

Chief Justice John Roberts Commencement Speech
Cardigan Mountain School Graduation (9th Grade)
3 June 2017

Thank you very much.

Rain, somebody said, is like confetti from heaven. So even the heavens are celebrating this morning, joining the rest of us at this wonderful commencement ceremony. Before we go any further, graduates, you have an important task to perform because behind you are your parents and guardians. Two or three or four years ago, they drove into Cardigan, dropped you off, helped you get settled and then turned around and drove back out the gates. It was an extraordinary sacrifice for them. They drove down the trail of tears back to an emptier and lonelier house. They did that because the decision about your education, they knew, was about you. It was not about them. That sacrifice and others they made have brought you to this point. But this morning is not just about you. It is also about them, so I hope you will stand up and turn around and give them a great round of applause. Please.

Now when somebody asks me how the remarks at Cardigan went, I will be able to say they were interrupted by applause. Congratulations, class of 2017. You've reached an important milestone. An important stage of your life is behind you. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you it is the easiest stage of your life, but it is in the books. While you've been at Cardigan, you have all been a part of an important international community as well. And I think that needs to be particularly recognized.

[Roberts gave brief remarks in other languages.]

Now around the country today at colleges, high schools, middle schools, commencement speakers are standing before impatient graduates. And they are almost always saying the same things. They will say that today is a commencement exercise. 'It is a beginning, not an end. You should look forward.' And I think that is true enough, however, I think if you're going to look forward to figure out where you're going, it's good to know where you've been and to look back as well. And I think if you look back to your first afternoon here at Cardigan, perhaps you will recall that you were lonely. Perhaps you will recall that you were a little scared, a little anxious. And now look at you. You are surrounded by friends that you call brothers, and you are confident in facing the next step in your education.

It is worth trying to think why that is so. And when you do, I think you may appreciate that it was because of the support of your classmates in the classroom, on the athletic field and in the dorms. And as far as the confidence goes, I think you will appreciate that it is not because you succeeded at everything you did, but because with the help of your friends, you were not afraid to fail. And if you did fail, you got up and tried again. And if you failed again, you got up and tried again. And if you failed again, it might be time to

think about doing something else. But it was not just success, but not being afraid to fail that brought you to this point.

Now the commencement speakers will typically also wish you good luck and extend good wishes to you. I will not do that, and I'll tell you why. From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you'll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion. Whether I wish these things or not, they're going to happen. And whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes.

Now commencement speakers are also expected to give some advice. They give grand advice, and they give some useful tips. The most common grand advice they give is for you to be yourself. It is an odd piece of advice to give people dressed identically, but you should — you should be yourself. But you should understand what that means. Unless you are perfect, it does not mean don't make any changes. In a certain sense, you should not be yourself. You should try to become something better. People say 'be yourself' because they want you to resist the impulse to conform to what others want you to be. But you can't be yourself if you don't learn who are, and you can't learn who you are unless you think about it.

The Greek philosopher Socrates said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' And while 'just do it' might be a good motto for some things, it's not a good motto when it's trying to figure out how to live your life that is before you. And one important clue to living a good life is to not to try to live *the* good life. The best way to lose the values that are central to who you are is frankly not to think about them at all.

So that's the deep advice. Now some tips as you get ready to go to your new school. Other the last couple of years, I have gotten to know many of you young men pretty well, and I know you are good guys. But you are also privileged young men. And if you weren't privileged when you came here, you are privileged now because you have been here. My advice is: Don't act like it.

When you get to your new school, walk up and introduce yourself to the person who is raking the leaves, shoveling the snow or emptying the trash. Learn their name and call them by their name during your time at the school. Another piece of advice: When you pass by people you don't recognize on the walks, smile, look them in the eye and say hello. The worst thing that will happen is that you will become known as the young man who smiles and says hello, and that is not a bad thing to start with.

You've been at a school with just boys. Most of you will be going to a school with girls. I have no advice for you.

The last bit of advice I'll give you is very simple, but I think it could make a big difference in your life. Once a week, you should write a note to someone. Not an email. A note on a piece of paper. It will take you exactly 10 minutes. Talk to an adult, let them tell you what a stamp is. You can put the stamp on the envelope. Again, 10 minutes, once a week. I will help you, right now. I will dictate to you the first note you should write. It will say, 'Dear [fill in the name of a teacher at Cardigan Mountain School].' Say: 'I have started at this new school. We are reading [blank] in English. Football or soccer practice is hard, but I'm enjoying it. Thank you for teaching me.' Put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it and send it. It will mean a great deal to people who — for reasons most of us cannot contemplate — have dedicated themselves to teaching middle school boys. As I said, that will take you exactly 10 minutes a week. By the end of the school year, you will have sent notes to 40 people. Forty people will feel a little more special because you did, and they will think you are very special because of what you did. No one else is going to carry that dividend during your time at school.

Enough advice. I would like to end by reading some important lyrics. I cited the Greek philosopher Socrates earlier. These lyrics are from the great American philosopher, Bob Dylan. They're almost 50 years old. He wrote them for his son, Jesse, who he was missing while he was on tour. It lists the hopes that a parent might have for a son and for a daughter. They're also good goals for a son and a daughter. The wishes are beautiful, they're timeless. They're universal. They're good and true, except for one: It is the wish that gives the song its title and its refrain. That wish is a parent's lament. It's not a good wish. So these are the lyrics from Forever Young by Bob Dylan:

May God bless you and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
And may you stay forever young

May you grow up to be righteous
May you grow up to be true
May you always know the truth
And see the lights surrounding you
May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong
And may you stay forever young

May your hands always be busy
May your feet always be swift
May you have a strong foundation

When the winds of changes shift
May your heart always be joyful
May your song always be sung
And may you stay forever young

Thank you.