

Graduation Address
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Realms of Inquiry
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Congratulations to you, the Class of 2010, for all you have done to arrive at this point today. You have been extremely fortunate to receive an education at Realms of Inquiry. Realms is an extraordinary school that, through its remarkable teachers, its administrators, and everyone who supports the school (including your parents), has provided each of you with unique experiential learning opportunities, including studies abroad and explorations of all sorts. You have been privileged like very few people anywhere in the world to attend a school that so intensely values and helps to develop your curiosity, creativity, and sense of empowerment to make this a better world as you build rewarding, enriched lives for yourselves.

Now is an appropriate time for you to demonstrate your gratitude, and to acknowledge the incredible opportunities you have enjoyed at Realms, because of those who have made possible your unique educational, social, and character-building experiences at this remarkable place. Let’s hear it for your parents, your teachers, the other staff, and all who support the fantastic mission and work of Realms of Inquiry.

Now is also a time when your commencement speaker is supposed to provide a little wisdom, some inspiration, perhaps some advice as you move forward from this moment to whatever comes next – or, better put, whatever you make happen next.

I will draw from Socrates, Woody Allen, and Yogi Berra to arrive at my conclusion that the best life you can live, from this day forward, will be a life during which your decisions and actions are well-contemplated; a life during which you realize at every moment your power – and even your responsibility – to not simply be buffeted amidst the waves as you coast along, but to vigorously pull your own oars and competently steer your rudder, purposefully and with a recognition that where and how you travel through life is up to you; a life that serves not only the immediate interests

of you and your family, but that makes this a better world for everyone, including those who, due to no fault of their own, have not enjoyed the benefits and opportunities bestowed upon you.

Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. One expects that from a philosopher, I suppose, but consider how much richer is your life when you learn; when you enjoy great art, music, and literature; when you experience our awe-inspiring planet and universe; when you better understand other peoples and other cultures – and when you actually come not only to tolerate, but to respect and value, the differences that make our world and our lives so fascinating and rich.

Contemplate your place in this natural, social, and political world – contemplate all that you can do to positively affect our world and the lives of its inhabitants – and you will find that such contemplation will bring a sense of awe, a sense of tremendous responsibility, and a recognition of the tremendous privilege and opportunity you have to make a real, positive difference.

Two of my favorite quotes are from Woody Allen. Opining one day about speed reading, Woody Allen said, “I took the Evelyn Wood speed-reading course and read *War and Peace* in ten minutes. It’s about Russia.”

More on point, Woody Allen once wisely made the point that eighty percent of life is simply showing up. Certainly, showing up is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to a rewarding, interesting, engaged life. Another necessary condition has to do with what you do, and the passion you have for it, when you do show up.

Yogi Berra once observed, “You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there.” He also advised that “If you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

We all seek a set of guideposts, at least some principles that will help us decide when, how, and where we will show up.

One fundamental principle to apply in deciding our paths is the notion that we should treat others as we would want to be treated. Every humanitarian and religious tradition has, for good reason, some variant of the Golden Rule. How we treat others – or how we ignore others, particularly those who are in need – determines in very real ways the worth and sense of meaning in our lives. Yogi Berra expressed his take on it by noting, “If you don’t go to somebody’s funeral, they won’t come to yours.”

As you contemplate what you are going to do from here forward, think hard, then act resolutely. There will be surprises in life – certainly life will take many turns that you can’t even imagine as you sit here today. But the quality of your role will be determined by how you respond, how you map out what is susceptible to mapping out, and how you treat yourself, your family, your friends and associates, and even how you treat strangers, seen and unseen, along the way.

During genocides, in the context of labor and sex slavery, during the commission of many crimes during which innocent people are victimized, and even during times when our country ~~is~~ has been engaged in morally repugnant activities, there are three types of people. There are those who actively engage in harm – the perpetrators; there are those who stand up to fight against wrong-doing; and there are those who believe themselves to be without fault because they live their lives passively, but without whom the evils could not persist: the bystanders.

I’m sure there are few, if any, prospective perpetrators here today. The question that most of us should conscientiously consider is whether we are, or are going to be, complicit in the commission of atrocities and other wrongdoing as bystanders, or whether we will live our lives as upstanders – people who will stand and fight against those who harm others through their abuses of power.

Will you aid and abet wrongdoing by turning a blind eye, with the excuse that it’s none of your business, that you feel powerless to act, or that you’re just too busy with your own life to bother with the tragedies suffered by others?

There is no sitting it out when it comes to our most basic moral choices. A decision to look away, to ignore, to refrain from acting to stop the abuses of our earth or its inhabitants, is a decision to *support* the wrongdoing. Just as you make the decision to move a child out of the harm of oncoming traffic, so too are you faced with decisions every day as to whether you will come to the aid of those suffering from abuses of power and stand up against the abusers. This is all about the vast responsibility we share as human beings – and about the tremendous opportunities and privileges we have to make a positive difference.

So, as you consider how you will approach your future, decide whether you will be a bystander or an upstander. So much in your life, and in the lives of others (including our planet), depends on your decision.

Be engaged. Reach out. Build community, in your personal life and in the broader world. And never, ever stop questioning.

Cultures of obedience – societies where people simply go along with those in authority to get along – are the most dangerous. They are the most susceptible to committing genocides – almost all of which have been perpetrated while the US and the international community failed to act, as they could have, to stop the preventable horrors. As a nation, and as an international community, we have been, collectively, bystanders to the worst sorts of atrocities and terror. We promised “Never Again” after the Holocaust, but have tragically, as bystanders, violated that promise time and time again.

As upstanders, we can demand far better, far more, from our government, acting on its own behalf and as a leader in the international community.

Our nation is a reflection of who we as a people are. If we are content with being bystanders, then we allow those bent on abusing their power to do so. Upstanders can stop or prevent the abuses. In fact, they’re the only ones who ever do.

The greatest allies of evil-doers are those who do not stand up against them.

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.” That statement, often wrongly attributed to Edmund Burke, is a strong reminder of our responsibility to act and the consequences if we do not.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends."

One way of standing up every single day is to be engaged. Participate in the political process. Get to know your neighbors and be there to help when help is needed. Join service and civic organizations. Support and work with those organizations that help people in need and that seek to protect our earth and its current and future inhabitants.

Voter turnout in Utah in 2006 was the lowest in the nation. We love to yell at sporting events, “We’re number one,” but the fact is that, in the measure of the most basic civic responsibility, we were dead last. Only 36.7 of people eligible to vote in Utah showed up. Those low numbers were driven in large part by young voting-age people who chose to be electoral bystanders.

Even during the 2008 presidential election, Utah had the second-worst voter turnout in the nation. Utah is also second from last in the percentage of voting age people registered to vote.

“Social capital” is a term that refers to the ways in which our lives are more productive and enriched as a result of our various social ties. In areas other than voting, Utah does fairly well in the social capital arena. We volunteer in large numbers, we contribute a lot of money to charitable causes (especially when church donations are included in the calculations), and we are, compared to other states, relatively good joiners in religious, civic, and charitable organizations.

What difference does such “showing up” make? Civic vitality – everything from getting to know our neighborhood grocer, having family dinners on a regular basis, joining local civic organizations, volunteering in our schools, and turning off the television and engaging in discussions about current events with our friends and family – makes an enormous difference. When we are engaged in our communities, and when our communities are not sprawled but designed to encourage our engagement, they are safer, the schools are better, and people are healthier, psychologically and physically. As Robert Putnam said in his fascinating book, *Bowling Alone*, “civic connections help make us healthy, wealthy, and wise.”

We trust each other, and behave better, when we get to know each other. We become more empathetic and understanding when we get to know other people. Our lives, and the lives of our communities, are enriched as we open ourselves to interactions with others, whether informally, as in a regular card game or book club, or formally, as in church congregations or Rotary Club membership.

With my congratulations, I wish you the best as you decide over the course of your lives which roads you will take. Always know that you will find the most enrichment, and add to your communities and to your world, as you pursue, passionately, an engaged, well-examined, upstanding life.