



Note:

Mr. Sullivan's remarks were interrupted by inclement weather. His full remarks are presented below.

I am honored---truly honored---to have been asked to join in this celebration---to participate in such a joyous moment in your lives. You have earned the right to be proud of what your presence here today says---not just about you---but about those who from the beginning have loved you, admonished you, believed in you---believed in you not just because of your multiple triumphs, but in spite of the many and manifest blunders which everyone here must surely have committed. Everyone in this great gathering is a celebrant---and everyone has a real claim on a fair share of the joy we all feel.

You graduate from a university that is arising on the arc of a dazzling ascendancy. A university blessed by magnificent leadership, a fine faculty and staff---and which will, I predict, move forward to embrace a powerful destiny. The world has only just begun to learn of the greatness that blossoms here.

Candor compels me to confess that not everyone in the world enjoys commencements as much as I do. In my penultimate year as President of William and Mary, our commencement speaker was Jon Stewart, Class of 1984. I have a vivid memory of what he said when I finished introducing him. I sat down. He stood up---and turned to me.

You know what he said? He said "Thank you Mr. President. Until just now I had forgotten how crushingly dull these ceremonies are. So thank you."

Speaking of Jon Stewart, I must tell you one more story. I was deeply honored when President Tribe asked me to be your commencement speaker. But then I thought---how will the students feel? What will they make of an almost elderly retired university president who runs the museum next door? Where is the WOW factor in that? The truth is, there isn't any.

So I said to President Tribe, Jon Stewart is a friend of mine. He did a great job at William and Mary three years ago. Wouldn't you like me to ask him if he would come to Christopher Newport?

President Tribe's response was immediate and emphatic. Absolutely not---I know our students---I know them very well---they would much rather hear from you than Jon Stewart!

Well---What else could I do! I took him at his word---and here I am. Perhaps we can arrange for Jon Stewart another year.

What about you? And here you are, too---perched precariously---on the brink of the great unknown. Some part of you must be exuberant---another must be apprehensive. And the question that little voice which haunts us all must be whispering to each of you is "What will my life be like?" Trouble is---pressing as it is---the question can't be answered. Oh---yes---for the briefest moment---you might think you see a flickering, fluttering sign of what fate foretells. But that is self-delusion---wholly understandable---but self-delusion still. None of us can know the outcome of a story yet to be written.

So--- let me put to you an easier question. One that is at least partly within your power to answer. "Who are you?" It seems simple enough---I know---but even this question is harder to answer than you think. For the "who" is not about your GPA or what your major was or all the honors that light up the best lines in your resume. For the "you" does not query the depth of your longing for a large net worth or your hope for vaulting fame.

The question does not ask for answers about those things. It wants to know what lies at your soul's center. Its purpose is to discover what about you is uniquely you. It is about the values and the strivings that will define your life---and by which and for what you are prepared to sacrifice almost anything to achieve. The question---it turns out--- is not really one but two: First, what is my life worth living for?---and---second, when my life is over, will it have been judged to have been well lived?

A wise man once wrote, "It is foolish to wait for your ship to come in unless you have sent one out." We could debate the meaning of that thought, but we don't have the time. I'll tell you what I think. I think it is about the powerful and fateful connection between effort and reward. Sadly, we live in a culture that is dominated by a presumption of entitlement. That culture makes us want to believe that effort and achievement are disjoined and that is not right. In my life's experience, what is achieved is almost always an expression of what is valued ---and what is earned. Put yet another way---your values are your destiny. There is luck, of course. I wouldn't advise relying on it. Luck is by definition capricious and so---supremely unreliable. Take care that the values by which you choose to live have the potential to earn the sort of success that will give you comfort in that---oh so distant future---not so distant at all really---when you have learned the hard way what matters and what does not.

It is not my intention to disparage an ambition for wealth or the hope of fame. Far from it. These are the worthy objects of an honorable ambition. But wealth and fame---even if you have them both---are not alone enough. Not enough if you would be worthy of what has happened to you here. Not enough if you consider not just the privilege your talents allow---but the obligations they impose.

In a long lifetime, I have learned some things about values and success. I wish I could tell you they are profound. They are not. Like many important things, they are simple, not complex. But they have mattered to me and they have made my life better. Not particularly because they have helped me contend with the counterfeit intoxication of success, but because they have given me the strength to deal with the really big hurt of personal failure. In telling you this, I am mindful of how ridiculous can be the conceit of

the old giving advice to the young. But I hope that you will understand the spirit in which I speak. And here are five things I want you to know.

Be Honest. All depends upon the durability of your integrity. To trifle with truth will corrupt everything else you try to do. Little lies are no better than big ones. By degrees---little or big---lies corrode the only sure basis for sustained and loving human relationships. What you gain by the indulgence of untruth---is never---worth what you lose---and what you lose is a part of the best part of yourself. One of my heroes---the late Judge Elbert Tuttle, hardly anyone knows him now---said it better than anyone I know: "For what is a share of a man worth?" Judge Tuttle asked. "If he does not contain the quality of integrity, he is worthless. If he does, he is priceless. The value is either nothing or is infinite." So ladies and gentlemen, the choice is yours to make: nothing or infinite.

Be Fearless. Fearless isn't really quite the right word but I can't think of a better one. No woman or man in the whole of human history has lived entirely without fear. Fear is as much a part of the human character as the capacity to love or the disposition to be cruel. What I mean is never---never---allow yourself to become the captive of your fears. To be in thrall to fear means that you are ruled by weakness and that means---almost always---bad decisions which will make a moral desert of your life. Fear is all the more insidious because of the many masks it wears. We rationalize that a fear-driven decision is the most practical choice---not ideal---but the best we can do. Fear-driven decisions usually require us to convince ourselves (and it is not hard to do) that while we are perhaps afraid to make the decision we know to be right---it doesn't really matter in the long run. There will be other chances---so we think---to retrieve the wrong---to redress the insult done to decency. None of that is true you know. Almost certainly you won't have another chance. You won't be given a second opportunity to make up for the first when you cravenly turned away and disdained to make the honorable choice. And the worst of it is---a decision founded on courage---a choice---in other words---which defies fear---is---in the end---really no harder to make. And the penalty for being wrong - if the choice was made in honor---is so infinitely small compared to the consequences of a decision made in the shadow of fear and so---disfigured by it.

Listen to Homer. He got it right. He wrote this in The Iliad: "Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard. We are all bound in a single honor, the brave and the weaklings. A man dies still if he has done nothing as one who has done much."

Be Gentle. By this I mean be gentlemen and gentlewomen. It is not always an easy thing to do. Should you choose this path, you will be one of a company that is far too small. It is hard to say, but sadly true---that we live in a time when vulgarity is fashionable. This is the supreme age of celebrity---a peculiarly soulless state---in which the celebrity is celebrated for nothing worthy, and those who celebrate celebrity are themselves equally empty. Both parties to the transaction have nothing to offer that should detain a sensible person for ten seconds, and you must not allow it to detain any one of you.

Success that matters has no need to trumpet its triumphs. People who count---count for something worthy of emulation---know that personal achievement is never a license to indulge in an orgy of self-congratulations.

By gentleness I mean a quality that cultivates a serene self-containment and which reflects a self-discipline that makes the joy of great achievement all the more meaningful for its lack of self-advertisement.

By gentleness---I also mean good manners which are the sure mark of the true gentle woman or true gentle man. On this subject, George Washington wrote: "Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect for those that are present." Can you imagine how much better this world would be if Washington's advice mattered to more people? Do your part to bring that better world nearer. Live by Washington's advice.

Be Tenacious Youth is impatient. It is in your bones. That natural impatience---wonderful in so many ways---is reinforced by a popular culture in which the lack of almost any attention span is a cause for celebration. There is even some truth in the half humored thought that "we live in a time when for too many instant gratification takes too long."

In the world you are about to enter, you will find no shortage of people with brains, winning ways and great ideas. What you will find in short supply are those with the

tenacity---the simple grit---to stick to a plan when it gets tough---really tough---to hang on. You will see the backs of a multitude---who were brilliant at the beginning - but nowhere to be found at the end. They will have fled to new projects and new ideas from which they will yet again detach themselves when the battle is joined, when personal risk is real and failure is more than a distant possibility.

If you care about success that really matters, steel yourself to be one of the few for whom the real risk of battle for real things is an inducement to engage, not an excuse to seek another opportunity elsewhere. A favorite singer of mine--- K. T. Oslin---has a great line in a good song. "If you can't take the fall, you shouldn't take the ride." I beg of you, don't be one of the crowd who is afraid to take the ride, but I beseech you - when you fall---get back on the horse---really---really fast.

If you do these things---there is a price to be paid. You will enjoy fewer, flashy up-front successes. But that kind of success isn't really worth the trouble. The glow of it is gone before you even have the chance to boast about it.

You don't have to believe me. Listen to Einstein. 1905 was his annus mirabilis. He published three papers---one that proved the existence of the atom---another showed the validity of quantum physics---and the third advanced his special theory of relativity. Not bad at all---for a year's work. In trying to explain these achievements, he said, "It is not that I am so smart. It is just that I stay with problems longer."

If it is ultimate---not superficial---success that you wish---remember Einstein.

Be There for Others

Will it be life's "glittering prizes" that you want? I hope so. I have already said that fame justly earned, power fairly won, wealth honestly gained - these are the proper objects of an honorable ambition. But they are not alone enough - not if you are the true sons and daughters of this very special University - not if you are the women and men those who know you best tell me that you are. If - in the end - success for you means only fame or wealth or power, you will discover - late if not soon - the bitter paradox that the moment of your greatest triumph will also be the moment of your greatest disappointment. Fame to what end? Power in what cause? Wealth to what purpose? Fail to ask - and to answer - these questions - then failure will be your certain destiny.

But there are other prizes - prizes which in the world's eyes do not glitter - but which I believe are very much worth the winning. Let me conclude by speaking for a moment about just one of them.

Who really matters in your life? Really matters. Who is always there for you? Who knows the deepest secrets of your heart or the furthest boundaries of your wildest ambitions? Whose example gives courage when fear is at your throat? Whose counsel do you seek when the problem is just too big - the choice beyond your power to make unaided? Whose face comes to mind in unexpected places and at unexpected times - and offers you comfort in the moment and confidence for the future? Whose life is it that seems so right that you would gladly make it the basis of your own biography?

To be that person in someone else's life may be life's greatest secret prize - because to be that person - always and unstintingly - demands the best in you. So fight - fight if you will - for the "glittering prizes" with all the cunning and all the fierceness that the quest demands.

But do not forget - and do not neglect - the quieter competition for the secret prizes which at the end of life's long sweep - will leave you not with fame, not with power, not with wealth - but with the abiding love of friends whose friendship you have earned and the profound satisfaction of having drawn from the deepest wells of your own humanity in the spirit of charity and the cause of hope.

Good luck---good luck to everyone of you---and Godspeed.