

Scott Sipprelle and dedicated, stalwart trustees; the spirit of Jon O'Brien who first invited me in 1979 and then guided my career for 18 years with his dynamic wife Joanie, present in the audience to see her third grandchild graduate; Tad and Elizabeth Roach, whose friendship and partnership have been the professional and personal gifts of a lifetime; esteemed colleagues gathered around me, who teach with such inspiring gusto; my wife Heidi, whose love fuels this and the next adventure, and whose dedicated teaching to immigrant adults yearning to become U.S. citizens demonstrated how education can truly change lives; my three remarkable sons, graduates of St. Andrew's and here today, each a vivacious manifestation the St. Andrew's ethos; parents and family members bursting with pride and love; underformers who are the vital and exciting future of this School; and most importantly, seniors, VI Formers, members of the outstanding Class of 2019: It is a distinct and humbling honor to "graduate" with you today.

Perhaps more than any other commencement speaker could, I know what you have been going through – this senior year, this spring, this past week, this day, these fleeting moments together now on the Front Lawn: the anticipation and denial, the emotionally charged good-byes hovering in the air, the mysterious world that beckons down the driveway, each speed-bump underscoring the transition. We are dumbfounded at how fast the time has gone by. So many contradictory, explosive and unknown sensations coarse and rage through us, with so much to celebrate, so much to miss. We know these buildings, classrooms, dorms, the benches in the dining room, the pews in the Chapel, the athletic fields, the trees, the sunsets stretching shadows across the grass. But what will it be like starting over, being new, not comforted by the reassuring sounds of the bell tower or "Everyone go to your tables, please!" or "Griffin Up!" or "Time for tiny tots to triumph and travail – Tuesday!" or the daily references to Hamlet, Beloved or Bryan Stevenson? You and I, we seem to exist in a triptych time zone of past, present and future, a nexus of memories and fears, the familiar and strange – and then there is this ephemeral present which relentlessly sprints forward. And then there's that dorm room, that house, with so much stuff to be packed up. Where did all those things come from? Exactly how many SAS related t-shirts do I have?

Well, you and I, we will survive and flourish because we know how to make friends, how to be a friend, how to collaborate, support, laugh together, work through pain or confusion with another. You know, by coming to St. Andrew's, how to start over, because you did it two, three or four years ago. You know how to be open to all, regardless of means or sexual orientation or gender identity or race or religion or ethnicity or color or national origin. You know how to talk to your teachers; how to engage in challenging courses; how to be curious; how to explore; how to serve; how to imagine; how to compete. You know how to include, how to notice, how to rescue.

The people encircling you, seniors, these people are in your life for the rest of your life. And for those of you who believe in Heathcliff and Cathy, these classmates will obliterate that puny boundary of life and death and forever romp with you in "The Great Ethos" above, the St. Andrew's name for Heaven.

Your Mein Chapel talks last Wednesday night, testimonials offered by Xander, Diana, May, Danny and Sharon, celebrated the generosity and mettle of your friendships. Afterwards, driving with Bilal and Noor into town for food, I mentioned how powerfully those talks captured your form's capacity for authentic relationships. Bilal thought for a minute, and then replied: "We really know how to show up for each other." There it is: the artistry of your hearts in action. What Zahara, Lilly, Ben, Frances and Matt told us last night; what Carson and Noor just spoke – these expressions substantiate your commitment to each other, and your ability to ever widen your circle of friends.

St. Andrew's fosters friendships. Like you, I've made friends at St. Andrew's that I know will last beyond this campus, beyond this block schedule, beyond weekends and Wednesday night dinner and Chapel, beyond School Meeting and Arts Weekend and successful or grueling athletic seasons. I've known Elizabeth Roach for 40 years – I've known her amazing parents; her Aunt Mary; her four sisters including Annie, the mother of your classmate, Tad; her four children, each of whom I taught how to ride a bicycle because their brilliant father lacked that athletic skill. From among a million examples, here's

my Elizabeth Roach lifetime friendship parable. There's a similar occurrence between you and any number of your classmates.

During Jesmyn Ward's visit last month, in the lunch session with students in the Gahagan Room, Jesmyn Ward talked about her early years as a struggling writer. You, Elizabeth, were sitting next to her, and as she recounted what it was like to be rejected over and over again, she confessed, turning to look right at you, that perhaps, "I'm no good. I can't write." What struck me about this moment was that when she turned to you, instinctively you gave her an expression back which said, "No, Jesmyn, you can write. You are good." I could see it in how your eyes and smile asserted that conviction to her. It's an assurance I've received countless times from you over these years – one your students, advisees, tennis players, colleagues, past and present parents, alums, your family know so well. I don't have to be at St. Andrew's to experience that acceptance. You, the Class of 2019, you also have classmates who love and affirm you; and that bond will endure even as you depart to different campuses.

Here's but one sinew of my abiding friendship with Tad Roach, from rooming with him on Sherwood, to being godparents to each other's children, to teaching side by side these 40 years. We also coached boys' varsity soccer together for about 15 years. At one practice during the mid-1980's, I remember you stopped the drill, the team sat on the benches on the field where the swimming pool is now. Bending down on your then youthful knees, you asked the team, "Why are we here?" I can't remember what prompted this talk; but this episode crystalized for me that athletic teams, with the right approach and engagement, could become entities larger than themselves, more significant than their won-loss record. I've remembered that fall afternoon for 35 plus years because you possess the Tolstoian ability to transform the ordinary into the significant, in School Meetings, Chapel Talks and conversations in your grace-filled office, bestowing justice, compassion and hope upon confusion, pain and loss. I've never met someone who so passionately believes in people, in the miracle of kindness, the sanctity of connections and conversation, and in the redemptive energy of education and community. Your tenacious heart and mighty soul have saved, reinforced and

sustained me – that’s what friends do. You seniors already know this – you have such friends sitting next to you and around you. At your 5th, 25th, 40th reunion on this Front Lawn, you will be amazed at and nourished by how much has happened with these friends since today.

Why is this so true for you, the Class of 2019? I have two possible explanations, both of which relate, of course, to books and the classroom – but I’m also starting to consider it wasn’t so much that the books taught you something new as the books reflect what is already inside you.

When you were in V Form, many of you read Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*: we may have been the first school in the country to read it, and certainly your experience helped Mrs. Roach convince Jesmyn Ward to come to St. Andrew’s last month. In one class we were discussing that profound scene right before Mama dies, a scene teeming with ghosts and spirits and family members surrounding Mama in her bed. Building off a classmate’s comment, Ben argued that “These characters make-up each other; they complete each other.” Ben was already anticipating Sixo and the Thirty-Mile Woman in *Beloved*: “She is a friend of my mind,” Paul D remembers. “She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order” (*Beloved*, p.321).

Real friendships, you and Ben assert, are about completing, fulfilling, honoring. When you were in IV Form, you heard Bryan Stevenson in Engelhard proclaim that our very humanity came from our brokenness; some of you traveled to Montgomery this winter to learn about his Equal Justice Initiative. A friend initiates the “putting together” process by showing up, maybe with a pizza slice, maybe with a seat in a car to Wawa, maybe just as a silent witness. I promise that you don’t need your Baum corridor or your Upper Mein room to experience this restoration: it will happen with these friends forever. You and I know there really isn’t “the last” class or family style lunch or game at St. Andrew’s. This concept of “last” doesn’t exist. Instead, there is only the “lasting” – lasting friendships, lasting cables, lasting gifts of coherence, clarity, beauty and joy.

There's another way St. Andrew's gathers you together "in all the right order." It's the motif of "palimpsest." Palimpsest is when you physically write on top of a piece of writing, so we see multiple narratives, usually from different time periods, together. This spring my V Form students read about palimpsest in *The Chaneysville Incident*; there's an example of palimpsest in *Wuthering Heights* when Lockwood reads Cathy's journal written in the margins of a novel from her bookcase. Hamlet rewrites his entire life, re-engraving his vision of what it means to live, to "let be," on top of the revenge plot he was handed by Life in Act I. *Pride and Prejudice* becomes a novel of revision, reseeing, redoing – another type of palimpsest for Elizabeth Bennett. Palimpsest is also like a remix in music; it's the carving you did last night in the basement of Founders, where your names and initials add to the signatures of alums dating back to the earliest days of St. Andrew's. That wall downstairs has become the ongoing novel of St. Andrew's – each graduating class writing its own chapter. Palimpsest is about the story continuing, evolving, regenerating.

William Park, in a conversation we had this spring over breakfast, taught me that palimpsest also happens in art, something he was learning from Mr. McGiff and Ms. Gahagan in their Art History course. As William explained how some of the Japanese artists they were studying were painting conversations between the past and the present, it occurred to me that St. Andrew's, that indeed our lives, are a palimpsest; we are all adding to the unfolding narrative of Life, of this School, of our families, of our countries, of our common world. And each of these stories grows because we re-engage with them – we rethink and reimagine and repaint and reword and resound. You and I, we have new texts, a fresh canvas waiting for us in places that are not by Noxontown Pond. As scary and unknown and uncertain as that may be, that's an invitation and adventure worthy of our character and aspirations.

Your commencement today is both yours, and yours created with so many others – seniors who mentored you, teammates, classmates, teachers, friends, advisories, clubs, parents and family. You and St. Andrew's are a robust palimpsest of lives, struggles, promises, expressions, interpretations and reinterpretations, scratches upon previous scratches, tenaciously

coalescing together. Each conversation links us, grants us a new vision or question to explore, a fresh perspective to learn from, a confusion to wrestle into. Colum McCann described this connection in *TransAtlantic*: “We return to the lives of those who have gone before us, a perplexing möbius strip until we come home, eventually, to ourselves” (*TransAtlantic*, p. 252).

Similarly, Lois Kim, Sylvia’s mom, told us in her stirring Arts Weekend Chapel talk, that St. Andrew’s can be a place to return to – a place to draw strength from, a moral compass, a foundation of courage and goodness and coherence. St. Andrew’s is here, but it’s also “out there”: it’s simultaneously here and also the lives lived by graduates, by you parents, by past parents and faculty. Your colleges need you. Work places and towns and countries seek you. Bring them your wonder and insights and vitality. These diplomas mean little unless you share this human curriculum, galvanizing and animating it and yourself in union and communion with others. Thus your St. Andrew’s experience becomes the palimpsest of your next journey. So let’s resolve to embrace the incompleteness of our existence and understanding, and dedicate our education, artistry and souls to the lives, questions and service of others. Then your St. Andrew’s diploma gains relevance, purpose, muscle.

Where do we find the sustenance and the stamina for this noble, necessary undertaking? What redeems our sacred scrapes and bruises? Ultimately, my graduating friends, for you and for me, what St. Andrew’s sends us out into the world with, is love. Love fuses us forever to St. Andrew’s, to the people here. Love blasts through divisions and forges bonds, love animates and reveres, awakens and emboldens. Remember how Jesmyn Ward finished her talk to us last April in a packed, absolutely silent Engelhard Hall?

At the heart of [*Sing, Unburied, Sing*, she said,] is love. We have to care, share truths, hold hands, reckon with traumas, sing them. This love lets characters witness and bear witness.

And then she read Jojo’s final description of Kayla’s affirmation of and song to the ghosts in the tree:

Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease.

Yes.

Kayla tugs my arm and I lift her up. Pop turns. I follow him as he looks for raccoon and possum and coyote, bends branch after branch as he leads us back to the house. Kayla hums over my shoulder, says “Shhh” like I am the baby and she is the big brother, says “Shhh” like she remembers the sound of water in Leonie’s womb, the sound of all water, and now she sings it.

Home, they say. Home. (p. 284-285)

When she finished the passage, Jesmyn Ward looked up at us, exclaiming:

That is how we reckon. That is how we hope. That is how we witness. That is how we thrive.

Can you feel how Jesmyn Ward’s radical vision of love pulsates with grit, glory and audacity? We must react to the world around us – to reckon, to hope, to witness. If we do that, if we answer in Kayla’s universal language, then, proclaims Jesmyn Ward, “we thrive.”

You, Class of 2019, you beloved, dynamic, creative, perceptive, ferociously kind, silly and generous seniors: you already know that. You are Kayla. You are the senior class who loved, who loves, who transformed us with your dances, songs, embraces, pursuits, artistry, heroic endeavors. And for you and for me, we also know in the very marrow of our bones, sense it right this second as it all seems to be racing away from us, that quintessentially, St. Andrew’s is also love – love that listens and perseveres, love that revitalizes and prevails, love that thrives.

So much eagerly awaits you, needs your spirit for, will be made better because you were there, as has characterized your days at St. Andrew’s.

Fiercely hug these friendships. Keep creating the palimpsest that is your life story. Go love. Go thrive.

Thank you.