

Graduation Speech

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Preface

First, I would like to congratulate all of my classmates in this room today. Being a high school student for four years is *no* easy task. But imagine being a teacher - putting up with high school students for *seven hours every day* is even tougher, so I would like to extend a word of thanks to all the teachers at Marian. Ultimately, though, our families had it the hardest - your mother and father had to deal with one or more grumpy teenagers for the remaining *seventeen hours* each day. And your grandparents had to deal with your parents, and so on. So thank you - moms, dads, grandmas, grandpas, aunts, uncles, and siblings - for giving us the opportunity to walk off this stage with a high school diploma.

Speech

Often, these speeches start off with some cliché like “this is the time of our lives” or “look back upon these days as among the best.” However, I don’t agree with such clichés. They imply that from this point onward, our lives will become duller and more disappointing. They imply that as we journey through life, we will eventually cease to be happy. I’ll admit that sometimes, this is the case...

...But it does *not* have to be that way. I think our enjoyment of life is largely dependent on our interpretation of happiness. So let’s take a few minutes to reflect upon happiness, and how we can continue to grow in it even after we leave school. Now, I will not attempt to define happiness, since happiness is quite a subjective concept, but I will propose three aspects which I think are important to growth in happiness: intrinsic enjoyment, reward to others, and creativity. Let me tell you why.

I valued creativity since I was a toddler. My mother encouraged me to explore my imagination - to wander about in my own world and extend the capabilities of my mind. She was the definition of creativity, a true artist with an endless imagination. I can recall spending ample time with my mother constructing animals from various items we found around the house. Foo-foo, my favorite canine whose oatmeal-container body rested upon four upright paper towel rolls and who licked you with his cold coffee-can snout, was a wonderful companion in creativity.

However, only later did I realize the importance of *intrinsic enjoyment* to happiness. During my elementary and middle school years, and even my freshman year of high school, I overvalued external rewards from sports. Professional athletes appeared to be little demigods who were not only physically powerful, but were also very popular, respected individuals, and I thought I could get a taste of their glory by turning myself into a sports superstar. But after I made our hockey team my freshman year, I realized that the “glory” I was after was actually disillusionment in disguise. I was *not* a superstar.

However, I still couldn’t seem to let go of the notion of extrinsic enjoyment. When my father brought me along on a business trip to Germany during the spring of my sophomore year, I noticed that just as athletes appeared to mount the American ideal, scientists seemed to be the respected figures in Europe. So when I came back to the States, I decided to try my hand at science. Not because of intrinsic enjoyment, but because of extrinsic motivation to receive recognition and control the natural world. So I got involved in university research, enrolled in all the mathematics and science classes I could, and read nothing but science and math texts. I had one objective on my mind: to learn everything about science and mathematics.

In my investigation of mathematics, however, I realized something striking: our world is *not* governed by mathematics, nor science. In mathematics, we establish our own rules to create little microcosms in which we know everything. In science, the objective is to construct a microcosm which models the external physical world. But we can never know if we’ve constructed the correct microcosm, since we reside within its confines. We can never know everything about our physical world, since we live inside it. I realized that in wanting to know everything about how the world works, I essentially wanted to be a divine being. Which simply *isn’t* possible. I realized that if my notion of happiness involved the extrinsic motivator of complete knowledge and control of our physical world, I would *never* be happy.

However, I noticed that whenever I played the guitar my father had given me as a middle-school graduation present or worked on a math project, I was truly content. Not because anyone was watching me, but because I simply *enjoyed* it. I loved to make my own songs and theorems, and I could spend a whole day laying down in my room with my head in the clouds and my mind in music and mathematics. And although I enjoyed these activities on my own, they were even more enjoyable when I used them to help others - for example, playing guitar for *Godspell*, or teaching mathematics at Mathnasium.

Recently, I realized that this interpretation of happiness is something we have been learning throughout our years at Marian. For our past four years, we have wondered why we have been at school. We have probably asked the question, and the resounding answer - at least, for me - has been “to learn.” But to learn what? Well, the *obvious* answer is mathematics, science, English, religion, history, art, music, sports, etc. But the *subtle* answer is that we were learning which activities we enjoy. High school is a “launch pad” for finding our passions - those activities in which we find intrinsic enjoyment, reward to others, and creativity - those activities that make us *happy*.

And indeed, I’ve seen several fellow students grow in happiness by finding and developing passions during high school. Consider some of our *finest* visual artists, Brenda Cuevas and Liz Kramer, the art extraordinaires whose sketches teleport one to a whole other world. I see Liz draw whenever she can in class not because she wants recognition, but because she simply *loves* drawing. She is intrinsically motivated to draw, and her drawings inspire creativity in others.

And don't forget Clare Costello, the *magnificent* actress who devotes herself to theatre performance and teaching kids how to act at the South Bend Civic Theatre. She *loves* acting, others *love* to watch her act, and she finds creativity in that "there are no rules in becoming someone else."

And also Isaac Torres, who made a lasting impression on me with his skill and passion for soccer. Even though he is a captain of our soccer team as a junior, he plays simply because he *loves* the sport - not because others are watching him. I can recall one day, after teaching me a few soccer moves and showing me some creative tricks he was learning, Isaac told me that if he could, he would just play soccer *every day* for the *rest of his life*. Talk about passion!

In closing, rather than looking at happiness as the result of some external benefit - say, material possession, or prestige - that comes from an unenjoyable activity, I challenge you to view happiness as the result of activities that provide intrinsic enjoyment, reward to others, and creativity. *Don't* get stuck working at a dead-end job that does not interest you. *Don't* let these past four years be the "best of your life." *Find* your passions. *Pursue* your passions. *Devote* yourself to your passions. And then, as the old saying goes, "you'll never work a day in your life."

Thank you.