

Shrewsbury High School Graduation Remarks

May 29, 2014

Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

Members of the School Committee; administrators, faculty, and staff; parents, family, and guests; and, most importantly, members of the Class of 2014 – it is an honor and a privilege to address you this evening.

Lately, I've been giving a lot of thought to the value of public education and the influence teachers have upon their students and that schools have upon their community, which led me to thinking about how I got started in this profession. In doing so, I recalled the influence of a movie I saw during the summer before my senior year of college. The film, *Dead Poets Society*, starred Robin Williams as a boarding school teacher who has a profound impact upon his students. I saw it on a rainy Saturday afternoon in a theater in Winchester, Virginia, where I was playing in a college baseball summer league. Our game had been rained out, and my host family had invited me to see the movie, probably to try and cheer me up. I was a bit depressed, because my performance that summer had made it very clear that my longtime dream of pitching in the major leagues was not going to come true.

So, I was at a point where I knew I had to figure out what I might want to do with my life since it wouldn't involve playing for the Red Sox. I found inspiration in that fictional teacher's ability to transfix his class of adolescent boys and instill in them a passion for learning, and it made me think that perhaps becoming a teacher would be a fulfilling pursuit. And so I did.

A little more than a year later, I had graduated from college and found a job teaching American history at a private school, for adolescent boys no less. I diligently prepared my lessons for the first day of school, with the intention of inspiring my students to love history the way that Robin Williams had inspired his students to love literature and poetry. After about ten minutes, I was thrilled that these students, my students, were seemingly hanging on my every word. After I finished my introduction, one boy raised his hand and I approached him, leaning in so I could provide a wise response to his question, and I'll never forget what he said: "Mr. Sawyer, did you realize that you have a giant pimple on your cheek?" (And I did.)

And so my bubble of naivete was burst. I was rudely awakened to the truth that students are both very observant and brutally honest, and I realized that real teaching wasn't like the movies. And, even though I quickly came to understand that I would not be able to enrapture my students each minute of each day, I came to love the hard work of education, and ultimately made it my career.

My mother was a teacher (and an excellent one), and truth be told her influence had much more to do with my path than any movie, as evidenced by the fact that my sister and brother are also teachers. My mom and my dad were my first and most important teachers, of course, as were your parents for you, so don't forget to thank them - repeatedly, and for the rest of your

lives. I also thank your parents now because, as both an educator and a parent, I know how critical their support has been to your success.

Of course, beyond your families, you have benefited from the support of the Shrewsbury community. I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to both live and serve as a school leader in Shrewsbury for almost 17 years, and because of the connections I've made this ceremony has extra meaning for me. This is because many of you were my students when I was your elementary school principal at Floral Street School, and it fills me with pride to see the successful young women and men you've become. It is also because I've come to know others of you as my neighbors, my daughters' babysitters, their basketball and softball coaches, and their role models. They, as I, have loved watching you perform, on the stage and field and court, so much so that I actually had to referee a dispute at breakfast yesterday when my girls were fighting over who got to look at your yearbook first (a yearbook that is extremely well done, by the way).

I am so very proud of you as a class, not only because of your many accomplishments in academics, the arts, and athletics but because of the remarkable commitment you've made to serving your community. You have given over 12,000 hours of your time over the past three years, freely, to help others, with nothing expected in return. While I'm sure most of those whom you helped were grateful, you may also have experienced times where your contributions were neither noticed nor acknowledged. Unfortunately, that is part of the reality of serving others; sometimes those whom you serve are ambivalent, or even hostile, despite the fact that you are working hard to help them. But, despite the fact that throughout life you will encounter some people who are selfish and ungrateful, I truly hope you will continue to serve others, for it not only enriches the lives of those whom you help, but it also enriches your own.

When I was playing college baseball in Virginia that summer, I was also doing research for my senior history thesis, which was focused on a Civil War battle nearby. I learned about a Union officer from Massachusetts, Colonel Charles Russell Lowell, who died heroically in that battle, and discovered a quote of his that has since resonated with me. He said, "Nothing can repay you for what you have done, except the doing of it." Colonel Lowell was both wise and prescient, as recent social science research confirms that people who give of themselves with no expectation of something in return are happier people who accomplish more in life. I hope you choose to be one of those people.

How you live your life is a series of choices. Of course, there is one outcome over which we have no choice, as we are all traveling the same path to the same ultimate destination. But we do have a choice, as George Bernard Shaw wrote, whether to live a life of purpose or become a, quote, "feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." In an unattributed extension of that quote, Shaw supposedly went on to say, "Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I've got a hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

And that partly is what this ceremony is about. This evening is a symbolic passing of the torch to you, when we celebrate the fact that our community has provided you with the education you need to go into the world and make your contribution ~ and that you are ready to make it.

In the future, I ask that you remember that your success was due in part to your families, your teachers, and the larger community, and that you repay that debt by passing the torch and supporting those who come after you. Our deeply held American tradition of caring for the next generation is what keeps our communities, and our country, strong.

Recently, an Apple advertisement for the iPad caught my attention, as it uses a voiceover from *Dead Poets Society*, that movie that was so influential for me at an important juncture of my life. In it, the teacher quotes from the Walt Whitman poem *O Me, O Life*, which alludes to life as a “powerful play” to which each of us may contribute our own unique verse. The teacher concludes by asking his students “What will your verse be?”

This is a profound question. To attempt to answer it, I suggest a different quote from *Dead Poets Society*, from the scene when the teacher has his class view photographs of graduates from long ago to impress upon his students the idea that life is too short to wait to write that unique verse. He says, of the students in the old photos:

They're not that different from you, are they?
Same haircuts.
Full of hormones, just like you.
Invincible, just like you feel.
The world is their oyster.
They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you.
Their eyes are full of hope, just like you.
Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable?
Because you see gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils.
But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you.

And, at that point, with every student raptly anticipating what he would say next, their teacher shared that wisdom that we all should heed given how brief our time truly is:

“*Carpe diem*. Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary.”

Class of 2014, I wish you the very best as you write the verses that make your lives extraordinary. *Carpe diem*.