

Commencement Address
John Matouk '89
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Thank you, Tad, for your introduction and for inviting me to speak today. Parents, family members, faculty, trustees, and Class of 2018 – as I stand here before you, I am reminded of the last time I addressed the St. Andrew's community, 31 years ago. At that time, I was a budding V Former and my teacher and mentor, Mr. Speers, somehow had coerced me to stand up during a chapel service to read a paper I had written in English class about my days growing up in Cairo, Egypt. I am deeply moved to be back more than three decades later, once again addressing the St. Andrew's community, in honor of this momentous occasion.

As I think back to my early days as a V Former, I vividly remember key events that would shape my future. I would like to share one with you: upon returning to campus for SAS soccer camp, I discovered our team had a new assistant head coach – a certain Mr. Austin. Mr. Austin seemed odd at first – a strange hybrid between a classic all-American jock and an absent-minded worldly intellectual. With intense eyes peering out from behind his spectacles, he appeared to be mainly obsessed with three things: scoring goals, scoring more goals, and making us run wind sprint after wind sprint after wind sprint. I remember thinking, exhausted and nauseous after soccer practice: "What is wrong with this guy?" Well, after coaching me in soccer and teaching me Shakespeare, Mr. Austin married my sister, Monica Matouk '84, becoming my brother-in-law and one of my great lifelong friends. Their daughter, my niece Isabel, sits here today as part of the graduating Class of 2018.

It is a loosely held secret that John and Monica's marriage was a marriage masterminded by Elizabeth and Tad Roach, arranged and orchestrated within the great literary tradition of Jane Austen and Emily Bronte. As students at St. Andrew's, the only two things Monica and John had in common were, first, a mutual apathy for each other and, second, Elizabeth Roach as an advisor. The latter made all the difference. Let me state this as a warning to all of you sitting here today: in the arsenal of skills that Tad and Elizabeth deploy in their visionary leadership of the School, their mastery of the lost art of Victorian matchmaking is one not to be underestimated. I would also like to congratulate Tad and Elizabeth on another achievement: Annie – their youngest daughter – also sits here today as part of the graduating Class of 2018.

Now whilst most of you may not have shared the joy – or should I say shock – of having your St. Andrew's teacher and coach marry into your family, I am sure that each one of you sitting here today could share similar stories of deep friendships formed with your peers, of unforgettable human connections with your mentors and teachers at St. Andrew's. Fundamentally, these St. Andrew's stories are stories of community – a community of inspired learning and teaching where we are taught not only how to learn but also how to share and debate ideas with each other. It is a community where we are taught to dig deep, challenge ourselves, and support each other.

If you, Class of 2018, think back to your first few days and weeks at St. Andrew's as III or IV Formers, you'll remember that St. Andrew's was at first a somewhat daunting and alien place.

Your fellow classmates, complete strangers; the older students intimidating. You will no doubt remember the first time you pushed yourselves out of your comfort zone; the first time you dared speak out in class to express your opinion; the first time you reached out to help someone on the playing field; the first time you asked for help. You all rose to this challenge and engaged with St. Andrew's. You built connections with your peers and teachers; you made friends with people who at first appeared alien to you. This did not happen overnight but gradually, day after day, over all those small moments that made up your St. Andrew's lives – in the classrooms, on the playing fields, in the Chapel, in the Arts Center, on the Front Lawn, on the T-dock, and on dorm.

The accumulation of all of these moments of learning and sharing, the sum total of all of these experiences, is what ultimately turned you into St. Andreans. And I suspect that you will discover later in your lives – as I have – that learning how to be a St. Andrean is the most valuable, transformational, and life-changing lesson St. Andrew's will give you. It is the lesson of how to become an active and productive member of a vibrant community that lives by its principles. And while memories of specific equations or literary texts analyzed in the classroom may fade over time, this greatest lesson of all – of how to be a citizen in the St. Andrew's community – never fades.

After I graduated, this central lesson of what it means to be a St. Andrean became the guiding principle that helped me tackle the challenges I faced as I made my way in the world. It has been my inner compass, guiding me both personally and professionally through the ups and downs of life. On a professional level, for example, I owe the success of the business I built in Egypt directly to the community-building tools I learned here. Let me explain.

When I set off to build my law firm in Cairo, my basic strategy was to surround myself with the best lawyers who could get the job done. Recruitment decisions were made solely on the basis of merit, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, or belief system. It was a pragmatic strategy based on my commitment to diversity. But I discovered, during this process, that diversity can be tricky when contending with competing belief systems: should I hire lawyers who believe women should be veiled? I thought about it; and yes, I did. Should I differentiate between their reasons for supporting the veil? For example, some hold the traditional view that women should cover themselves because they are a source of temptation that can lead to sin. Other lawyers celebrate the veil as a source of feminist empowerment. No, I did not differentiate – I hired from all sides. Should I hire candidates who support men's rights in Egypt to have four wives? Yes. Who oppose democracy as an ideology of Western imperialism? Yes. Who support the virtues of the autocratic state? Yes. We also have a large number of deeply committed liberals. We have lawyers who drink alcohol; who wear bikinis. We have agnostics and atheists. We have young lawyers chauffeured to work every morning in their parents' luxury SUV's; others who could not afford the bus fare for their initial job interview.

Over the years, our group organically grew to over 200 Egyptian, Sudanese, American, Algerian, French, and Lebanese lawyers – each with distinct and sometimes opposing worldviews. Each professionally trained to passionately argue his or her views in multiple languages. Although messy, the social fabric of the firm held together for two main reasons: first, we respected each other's right to live by different belief systems and ideologies. Not a day went by without intense

debates and sometimes hurt feelings, but fundamentally we respected each other's right to think differently and did not let it interfere with our work together. And second, we were committed to being decent and kind to each other.

Our policy helped us stand out in the legal market. Our eclectic group helped us connect with clients from all walks of life. And more importantly, acting in concert, we could originate sets of competing ideas and opinions that enabled us to think outside of the box and come up with fresh solutions for our clients. This gave us a competitive edge in a very competitive field.

My firm was most severely tested during the Arab Spring, seven years ago, when revolution, upheaval, and chaos swept through Egypt. Literally overnight, the world as we knew it in Cairo ended. Tens of millions of people took to the streets; President Mubarak was toppled. It is called a revolution, but it felt more like a civil war. Law enforcement and police forces, all loyal to the previous regime, were disbanded by the army and disappeared from the streets. The internet and mobile phone systems were disconnected, blacking out all communication and information. Stores ran out of food; gas stations ran out of fuel. Air and sea ports were shut down. Prison gates were opened, freeing not only political prisoners but also tens of thousands of hardened, desperate criminals who took to the streets. City-wide looting and burning and robbing and shooting and killing ensued. Anarchy reigned. We were forced to set up neighborhood civilian militias to guard our homes and families at night with whatever weapons we could find. We built barricades in our streets to repel assaults. Surprising images added to the general sense of unreality. The image, for example, of a man on evening watch in our shattered dusty streets decked out impeccably from head to toe in a green tweed Scottish duck hunting outfit. Or of a neighbor wielding an antique samurai sword. Or of an overweight middle-aged banker in full Harley Davidson leather, mounted on his motorcycle, ready for battle.

As Egyptian society was torn apart, at the country disintegrated into opposing poles, the social fabric of my law firm somehow withstood the storm. We settled into a period of crazy normalcy after the initial shock of the revolution. After our morning coffee, for example, we would routinely clear out the suffocating tear gas that had filled our ground floor offices from the previous night's battle in Tahir Square, located three blocks upwind from us. We would then settle into our corporate law work for a few hours in our meeting rooms and on our conference calls, the background wailing of ambulances ferrying the dead and wounded the only reminder of the war zone just three blocks away. In the afternoons, groups of our lawyers would walk over to Tahir Square and join the struggling mass of demonstrators risking their lives for what they believed in. The Islamists amongst us stood with Muslim Brotherhood fighting for a more humane social network to support the poor; the liberals joined the activists struggling for greater civil liberties; the conservatives and minorities joined rank with the army as the only means of bringing security and stability back to the country. Then, as if nothing had happened, everyone would return back to the office, somewhat disheveled, and start working together again. Even during the extreme polarizing stress of the revolution, our lawyers agreed they could be opponents in Tahir one moment, teammates at the office the next.

Ultimately what kept us together was a system of pluralism that had become the backbone of our firm's culture over the years prior to the revolution. This culture of pluralism was able to flourish in our small legal community thanks to the steady application, day after day, year after year, of

principles of diversity, respect, tolerance, kindness, compassion, teamwork, hard work. In other words, St. Andrean principles. I had not done it consciously, but the St. Andrew's model had become so ingrained within me during my formative years in high school that I could imagine no way of forging the professional relationships around me other than as a St. Andrean. I used the community-building tools I had learned at St. Andrew's to build my firm. Surprising as it may seem, I owe the creation, survival, and success of my business in Egypt to the central lesson I took away with me from St. Andrew's – how to be a St. Andrew's citizen in the world at large.

Class of 2018, before I conclude, I would like to present you with one mission: never stop being a St. Andrean. Take your St. Andrew's values with you as you go out into the world and share them with the people you meet. Particularly with those people who not only look and dress and speak differently, but who think differently. Push yourselves to try to find common ground with them; perhaps even forge friendships or partnerships. One person at a time, one day at a time. In other words, Class of 2018, go out into the world and build new communities, big and small, in the image of St. Andrew's. The tools you have learned during your years here will serve you well. I have no doubt that you will rise to this challenge – after all, you are now St. Andrew's graduates.

Thank you. And congratulations.