

*Speech delivered by a teacher to  
graduating seniors of a small private school.*

Here we are...the long awaited day has finally arrived. After all the anticipation, thirteen years of preparation have brought us to this point—and it's not the end, but rather the beginning.

As I was thinking about the message I would deliver today, I reflected on the many significant world events that have taken place in your lifetime. The past 18 years have seen a long, long list of remarkable advances in fields such as medicine and engineering. By far, though, the biggest leaps of progress and the greatest number of accomplishments have taken place in the field of information management: computer hardware and software, the Internet, e-mail, and data storage, retrieval, and transmission.

Think about it: in 1987, when most of you were born, we were still talking on telephones that were attached to walls. A *virus* was something that was spread by close personal contact, a *worm* was a crawly thing one found in the garden, and a *web* was a *net*...not **the** net, but a net that was created by a spider. Memory was how we remembered the names of people we met. Terms like *intranet*, *gigabyte*, *telecommuting*—a whole new language has evolved, just to describe and explain the processing of huge quantities of information at speeds most of us can't even begin to comprehend.

Sadly, I was also reminded of the truth we all know—the news is not all good. In those same 18 years, we've seen too much pain and suffering brought on by natural disasters, environmental accidents, and violence inflicted on one group or individual by another.

And so I asked myself, "How has it mattered, having access to all of this information? Has it done any good?" The answer came immediately. Information is neutral. It is facts and figures. It can be up to date and factual, misleading, or

downright wrong. All the information in the world will not produce a cure for disease, create efficient energy systems, or bring us peace. Only knowledge and understanding will fuel our quest for a better world. Computers can store, sort, and process data—but they cannot *know*.

Only when the human mind and spirit interact with all those miles of data can the bits and bytes be transformed into the knowledge and understanding that will lead your generation into the future.

I'm reminded of a story. Dr. Smith, a forensic psychiatrist, was a guest at a dinner party. A high profile crime was in the news at the time, and as often happened in such situations, the conversation soon turned to the doctor's work. "Tell us, Doctor," the host asked, "how do you detect a mental deficiency in someone who appears completely normal?" "Nothing is easier," Dr Smith replied. "You ask him a simple question, something that anyone should be able to answer without a problem. If he fails to answer correctly, that puts you on the right track." "Could you give us an example?" the host asked. Dr. Smith replied, "Well, you might pose a question like this: 'Captain Cook made three trips around the world and died during one of them. Which one?'" The host thought for a moment, then said with a nervous laugh, "You wouldn't happen to have another example would you? I guess I don't know much about history."

Clearly, the host had all of the information necessary to answer the doctor's question. His "mental deficiency" began with his immediate assumption that only a student of history would be able to come up with *the* factoid that would answer the question. He failed to see what the answer to the question required: his human ability to hear and understand, analyze and draw conclusions.

I'm willing to bet that you all knew the answer to the doctor's question. Here at [small private school] you have received all the basic tools you need as you proceed into the next chapter of your life. Your individual academic accomplishments have been outstanding—100% of the graduates in this class will be going on to college! That is an awesome statistic! And through athletics, theatrical productions, and other extra-curricular activities, you've learned how to work as a team. More importantly, you have learned values that will guide you each step of the way...faith...kindness...compassion... justice...loyalty...hope.

Now, as you enter college, you will find yourself in the middle of a rapidly expanding universe of information, and you will put to work all of the skills you have learned here, and more. Our beloved Pope John Paul II, whose passing we mourned so recently, knew and understood the challenges facing young men and women. The information age was in full swing in 1993 when he spoke at World Youth Day in Denver, Colorado. His words give clear direction for your response to the barrage of information you will confront: "Ask *why*. Why am I here? Why am I alive at all? What must I do?...To fail to ask these basic questions is to miss the great adventure of the search for the truth about life."

Up until now, most of your learning has occurred in fairly structured environments, either at home or here in our school. But now you are embarking on that "great adventure of the search for the truth about life." You will be exposed to amazing new ideas and exciting possibilities. My hope and prayer for you today is that you will ponder these words of Pope John Paul and their meaning for you as you encounter the future.

Each of you will take with you your own unique gifts. These are the gifts you have shared with us, and for which you will always be remembered. Just to mention a few....

**[student 1]** – your effort and perseverance.

- [student 2]** – you talent and wisdom.
- [student 3]** –your unique perspective
- [student 4]** – your warmth and caring
- [student 5]** – your kindness and giving
- [student 6]** – your genuine humility
- [student 7]** – your quiet thoughtfulness
- [student 8]** –your inquisitive mind
- [student 9]** – your way with words
- [student 10]** – your analytical mind
- [student 11]** – your brilliant humor
- [student 12]** – your unassuming intelligence
- [student 13]** – your inspiring determination
- [student 14]** – your love for people
- [student 15]** - your strength of character
- [student 16]** – your clever wit
- [student 17]** – your calm persistence
- [student 18]** – your quest for learning

This is, of course, only a short list of some of the gifts that define you. There are so many more! And the best part is this: As a class, over the course of 13 years together, you have shared your gifts generously among yourselves. When you leave here today, each of you will take with you a part of the others. Your gifts and the gifts of your classmates, along with the wisdom and values and guidance and love you've received from your parents and teachers—these are the resources you will draw upon when you find yourself searching for your own answers to the questions posed by Pope John Paul-- Why am I here? Why am I alive at all? What must I do? And you will find the answers springing from within.

Members of the Class of 2005, we have watched with love and pride as you have grown into the bright, dynamic men and women you are today. As this chapter closes, look to the future with hope and confidence. Look around now at your classmates and at the family and friends and faculty who love you. These are your roots. Tap into them as you shape your response to the new world that awaits you. Draw strength from them. And then...work hard, ask questions, thirst for truth. The future is bright, it is here...and it is yours.