

Commencement Chapel Talk

Mark Hammond

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As you begin your graduation day, think back to your senior big brothers and sisters. That class of 2009 was described during its graduation chapel talk in terms of the new rules that came into being as a result of their behavior. Freshman study hall in the Dining Hall? That's because of the Class of 2009. Explicit references to branding in the student handbook? Class of 2009. Senior retrospective acts that must be previewed in front of class advisors? Class of 2009.

It is, I believe, significant that the only new rule I can think of as a result of your behavior is a series of checks and balances allowing Ms. Ramirez to coordinate overzealous charitable fundraising. Oh, wait, there's one more: six on the dock and don't rock! Sure you guys have committed your share of shenanigans, but mostly we just worried you'd hurt yourselves climbing trees and walls, building forts and bicycle jumps, diving into poles, and sailing cardboard boxes. Now, here you are ready to graduate.

Look at all the people who have come to see you graduate. There are many more outside, too. Why is this such a large celebration? I mean, really... in the words of Mr. Higgins, "Relax, it's only high school."

Over 87% of the US population graduates high school. 30 some percent receive a Bachelor's Degree. 9% Master's or other professional Degree, 3% PhD. You might think that as you get to more rarefied degrees, the graduation ceremony might be a bigger deal, even better attended by your family, relatives and friends. But quite the opposite is true. Today is most likely the most elaborate graduation you will experience. I know this was true for me, but I recently started wondering why this was. I think the answer has to do with how many people are so closely involved with you and your education. Your graduation from high school is as much a communal triumph as it is a personal one. Many people helped you get here and helped you to become the person you are: grandparents, parents, teachers, your classmates, friends, the people who cook your food everyday, the trustees of this school, and the list goes on. For instance, the classes I teach are a result of hundreds of people who have worked to develop a coherent pedagogy and thousands of people currently collaborating electronically and face-to-face helping each other. All of these people have contributed to a web of cause and effect that has resulted in your presence here today, and the proximity of their support makes this very obvious right now, while you are still young. That sense of proximity will fade as you graduate from college and

beyond, but remember that the effects these many, many people have had on you will never go away. As you grow older, you might start to believe the illusion that you've done something all by yourself, even as the number of people who have affected you grows exponentially (and yes, I used that correctly). Yet, no object or concept or achievement comes into existence without a web of prior connections and links. Nor can any object, person or concept continue to exist without this web of connection. Buddhists call this concept "dependent origination."

Think about the school ties and St. Andrew's crosses you were given last Sunday at the senior-alumni dinner. Those things are now "yours." Yet someone sewed that tie and polished that charm. Many people were involved in loaming the silk for the tie and casting the cross. Yet more people were involved with collecting the silk and creating the die and the die casting machine. Truck drivers and truck stop employees were involved in transporting the materials. Thousands were involved in building the vehicles that moved the materials. You can entertain yourself for quite a while making as many connections as you want, back all the way, perhaps to those who cleared the fields to grow the food to feed the people who... you get the idea. So in what way is that tie, that St. Andrew's cross really "yours?" In what way is your graduation really just about you? You are part of a whole, a web of cause and effect, of interdependence. But that web itself depends on the parts. The Dalai Lama explains it this way:

"We begin to see that the universe we inhabit can be understood in terms of a living organism where each cell works in balanced cooperation with every other cell to sustain the whole. If, then, just one of these cells is harmed, as when disease strikes, that balance is harmed and there is danger to the whole. This, in turn, suggests that our individual well-being is intimately connected both with that of all others and with the environment within which we live. It also becomes apparent that our every action, our every deed, word, and thought, no matter how slight or inconsequential it may seem, has an implication not only for ourselves but for all others, too."

I guess I've told you all this for two reasons. The first is to put this elaborate celebration called graduation into perspective. It's a big deal not only because of what you, as an individual, have accomplished, but because so many people have been involved. Second, it is now up to you to sustain and nurture this web of connectedness: to protect our environment, to sustain each other, to make sure no one is left behind without basic human needs being met. If you are ever at a loss for what to do, seek first and foremost to help someone else, then the next step will become clearer.

We, who are part of your web, all wish you more than luck as you leave St. Andrew's!