St. Andrew’s School

2020 Baccalaureate

Will Robinson ‘97

Good morning or good evening everyone.

It’s a tremendous honor to have the opportunity to share with you today, but I must begin by thanking Mrs. Kristin Honsel, my fellow Co-Advisor to the Class of 2020. I jumped at the opportunity to work with Kristin this year because of her relentless energy and dedication to students. She will — and has — done anything for this class and this community to the point where you can actually see her physically breaking down after days and days of giving and giving, and then she somehow bounces back, fueled by her desire to keep giving, to lift us up with her energy and unconditional love for this place and everyone in it. This spring has somehow breathed even more life into her commitment to you all.

You want to work with Kristin to support St. Andrew’s students because no matter how hard you try, she will outwork you, whether it’s with a shovel, Halloween makeup, Casino Night decorations, or whatever students need. Kristin has an unusually strong moral compass and the moral courage to follow it without fail. She’s not afraid to say no, which, if you live with teenagers, doesn’t always make you popular, but she says “no” and she always says it with her heart in the right place. She’s a tremendous role model and leader, and a devoted mother to Zoey and partner to Jason.

She is absolutely mortified right now because she doesn’t want or need to be singled out, but it had to be done.

When the history of this period is written, the energy and commitment from the faculty and staff, and the leadership Mr. and Mrs. Roach, Billy and Steph and entire Class of 2020 will each have their own chapter, but I hope there is as bright a light shining on you, Kristin, as you’ve worked to shine on all of us this year. Mrs. Honsel, we thank you from the absolute bottom of our hearts for everything you have done and do for St. Andrew’s, the entire community, and especially this Great Class of 2020.

Now, I have a very simple message this morning. All of my life, and maybe all of your lives, you’ve been told to remember the good times; that you have to hold on to them in a sort of mental scrapbook of achievements and successes. Build trophy cases and fill them. We hang diplomas on walls, not rejection letters. Remember the time you won the big game with the celebrations that followed, the standing ovations after performances, walking out of a class with some extra pep in your step after crushing a test or leading a dynamic discussion. The van and bus rides after service when you feel alive sharing a story about your mentee. We could produce endless slideshows of you all together, smiling, laughing, loving. Those were great times, and you need to remember them. We’re told that we especially need to remember good times when times are bad because life is good — even great much of the time — and you’ll get through the bad times and back to the good soon enough. Right? Wrong.

Here’s what I’m thinking. I’m actually all in on embracing the bad times, the struggles, the rejections, the moments, days and sometimes weeks when it didn’t matter what I did, everything went wrong. Those were the times when I had to learn who I was and find out what I was actually made of. Think about that for a second. Think about the most challenging moment or period of your life.

Okay. Now think of this: you’re here. You did it. You made it through, and you’re stronger for it.

Here is a heavily abridged list of five of the best moments of my life in chronological order:

1. Being told at 13 during my interview by then St. Andrew’s Director of Admission Peter Caldwell that my grades weren’t good enough to get into St. Andrew’s. It lit a fire under me I wasn’t sure existed.
2. Not being named Captain of the St. Andrew’s Varsity Soccer Team. I’m still working on getting over that injustice.
3. Pretty much every day from 2001-2004 when I taught special education in rural Louisiana. I was 22 in a self-contained classroom with my name on the door and 18 students. I was punched, body-slammed, pulled a drowning student out of a pool, lost another to a shooting, more to prison, and was arrested myself once, though it was a genuinely a misunderstanding. I’ll tell you about that at the reunion. It was easily the most challenging and most rewarding time of my life and there is rarely a week that goes by when I don’t draw on that experience.
4. Finding a 5-month pregnant Lindsay pushing one-year old Liam in a stroller down Fairmount Avenue in Philadelphia on a sunny March day the week before her birthday to tell her I had been laid off during the 2008 recession. I started my own company that day, which eventually led me to land a job with Ogilvy Communications, which eventually led to Mr. Roach offering what I now see as the opportunity of a lifetime to return to the School I love as Director of Communications, and eventually doing the only work that has made me feel alive.
5. The twenty-four hours Lindsay was in labor with Liam, the seeming eternity that Luke had shoulder dystocia and I thought he wasn’t going to make it. The two days we spent waiting for Greta at a hospital in New Jersey only to return to campus. She was born a couple of days later.

This feels like an appropriate time for you all to thank your parents and families. You really need to thank them. You worked so hard to get to this point, but I promise they worked even harder and sacrificed a lot to get you here. I remember thinking at my graduation from St. Andrew’s that I had done something. I had, but there’s no way I fully recognized the sacrifice my parents and family — especially my younger sister — had made in letting me go and giving me the opportunity of St. Andrew’s. Parents, it’s been worth it. You have amazing children, but don’t let them off the hook. Graduates, thank your parents, thank your siblings, thank your grandparents, thank your neighbors, thank everyone connected, through you, to this morning and this moment. Sending you here was a challenge they took on, but they got through it. Thank them.

When I face challenges, I call on my bottomless well of failures, struggles, mistakes, challenges, and disappointments. I made it through all of them and that fact gives me the strength, power, and confidence to know I’ll be okay.

The good news is that you all have failures and challenges to draw on already. You’ve fallen hard and missed notes you thought you had on the Engelhard stage. Maybe you forgot a line, but kept going. You’ve been knocked out of games in the heat of the battle and forced to watch your closest friends fight for the win without you. You’ve pushed yourself to exhaustion in practices. You’ve lost games you needed to win. You’ve pulled all-nighters and not turned in your best work. You’ve been forced to sign in to breakfast every morning. And if you slept through enough breakfasts, you had to clean the roads on Sunday mornings before Chapel. You’ve been in trouble. Some of you have been in serious trouble, but you faced it head on and came through stronger than ever. You’ve bombed tests. You’ve spent Sundays in the library watching friends on the Front Lawn. The boys here spent every Study Hall at a Dining Hall table their freshman year. You’ve misread friendships, or budding romantic relationships. You’ve had your heart broken. You’ve received tough news from home and wanted more than anything to be there. You didn’t get elected, selected, or accepted. Most, if not all of you, felt alone, lost, and unsure at some point in your first days at St. Andrew’s, but you got through it. Make no mistake, St. Andrew’s is easy sledding compared to what many students in this country have to face every day in their high schools, but that doesn’t discount the fact that you did it. Most of you were 13 or 14 when you started. You moved out of your home and waded into this intentionally complicated melting pot. And you made it. If you started sophomore or junior year, that presented a whole host of additional challenges here and at home. But you made it too. Many of you have already overcome much more in your young lives than I ever have, but you got through it all and now you’re here, about to hear your name in the list of 2020 St. Andrew’s graduates.

To be sure, you will face more serious challenges in your life, but you will get through those times as well because you are stronger and more resilient than you realize. Remember the bad times.

You may be thinking, “But Mr. Robinson, I actually haven’t struggled or faced any real personal challenges in my life.” Don’t worry, you will. And I hope when that happens you remember this talk, know you will get through it, and start building your collection.

Now, what a gift this absolute nightmare has been.

I try to talk to my grandfather at least once a week. He’s 101, which made him about 12 when St. Andrew’s opened its doors. He and my grandmother, who passed away this fall at 96, were married 70 years, and four of their grandchildren graduated from St. Andrew’s. Now, he’s alone in his home most of the time. He’s owned a small business for about 60 years and was still going into work until he was forced to shut its doors in March. But he’s as content as ever. He misses my grandmother dearly and his eyesight and legs aren’t what they used to be, but you can’t get him to complain about anything. When World War II ended he walked off his base in San Francisco and hitchhiked back to Philadelphia. Think of every bad thing that’s happened in the world since he was born in October of 1918. He lived through it, and he lived through his personal challenges, and he’s living through this right now like it’s nothing. He admits it’s tough at times, but as he told me last night before Awards Night, if he can just get his legs strong again he’ll be alright. He’s 101, which makes him incredibly vulnerable to this virus, yet he’s filled with optimism in part because he’s lived and fought through challenges since he was born amidst the 1918 Spanish Flu.

St. Andrew’s, which was conceived amidst the Great Depression, has also powered through challenges because it is strong to its core. And so are you. You proved it every day this Spring. You pivoted to synchronous and asynchronous learning and honored this tireless faculty’s efforts by showing up and leaning in to classes. You learned how to celebrate each other in a virtual School Meeting, how to support each other in Chapel services, and reach out to each other to offer kind words of encouragements. Some of you went out and became essential workers to help your families. And you did all of this despite having your senior spring cruelly taken from you by a global pandemic. What a sucker punch. This is not how it was supposed to happen, yet you took it on and made it through. Years from now you will tell your grandchildren, and you’ll inspire them to be resilient when life knocks them down. You will remember this bad time, and I hope you wear it with pride in how you handled yourself, helped others, and pushed through. Remember this time. Lean on it.

I gave the Baccalaureate Address in 2014 and at that time I told the graduating class that life actually gets better after St. Andrew’s; that this would not be the best time of their lives and, if it was, we failed miserably. St. Andrew’s is a launch pad. They had so much to look forward to, and so do you. The good times will outweigh the bad, I promise you that, but don’t sweep the bad times away.

Embrace them and keep building. Put notches in your belt every time you get back up and push forward. Fill a trophy case with failures.

You are strong. You are confident in your resilience. You can take on anything. You will get knocked down and suffer challenges — you can count on that — but you will get back up. You know you can. Your beloved faculty and staff have seen you do it and you inspired all of us every day to keep going. Remember the bad times.

Class of 2020. We miss you. We love you. We are so proud of you.

And we thank you for everything you’ve given to us, to St. Andrew’s, and to each other.

Congratulations, and Go Saints.

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