

Commencement Address  
The Honorable Deval L. Patrick P'07  
Governor of Massachusetts  
May 27, 2007

Madame Chair, Mr. President and Fellow Trustees; Headmaster Roach and Members of the Faculty and Staff; Proud Parents, Family Members and Friends; and especially Graduates of the Class of 2007:

Thank you for inviting me to address you on this special morning.

I have been trying for weeks to come up with the right message for you graduates today, and I have been having a very hard time. It's not stage fright. In my line of work, I give a lot of speeches. I have even given a commencement address or two before, once from this very podium more than a dozen years ago. From the experience I should have anticipated that the graduate speakers would be more brilliant than I could hope to be, and mindful of the fact that you will remember nothing of what I say – and should have taken my wife's belated advice of this morning, when she said I should just come to the podium, say, "blah, blah, blah," and sit down.

No, the problem this time is that our own Katherine is among you graduates. And every time I thought about standing *here* while she sits *there*, words failed me.

For one thing, she has given me very strict and rather stern instructions: be short and don't mention her. (I have already failed on one count.) For another, there is at least one other graduate in this class – Christopher Speers – whom I have also held as a baby, tickled as a little kid and watched grow up with as much pride as I have Katherine. For yet another, my best friend Will Speers – the Dean of Faculty here for nearly 30 years and Chris' father – is a hopeless sap like me, so that for the last several months whenever we have talked about this occasion we have both ended up in tears.

Katherine would attribute this behavior – as she does most of my shortcomings – to age. Perhaps she’s right. Naturally, you graduates think you will be eternally young. It is hard for you to imagine that one day, you will return to St. Andrew’s for reunions and such to find the dorm rooms smaller than you remembered, the students holding the door for you and calling you “sir,” and the faculty finally to have reached the age you think they are now. Today, you may feel that graduation day has come painfully slowly; one day you will marvel at how fast time races by. God help you if you too find yourself having to stand in front of a crowd that includes the jewel of your own life, overflowing with emotion and struggling not to embarrass her or yourself.

At some level I cannot escape the contrast between Katherine’s life to this point and my own at a similar milestone.

I arrived at Milton Academy in 1970, the night before classes began. I had lived until then in a small apartment in an inner-city neighborhood, on the south side of Chicago, a life of want, of deeply segregated and ill-equipped schools, of gang violence and limited hope – and I had never seen Milton or any place like it before.

We had a dress code then, as you do now: boys wore jackets and ties to classes. Now, a jacket on the south side of Chicago is a “windbreaker”. So when the clothing list arrived at home, my family splurged on a new windbreaker. That first day of classes, when all the other boys were donning their blue blazers and tweed coats, there was I in my windbreaker.

Eighteen years ago, we bought a house not far from Milton Academy on the paper route I had once had while a student and Katherine grew up there. For all but one year of her life she has been in highly reputable independent schools. By the time she arrived at St.

Andrew's as a freshman in the fall of 2003, she had traveled on three continents, knew with confidence how to pronounce and use a "concierge" and had shaken hands with the president of the United States.

Once when Katherine was in kindergarten the class was studying the changes in the seasons. Her "homework" assignment was to describe the four seasons to mom and dad. She told her mother she was ready and proceeded to recount in minute and accurate detail her several visits to the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington. "First, you drive up and the doorman takes your car. Then, you walk down the main hall to the dining room, and Carlos the maitre d' says, 'Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Patrick, hello girls, and shows you to your table.'" She was 5 years old!

Like many of the Moms and Dads here, I am sure, we have been blessed to be able to offer Katherine a very different life than our own. And yet there is at least one thing in common that we shared on the first day of school, and that you have each experienced on the brink of every milestone and challenge since. Maybe you are feeling it now. And that is fear.

I remember being afraid that the admissions office would realize they had made a mistake admitting me or that the other boys would think less of me because I was poor or black. I was afraid the food and language would be unfamiliar. I was afraid I would be homesick – and that it would show.

What I found instead and over time was an extraordinary community, remarkable teachers, lifelong friends and life-changing experiences – but only once I opened myself to them, once I conquered my own fear, once I learned to approach new experiences fearlessly.

In his first inaugural address, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” I think he appreciated that fear is a treacherous thing. It is debilitating and constraining. It can prevent you from taking the very kinds of calculated risks that make growth and learning possible. Fear steals experience and defeats human understanding.

Just consider what you take away from this remarkable school: the great teachers, the lifelong friends, the rare and uncommonly strong sense of community, the sense you have now and will always have that you have shared something important with each other. But it only came by your willingness to open yourselves to it, by overcoming your fear. Some of you, I suspect are kicking yourselves, now on the threshold of your farewell, because the longer you waited to open yourselves up to this community, the more you missed out on.

You will need that perspective in the world you will soon inhabit. It is a complex place. It is filled with great beauty, extravagant wealth and remarkable people. But it is in the *same instant* filled with hate, with indescribable violence, abject deprivation and injustice. Still, it is yours to inhabit. I encourage you to inhabit *all* of it.

Most of you will have choices that only a very small proportion of people in the world will ever know: choices to live and work and play in rarefied surroundings, far removed not from your own problems, perhaps, but from the hardships and experiences of so many others. Guilt is not the answer to such privilege. Yet you must take care not to isolate yourselves, to avert your eyes completely, from the ugliness and suffering you need not experience. You could, if you wanted, let your whole life be about posh clubs or posh schools like this in posh communities – and know nothing about the lives of less fortunate people, or just different people, other than what you *think* you know

from the media. But your perspective will suffer. Your judgment will always be that much more imperfect. And the great responsibilities which so often accompany that rarefied life will be borne by weaker shoulders.

Lean to look out, not just in; to look up, rather than down. It can be scary, but the rewards are transformative.

I mentioned that Mr. Speers here is my best friend and has been for nearly 35 years. We were the best man in each other's weddings; are godfather of each other's kids; have been present for just about every important occasion in each other's families. We are as close as two brothers. So, imagine my surprise when after 20 years of friendship, Will confessed that he was afraid of black people. We were in Harare, Zimbabwe, surrounded by black people, when he confessed. (It's a longer story I will save for another time.)

Of course, I have to confess to my own utter terror at being new to Will's natural environment. I once thought a WASP was a bug. Imagine if those sentiments had kept us from the friendship we share. That's another thing: love is the utter rejection of fear.

Overcoming fear is not just a challenge for individuals, but for our times.

The events of September 11 were horrific, tearing apart families and our collective sense of safety. It was a wakeup call to our own vulnerability. It was also a colossal failure of human understanding. And ever since, in my view, we have been governed by fear.

Fear drove us to round up people of Arab descent – many of whom were American citizens – and hold them without charge or trial.

Fear caused us to turn from a known enemy in Afghanistan and invade Iraq.

Fear justified the broadest intrusion upon civil liberties (in the Patriot Act) and the biggest aggregation of presidential power in our history.

Fear invented the Guantanamo Bay detention center.

The point is that the failure of each of us to overcome our fear is not just about what you might miss, but about how human kind may fail. Our future depends on vigilance and understanding transcending intolerance and fear.

St. Andrew's has given you the tools to know the difference. So, whether your task is to save the world, your neighborhood and yourselves, you have learned here how to be fearless. The rest is up to you.

One more thing. On behalf of all the family, friends and faculty here, we love you. Good luck and God bless.