

Graduation Address
Thomas Jefferson Academy
May 23, 2014

Headmaster Wimberly,
Esteemed Faculty and Staff,
Parents, families and supporters of the graduates,
And most importantly ...
2014 Graduates of Thomas Jefferson Academy
Good evening and hearty congratulations!

I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to spend time with this outstanding class earlier this year discussing the importance of college. I am delighted now to have the opportunity to spend this special evening with you celebrating the achievements of the class of 2014.

First, I need to begin with a confession. I have a bit of a checkered history with graduations. In fact, my first college graduation was in another century at the University of Oregon --- 1974, to be exact. It was a beautiful spring day and my wife, Joyce, and I were extremely excited about graduation. Nonetheless, we simply decided not to show up. We stopped by The University of Oregon's Hayward Field, picked up a program for a souvenir and ventured out to spend the day in the park. Although I, at the time, claimed to be doing this because of my natural aversion to big formal events like commencement ceremonies, the real reason I didn't show was because I was more than a little scared – not of

the event, but of the future. Frankly, I didn't know if I had what it took to move on to the next level and this formal event made facing that future seem all too real for me. I remembered that experiencing that same feeling at my high school graduation and simply decided that on that day, the park presented a safer alternative.

I don't know with certainty, but I suspect, that some of you tonight are experiencing that same strange and unsettling combination of excitement and fear. In other words, you may be feeling, on the one hand, "I am so amped about the achievement I am celebrating tonight." While on the other hand, you are thinking, "What I am going to do next?"

I am going to share with you my thoughts about addressing that question. But, given my personal history with graduations, let's talk honestly about the natural limitations on that advice. My responsibility as your graduation speaker is to share with you my thoughts and advice about the exciting future awaiting you and about facing your fears --- all of this, of course, based on my own life experiences. Frankly, this seemingly straightforward task is extremely challenging. Let's think about this together for a moment. Many of my life experiences, like the one I just shared with you, took place before you were even born and the world is a very different place today. My experiences may not resonate with you. For example, I just mentioned my high school graduation. As my 1968 high school class prepared for that graduation on June 5, 1968, we learned of the death of a man we all knew as RFK and this, to say the very least, added to our collective anxiety and fear about the future. I suspect that some of the grandparents in the room are now quietly recalling that momentous date in history while some of the graduates may be wondering "Who is RFK?" My point is not a historical point about the death of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Instead, my point is that I cannot, of course, really understand what scares you about your future

any more than you can identify with my fears about my future in 1968. Similarly, the reality is that no one in this room, including me, can really tell you with confidence what the future will hold. At most, I can tell you that it will be exciting and challenging and please, hear me carefully, you are prepared to face it ---- so hold on and enjoy the ride.

Since we are talking about the great ride you are about to take, allow me to suggest at this point that the most reliable guidance to you about how to stay in your seat as the roller coast climbs and dips is not the speaker on the stage but the parent, grandparent, teacher, family member or friend in the audience who is here tonight to celebrate with you. Ten years from now, trust me, the topic of this address will be but a faded memory. In fact, ten years may be extremely optimistic. Ten o'clock tonight may well be more accurate. At that point in time in your bright future, whether it is ten years or ten o'clock, the supporters with you in this room tonight will be waiting anxiously for your visit, phone call, text message (or whatever new mode of communication we are then struggling to learn) as they follow and continuously support the course of your life. They will be standing ready, as they always have, to help you move forward to achieve the greatness which is within each and every one of you.

This is the single most important thing I can share with you this evening. Relish the chance to spend this special evening with these great people; and don't forget that the path to greatness can be found more readily in the minds of these people – people who show up for you each and every day – than in the twitter feeds of more famous folks.

Bearing this in mind, let's turn now to my advice for you. This is the point at which the mind of an old guy like me inevitably is tempted to gush forth with a long checklist of the keys to success in life:

- Vote always
- Exercise daily
- Read voraciously
- Pay cash for stuff
- Travel extensively and learn a foreign language
- Listen intently
- Hand write at least one thank you note every day
- Floss regularly

You get the idea. I am not going to finish the rest of this very long list. Instead, I am going to focus on the importance of one trait – GRIT. What do I mean? Tenacity, perseverance, unwavering focus on chosen long term goals, resilience, determination.

In the opinion of many current thinkers, this one trait -- GRIT--- far more than natural talent --- is the determining factor in success or failure.

Grit is really important to me personally because, as I told you earlier, I at one time thought that the key to success was raw natural talent --- the ability to earn a high score on an IQ test, big man on campus great looks and incredible physical talent. I was scared about my future because I knew, objectively, that I was not truly extraordinary by any of those measures. In other words, how could I succeed?

Fear of this type has the capacity to freeze you. However, if you take a deep breath, show up and realize that it is GRIT --- not pure natural ability --- that is the key, you may find that some of your greatest satisfaction in life comes when you steadily, tenaciously, deliberately move forward in the face of fear over a long period of time. Quite simply, whether you have lots of natural talent or not, it is going to take many years of work and effort to become truly great at anything and the

satisfaction which comes from that long period of sustained effort cannot be overstated.

Let me give you one example from the world of sports --- and you know I already warned you that lots of my stories come from another century. I used to love to attend track meets at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon. I particularly loved to watch Steve Prefontaine – Pre – put on the yellow and green Oregon singlet, lace up his signature waffle trainers, and run the 10,000 meter event. At one point in time, Pre held the American track records in 7 events from 2,000 through 10,000 meters. The reason I choose this example, the 10,000 meter event in track, is that you simply don't run about 25 laps on the track at a blistering pace of around a minute per lap because you have a boatload of natural ability. You do it because you love to run and because you possess the grit necessary to have done the hard work over a period of many years necessary to entitle you to even be at the starting line. As the pack in the 10,000 meter race neared the bell lap, I loved to watch Pre's body language. As the often painful last lap approached, Pre seemed to form a confident posture and even a small grin, and then he would punish the rest of the pack as they raced to the finish. Almost always, the result was the same – another Pre victory. That's grit.

Let me give you one more example from my personal experience. Perhaps the best choice in my own life (other than choosing to marry my wife, Joyce, and to have two beautiful daughters) was a choice I made in 1988. I was a partner in an Oregon law firm. I was doing what everyone expected me to do and life was good – if not in my own mind, at least in the minds of those who expected me to be doing exactly that. I withdrew from my law firm and Joyce and I and our two girls drove from Oregon to Georgia to take a temporary faculty position at the University of Georgia, Terry College of Business. At the core, we made the choice to

make this crazy move because it enabled me to do what was most important to me – teach. Frankly, I did not have lots of natural talent for teaching nor well-developed teaching skills. But, I was ready to do whatever was necessary to become a skilled teacher.

This choice to follow my passion led to over 20 satisfying years as a faculty member and senior administrator at the University of Georgia and, today, it has led to my current opportunity to live my dream as I serve as the president of East Georgia State College. This has worked out so well for me not because I was a talented and inspiring naturally talented teacher. Instead, it worked out simply because some people very close to me told me that, if I followed my passion and worked hard over a very long period of time, it was possible that I could become what I wanted to be.

So, graduates, in conclusion, there is greatness in every one of you. The key, in my humble opinion, to turning that potential into achievements is the courage to choose to follow your passion and to do the hard work over a long period of time necessary to become truly great at your chosen path. Choose where to focus that hard work based upon your passion --- not the expectations of others. Then enjoy every minute of the years of hard work you will devote to reaching your potential and achieving your dream. At any time along the road when you become tired and discouraged, please remember this room full of supporters. I know they will be there -- waiting anxiously to support you along the way to achieving your dream. Supporters of these graduates, please join me now in assuring these graduates that you will be there for them always.