

“Never Let Your Brains Go to Your Head” (With Reference to “Babe” Fisher)

*Remarks before the Episcopal School of Dallas
2013 Graduation Ceremony*



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Thank you, Kim MaGee (Interim Head of School). I am grateful to be your Commencement speaker this afternoon.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I want the Class of 2013 to look around this auditorium. All of these people have come to celebrate your success. These are your parents and grandparents, cousins, uncles and aunts, your brothers and sisters, your friends, your teachers and coaches and counselors. They have been by your side through joyful moments and less joyful ones. They have encouraged you. They have believed in you. And they have occasionally badgered and hectoring you and ... driven you nuts. All to good effect. They are here with glad and happy hearts to celebrate your admission to the society of educated men and women. You will be applauded by them many times tonight. But I want you, the graduating class, to turn the table on them and give *them* a round of applause. So stand up, put your hands together and give them a cheer. Thank them for loving you.

Now, please be seated.

The only thing that rests between you and your finally receiving your Episcopal School of Dallas diploma is ... me. So I will make it snappy.

By now, you have taken enough English and writing courses to know the tongue-in-cheek definition of a good essay: It is a collection of other people’s thoughts disguised as your own! Most graduation speeches are no different. The standard routine for a commencement speaker is to access Google or dig through *Bartlett’s* or the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* to find something said by some sage that will grace a graduation ceremony with a lesson you can take with you as you go off into this mysterious and challenging world.

To find something profound that I might pinch for your amusement, I pored over the sayings of the great minds of the ages: Plato, Socrates, Mencius, Muhammad, St. Augustine, Voltaire, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa ... Kim Kardashian, Lil Wayne.

The maxims put forward by the sages of the ages are inspiring, but as graduating seniors at ESD, you already know them: be disciplined; be prepared; be loyal and thrifty and brave; don’t waste your talents; question authority (but not the Head of School or your parents!); take risks; push the envelope; be true to yourself, to your school, to your country; never promise more than you can deliver; never compromise your integrity; never forget that you have been given talent to do good; never, never, never, never give up the pursuit of excellence.

These are all wise maxims. But, truth be told, it would save time and expedite many a graduation ceremony if its organizers would forgo a speaker and simply remind the graduating class to read and, throughout life, re-read the King James Bible or the Koran or Shakespeare or Confucius—

the ultimate sources of almost every graduation speech I have ever read or listened to.

For example, it would tax the capacity of the most powerful search engine to pull up the countless commencement speakers who have lifted and adapted variations of Shakespeare's lines in *King Henry VI*, Part 2, Act 4, Scene VII—that “ignorance is the curse of God; Knowledge the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.”

The much-admired and brilliant dean of arts and humanities at Harvard University, Diana Sorensen, defines a knowledgeable graduate taking wing as follows:

“He or she is competent in making discerning judgments with tools derived from science, engineering, social science, the arts and humanities. He or she should be a persuasive speaker who can articulate the reasons for his positions; who can write with clarity, elegance and conceptual power; an innovator who will take risks but first makes sure the limb they go out on is a sturdy one; a creative individual who has faced challenges posed by artistic production and experimentation; a global citizen who can speak, read, write in at least a second language; and who will learn what it takes to negotiate different world views emanating from different cultural traditions, a tolerant yet rigorous thinker whose moral compass is guided by ethical reasoning.”

Now, Class of 2013, I don't want to put any pressure on you! But that pretty much summarizes the skill set we all hope you have started to acquire at ESD and will now go on to hone in college and throughout your lives.

How might I, a lowly central banker whose musings are given to the arcana of economic and monetary policy, possibly improve upon the wisdom of the ultimate sources? Not easily, so I dug deep into my memory bank and called upon a source more erudite than the lessons of the Bible, the Koran, Shakespeare or Confucius, and more insightful than Diana Sorensen—my mother, Magnhild Andersen Fisher, whom everybody called “Babe.”

“Babe” Fisher was a stoic Norwegian. She was born and raised in an outpost in South Africa, lost her father when she was 4 in the flu pandemic of 1918 and grew up without the benefit of the type of education you have received here at ESD. Yet she was a wise woman. She was a kind of female Nordic Yogi Berra: She dispensed exquisite pearls of wisdom to her three boys. One is especially germane for this evening. My mother would say: “Never let your brains go to your head.” The pun is horrific. But the message is profound: To achieve success you will need to keep your superb education and your considerable talent in perspective. Brains and the gift of talent are necessary, but they are insufficient for success in life.

Time and again, in business and research labs and universities and government we see instances where men and women of towering intellect get far at first but ultimately snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. They do so because they have forgotten to develop their emotional quotient with the same devotion they applied to developing their intelligence quotient. My heartfelt advice to you is to work as hard on expanding your EQ as you have on harnessing your IQ.

You all have great futures ahead of you. You will get there just as fast, and enjoy it much more, if you remember that a sound mind resides most comfortably in a sound, well-rounded person

and that a sound, well-rounded person has more than a superior education and brain. The whole person is as important an achievement for those few who have been admitted to the “society of educated men and women” as is the achievement of intellectual excellence.

Which brings me to the last requirement for most all commencement orations—a smattering of Latin. Commencement speakers at great schools seem to delight in showing off their command of an ancient tongue. For example, a serious speaker might conclude this evening’s remarks with *labor omnia vincit*—a stern reminder that labor conquers all things. It is true, indeed, that you can’t rest on your laurels or your good family name or an ESD education or just plain good luck. You have to work hard and sweat to succeed. And in doing so, you have to remember *mens sana in corpore sano*—a sound mind resides best in a sound body.

But that is way too ponderous. This is, after all, a festive day! So I will conclude with this: “*Bubbus, sed possum explicarle; non sed possum comprehendere.*”

For those of you unschooled in the language of the ancient Romans, that is Texas-ized Latin for “Bubba, I can explain it to you, but I can’t understand it for you.”

This evening I have done my best to explain to the Class of 2013 that success comes to those who best put their talents in context and who connect their substantial intellectual achievement to an equally developed emotional capacity. Those of us who lead cerebral lives must constantly strive to elevate our “people skills” to a level equal to our intellectual skills. I can explain that to you *ad nauseam* (another Latin phrase!). But you must come to understand it on your own.

And if you do—if you go through your promising lives remembering that the “whole person is the best person”—my guess is that someday one of you in the Class of 2013 will be standing at this very podium giving the commencement speech to some future generation of graduates. And having the greatest pleasure a speaker can have: quoting your mom.

Congratulations, God bless you and good luck!

Thank you.