.

So, we rattle our chains with phrases like “You are the future” and “Follow your passions” (i.e. “prepare to be impoverished”) and “Carpe Diem” because we remember sitting on those chairs, thinking that the world was one way, but then soon finding out it was quite another.

In other words, graduation speeches try to be a trailer for the movie of life. That’s not altogether a bad thing. **But what you need to hear is an honest trailer.** And if I created an honest trailer for the movie of life it would say three things.

But first there would be a teaser trailer that just says this: “Psst. Life is not a movie, and if it were, you would not be the star.” Then the real trailer would come out. It would have three very simple points:

- 1) **Life is more difficult than you can possibly imagine.**
- 2) **Life is more beautiful than you can possibly imagine.**
- 3) **Christ reconciles the two.**

1) **Life is more difficult than you can possibly imagine.**

I think I first realized this on a day when I was living alone, running a 103 fever, there was no food in the house, and I broke my toe on a chair I bought at a garage sale with my last \$4. In that moment I heard echoes of graduation speeches: “The world is your oyster!” Sir, if my throbbing toe and empty cupboards tell me anything, it is that, no, the world is most certainly not my oyster.

Poets and philosophers in the “Great Books and beyond” have wrestled with the notion of life’s difficulty. Sadly, poets have a way of talking about difficulties that can make difficulties more difficult.

T.S. Eliot

“Our difficulties of the moment must always be dealt with somehow, but our permanent difficulties are difficulties of every moment.” [This is why Eliot was not a popular graduation speaker.]

If I can offer the Bridges version, I would say: “In life you will always be putting out fires (one cannot procrastinate when fire is in view). But even if you extinguish every fire, you will never eliminate the threat of fire.”

In life, you will feel at the end of your rope more often than you feel like you have rope to spare. More often than that, you will ask, “Where is that rope?” and “Who took my rope?” and “Dad, can I borrow your rope?”

You will soon find that you have no one to complain to, no one to blame, and no one to do it for you. There will be problems that you cannot solve, and those problems will rarely be the mountain in front of you – they will be the pebble in your shoe. There will be

people who do not like you. That is hard to imagine on days like today, but the day is coming. It might already be here.

Now, such difficulty need not lead to cynicism, like when Kurt Vonnegut said, "Plato says that the unexamined life is not worth living. But what if the examined life turns out to be a clunker?" We need never resort to that kind of cynicism, but neither should we ever believe that life will ever be anything other than difficult.

There are simply too many exhibits in the case against the existence of ease.

In some ways, the Bible is Exhibit A in the case of "Reality vs. The Expectation of Ease."

The Bible does not hide this truth:

Jesus:

"Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

"Take up your cross and follow me."

Paul:

"All those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

As a Christian, you serve a Lord who said, "My Kingdom is not of this world." If you live for him, **you raise eyebrows!** To put it another way, you are a **salmon**, not a **sailboat**. You swim against the current, you swim upstream, against culture, thinking little of the cost. It was not an easy-breezy life that led Luther to write:

"Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also, this body they may kill, God's truth abideth still - His Kingdom is forever."

The hope of this life is not that this life will be easy, it's that His Kingdom is forever. The winds of this world will always be in your face, not at your back. The swelling current of culture will always pull you away from righteousness.

But hear this from Ol' Jacob Marley -- it is precisely the ability to beat against the rapids and paddle upstream that testifies to the life that is within you.

G.K. Chesterton -

A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it. A **dead dog** can be lifted on the leaping water with all the swiftness of a leaping hound; but only a live dog can swim backwards.

If you move against the current, yours will be a difficult life. But it is not vain difficulty. Stretched out before you is something beautiful, if you have eyes to see it. This reminds me of the closing moments of Lord of the Rings:

When Frodo left his life of toil, he boarded a ship for the High Sea and soon, Tolkien writes,

“He smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water ... the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.”

Yes, life is difficult. And living for a far green country under a swift sunrise makes it more difficult, because our King calls us to treasure things that are of that world, not this.

But also ...

2) **Life ... this life ... is more beautiful than you can possibly imagine.**

That is not to say that life is pretty. Insta-gram is pretty. You persevering through trials with a steadfast testimony – that is beautiful. Weddings are pretty – marriages are beautiful. Diplomas are pretty – a life’s work is beautiful. Books are pretty – wisdom is beautiful.

Moments like graduation give you the chance to look back over the course of your entire Paideia experience and see beauty. As you look back, all of the frustration, failure, courage, and laughter weave together into something beautiful.

It will be the same as you move forward.

In the midst of life’s most exquisite difficulties, God will give you a glimpse of life’s beauty. Like taking off in an airplane in a dense, unremitting fog and suddenly breaching the clouds. It happens every time.

Sure you will have a pesky mortgage, but it will be for a house that will be filled with Christmas mornings and Easter dinners.

You will never understand it all. But over time you will, as C.S. Lewis said, come to “Misunderstand a little less completely.”

You have received an education that puts you in a special position to appreciate life’s truth, beauty, and goodness. Don’t leave those books on the shelf. Read them, and let them read you. And God will show you the beauty around you.

Difficulty and Beauty seems at odds, but ...

3) **Christ reconciles the two.**

The apparent conflict between Beauty and Difficulty is reconciled in Christ: The one who knew no sin, who became sin for us. When the Word took on flesh, he took on difficulty. He came to his own, and his own received him not.

That same Christ stands at the intersection of beauty and difficulty,

“In this world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world.

“Come all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

So hear the rattling chains of this graduation speaker:

- 1) Life is more difficult than you can possibly imagine.
- 2) Life is more beautiful than you can possibly imagine.
- 3) Christ reconciles the two.

We love you.