

**National Cathedral School  
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**“Bad Advice”**

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Bishop Chane, Mrs. Hayes and members of the NCS Governing Board, Mrs. Jamieson, faculty and staff, NCS alumnae, parents, and friends, and members of the class of 2011:

It is an honor to be addressing you today.

I was wildly excited when I found out that I would be delivering this speech. “This is wonderful news!” I screamed. “No one has ever asked me for advice before!”

My friends gave me a funny look. “There is a reason for that,” they said. “Most of your advice is bad.”

My parents put it more gently.

“Alexandra,” they said, “on occasions like this, the speaker is expected to supply the graduating class with good and useful insight from the rich storehouse of her own experience. And, do not take this the wrong way, but the rich storehouse of your own experience is currently empty’ except for some Star Wars posters, a few Starbucks cups, and a crude painting of Michael Jackson that you just purchased from a homeless man.”

“Ah,” I said.

But this advice thing couldn’t be that hard. After all, Ben Franklin wrote an advice best-seller where he said things like “A cat in gloves catches no mice.” Who’s putting gloves on a cat?

And consider the advice you usually get at graduation. It’s terrible.

First, they say that the world is your oyster. This is true. It is sort of an acquired taste, hard to open with a spoon, and threatening to people with shellfish allergies.

Take the road less traveled.

The road less traveled is probably less traveled for a reason, like, it's a less efficient road, or maybe it leads through a bad area of town where guys try to open your car windows with hooks.

Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars.

Sure, if you want to waste a lot of money on your space program and don't care about astronaut life.

Follow your dreams?

This advice has always struck me as somewhat suspect. In most of my dreams, I am flying, falling, losing my teeth, or being chased around menacing landscapes by my high school history teacher Mr. Wood, who for no reason I can tell is dressed as a bear. I am sure this says something deeply worrisome about my psyche, but there it is.

So when people tell me to follow my dreams, I always get concerned. Which dream? The one where I wear flip-flops to chapel? The one where I am giving a speech in the National Cathedral that I have not adequately prepared for in advance?

*(moment of awkward silence)*

And that was before I saw *Inception*.

But I was beginning to be worried.

It seemed as though all advice was either oddly specific or useless.

I tried to think of some of my own. But all I could come up with was "There is no situation that is not improved by a sandwich."

This did not seem like the sort of earth-shattering revelation that I was expected to provide.

Oscar Wilde said he always passed on advice. "That is the only thing to do with it," he said. "It is never any use to oneself."

But I was not ready to give up yet.

Everybody gives you advice all the time, everywhere you look. I just walked past a sign from a bank that said "Take more time to smell the roses." If posterboards incapable of human speech are giving advice, surely there was hope for me.

They say when giving advice that it helps to know your audience.

But the more I learned about the Class of 2011, the more I worried that you didn't need any advice from me.

I have it on good authority that you once kidnapped an ice cream machine and placed it in the senior room. Clearly, you will never starve.

In fact, you will be fine.

You've been at NCS for the past nine or fewer years, and you already know everything there is to know. You are about to go to college, or take a year off to find yourself. If you are having difficulty finding yourself, I have a hint for you: you are sitting right here! Maybe you can get a refund on those plane tickets to Burma.

You have friends. Friends are like chairs – you can sit on them, and they make your apartment nicer. Friends are like homeless people – they smile at me when I run into them at Barnes and Noble and sometimes I find them on my lawn furniture. Friends are like white blood cells – if you don't have any, there might be something wrong with you.

You have other gifts too. You have knowledge.

You have enough knowledge that if someone told you there was a monkey somewhere that had just gained this amount of knowledge, it would be frightening. That is a level of knowledge that many people do not have. You would not be impressed if you learned that a monkey was watching Jersey Shore.

As long as you live, you will know the difference between a gargoyle and a grotesque. This information turns out to be totally useless. The only time I have ever come close to applying it was once when I saw an ugly man spitting water into some bushes during a rainstorm. "How grotesque!" my friend exclaimed. "No," I said. "I'm pretty sure that's gargoylish!"

We are no longer friends.

They say knowledge makes your thoughts more interesting.

Or helps you put yourself to sleep by making lists of state capitals. Which is probably about the same thing.

But mainly it can be somewhat annoying.

At best, it will make you harder to pick up at bars, because you will be less impressed by tattoos that contain grammatical errors.

At worst, you will start making minor grammatical corrections to the graffiti you find in public restrooms. I have started to do this, and I am no longer welcome in certain malls in the northeast.

They say that if you did your work at NCS, you will never have to study again. This is not strictly true, but at college, you will have the opportunity to take courses like "The Magic of Numbers" and "The Magic of Magic" and "Einstein's Favorite Quiches."

This is not to say you won't learn anything at college, but it mostly falls along the lines of "how to avoid paying for detergent" and "doing things to your clothes that will discourage your roommate from stealing them and then attempting to sell them back to you" and "cohabiting safely with the cockroach in your shower who is too large for you to kill."

And for everything else, there's the Internet.

That's when it hit me! Maybe I was going about this wrong. Maybe I should have asked the Internet for the advice to give you today. It knows everything. It will tell you if he likes you. It will tell you what that humming in your elbow is. The answer to both of these questions is "It's a brain tumor!"

I asked the Internet what tips I should give you today, and it suggested some enhancement techniques that I do not believe are anatomically applicable.

Trust the Internet to fail me at a time like this.

They say that advice can be autobiography. So perhaps it is time for a relevant anecdote from my life.

I was walking home from my job, and these three strange, semi-homeless weird sisters showed up and told me some bizarre things about the future, and which grain would grow and which would not. My colleague Banquo said they were crazy. But I couldn't get this out of my head. I went home and told my wife. And she said, "Well, you know what you should do, you should totally murder the current king!"

And so I did. Then my wife got really into hand hygiene and muttering and walking around late at night. So I found the weird sisters again, and I said, "Look, madams, I'm a bit unnerved by all the goings-on, are we still cool?" and they said, "Don't worry, you will never be removed from power unless a walking forest intervenes and nobody born of woman can kill you." And so I said, "Okay," and then my enemies attacked me with a fake walking forest and I got beheaded by someone named MacDuff. That was the worst Tuesday ever. The moral of this story is two-fold: do not kill king Duncan without reading the user agreement, because there is always a loophole, and no matter how many times you wash your hands, it won't stop you from dying.

But maybe the bigger lesson of this advice is that if you have read great books like Macbeth, you can pretend to be more interesting than you are.

You will have to be more subtle than I am, but you get the idea.

The nice thing about reading books is that it allows you to borrow other people's lives. I recommend it highly. It is certainly the only reason I get to stand before you today.

I am a big fan of those terrible religious shows on cable tv .

And one time that I watched, it was a bearded man who claimed he could heal kidneys with his mind. And he said something that stuck with me. He had just read a book written by a great entrepreneur. "He put his whole life into that book," the man was explaining, "all the wisdom that he spent his whole life trying to gain, and I read it in an hour."

I never thought I would say this about someone who claims he can heal kidneys with his mind, but he has a point.

Read a book.

If you take away only one thing from this speech, I hope it's a diploma, because otherwise what are you doing here?

If you take away two things from this speech, I hope it's a diploma and a commemorative needlepoint knee cushion, because that shows ingenuity and daring. Don't actually take the commemorative knee cushions.

If you take only one metaphorical thing away from this speech, I hope it's that you read.

"Oh give me a break," my friends said. "That's your advice? To read? That's hardly advice. That's like telling them to get a second opinion."

And it's true, it is.

Anyone could give better advice. Probably they already have. So, read.

After all, your class theme is Imagine.

Imagination itself is a somewhat old-fashioned tool. People with imaginations say silly things, like, "I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams and nut allergies."

But it's really the ultimate portable entertainment device. And you can't accidentally break it by dropping it in the toilet. It can be in the gutter and work for years.

People talk about it like a muscle – there are stretches of the imagination and feats of the imagination – and the best way to supply it with raw material is to learn.

Learn how the world wags and what wags it. I didn't say that. T. H. White did.

Then you'll be able to advise yourself.

*So maybe that is the point of all this education you seem to have acquired.*

*We are switching from internal to external storage. You used to carry your friends' numbers and facts and notes about the best places to eat in your head. Now you carry them in your pocket. It seems just as convenient. But things fall out of your pocket more easily than your head.*

*There will be times when the GPS does not work. When Facebook is down. When Google is doing something weird with the logo, and you are on your own. And at times like that, you will not be totally and completely adrift. You, you see, have actual knowledge. You will have someone to ask for advice: yourself.*

*And it does not have to stop here.*

*Reading lets you crawl into someone else's mind and get something far better than advice. They say that it exists that where one has lived finely, thousands may afterwards live finely. That's true. You gain experiences that are not yours. You can profit by others' mistakes. You make new friends whom you can fit into your carry-on luggage without anyone passing remarks.*

The combination of imagination and knowledge means that you will never have to fear being alone. That's what everyone is most afraid of these days. That's why we want to be connected all the time. People have this notion that if you are alone ever you will wind up fifty years old at a Twilight

convention with a wallet full of pictures of your cat. This is silly. By the time you are 50, no one will use wallets any more.

But if you furnish your mind, if you read, you don't have to be afraid to rely on yourself, and you can lead a more interesting life. You won't have to keep asking Google if it's safe to eat this, or if Francis Bacon really said that. You will know already, and instead of asking for advice, you can go out and live.

You are the class of 2011, and I imagine you are going to be fine. You are smart, you are educated, you are wearing robes, and you know better than to listen to too much advice.

And congrats.

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