

The comedian Bob Hope who recently turned ninety five, and who only this past week was mistakenly reported dead, was asked several years ago to speak at a college commencement. He was also told to keep his remarks brief. He strode to the podium, looked out and said, "It's a cold, cruel world out there, graduates. Don't go!" and then sat down. I don't have lots to reflect on here tonight, but I think I can stay a bit longer at the podium than Mr. Hope. But, like him, I'll attempt to keep my remarks brief.

Let me start off by reminding you that **all humans are born without knowledge**. "Well, That's a real bummer," Dave Cushman used to say. "Can't they get some DNA scientists working on that? What a difference it would be if we could pick up where someone else left off." But it is a fact that **all that we come to know, has to be learned**. If that's so, we can then ask, "**What's really important to know to live fully?**" We should be aware that others have asked that very question, in every generation since the ice age . And know, too, that answers have varied a great deal. I thank my lucky stars and all the men and women who have gone before me that they took the time to leave me something to think about, listen to, and ponder, so that I didn't have to figure out everything about life by myself.

It is only common sense, too, to realize that **humans learn in stages--stages** that correspond with the various phases in our lives: as infants, toddlers, youngsters, adolescents and finally, as adults. Because we've all gone through many of those phases already, if we ask **how did we learn**, our memories might recall that we learned from others, through imitation, through experimentation, by trial and error, through study, and exploration. We learn visually by observation and by hands-on experience.

Mentioning experimentation, I can recall, at three years of age sitting alone behind the steering wheel and asking myself, what would happen if I pushed that button on my uncle Tom's car parked just outside the garage door - a starter button. Cars back then had starter buttons. Just what the mechanics of that old Ford were, I can't recall, but pushing that button with the stick shift in gear caused the car to lurch forward and crash into the garage door. Not only was that my **first** automotive lesson but my first lesson in guilt. I ran upstairs to my bedroom and hid under the rug till the adults found me hours later.

Has anyone ever said to you, "**When will you ever learn?**" It's a valid question and I've come to realize that we sometimes **only** learn when we **have to**, when we **need to**, **when we are ready**, or ripe for the lesson.

You may also have heard others say to you, "You're never going to learn!" or "You never learn, do you?" which implies that **some of us find learning some things, difficult**--that we seem to make some mistakes over and over. Even though there is a pessimistic sign on one of my bedroom walls that says, "Nothing's easy!" signed, Art Sharkey, I've learned not to be afraid to make mistakes, for **we often stumble towards the things we will end up doing best.**

Well, some smart people way back when, realized very quickly **that life is time. The time allotted to each of us is precious, and how we use it, matters**--that this "learning business" shouldn't just be left to chance, that learning **itself** is important.

My dad always used to say, "Shark, There's no substitute for knowledge!" He was convinced of this; knew it intuitively I guess, because his own formal education stopped a little after ninth grade. I'm almost certain he never read Aristotle, nor came

across his famous definition of a human being as, "**the animal that desires to know.**" But I remember dad telling me a story he heard about how Thomas Edison conducted 28,000 experiments on a new type of storage battery, making a careful record of each successive failure. A reporter once asked Edison if he did not consider the work as wasted effort. "Wasted effort?" Edison exclaimed. "What do you mean wasted effort? I now **know** 28,000 things that **won't** work."

So---in the history of things, to make learning in the limited time of a lifespan more efficient, schools were founded, and what humans thought was important was structured as content to be taught and acquired in stages- pre-school, elementary, middle school, high school, college, graduate school and beyond.

Emerson once observed that one learns by working and being worked on. For many of you over the past six years, the concerns of TA have been working on you and, hopefully, for every one of you, a moment of perception, of discovery, or the silent and even unmerited acquisition of taste and insight has been experienced.

So here we are. Here you are at the end of **your** high school experience. Dare I ask what have **you** learned? What do you know about yourself as a person? as a learner? I hope that, **at TA you learned how to learn--how you learn best.** Have you begun to figure out **who you are** and what you might like to do with the rest of the time you have as a human being?

We hope that TA has been a special place for you because of what it concerns itself with: the minds of young people and essential knowledge. A graduate of TA should be prepared to forge an identity for himself or herself. Other than the choice of a lifetime partner, nothing determines happiness so much as choosing the right kind of work. It is a choice of what is good for **you**; not good for those whom you may respect,

the choice is not about what makes **others** happy, **but** about what **makes you happy**. There's no clear path for any of us. **Know** what makes you feel good about yourself. Know something, by now, about **your inner self**. Trust your instincts. No one else will know them so well. Decide to lead your life without regrets. In all things in life choose your conscience, and as I said before, trust your instincts. You might have learned already that **life is very hard**. You have to choose the right profession and then have to work hard the rest of your lives to sustain yourself in this choice that you might happen to love. But, **if you let your education**, what you've learned formally and informally, **make a difference in your life, it will**.

What I've learned certainly has made a difference in my life. And I always considered myself a slow learner. I'm closer to 90 than 19... I don't think I got out of puberty until I was 39 or 40, or thereabouts. Just ask my wife! But the whole learning process has been a blast so far. This older age stage that I'm heading into now, is completely new territory. It's not for sissies. I'm already finding out that as one gets older, some things don't work anymore, and others that do, hurt. Recent medical breakthroughs may change all this. "Magic bullets" like Propecia for baldness, Prozac for depression, and Viagra for ...well, I won't go into all that, but suffice it to say, it's all new territory.

I reflected just recently that almost every aspect of technology that I was taught for my master's degree in communication back in 1972 is now completely obsolete. Change is the constant. Coping with change and building on, using, and learning from the good work of others from the past, is the key to living positively in the present. If you want to grow, you must be willing to change. There is so much to see, so much to know and the promise of knowledge and beauty is the reward of the searching mind.

I've mentioned beauty! The part that beauty plays in our lives cannot be emphasized enough...beauty in nature, and also beauty in the arts. What artists have

created and continue to create, truly enriches our time on earth, gives us insights beyond our imaginations, reinforces our belief in the very value of human life. Some people refer to the arts as recreation, and that is a fitting and apt definition if we consider the root -to create and the prefix, re, meaning, again. The arts re-create us, renew us, move us, tickle our fancy, even, bring catharsis. Perhaps, because of this, I became an English and drama teacher instead of selecting another content area.

Some of you may remember my holding up different kinds of books in 8th grade English class and asking why someone would read a history book, a dictionary, the Bible, a physics text. You might also remember correctly answering what purpose each book served. So, too, when I held up the final book in that little exercise--a novel. Most everyone insisted that people read novels for pleasure and enjoyment...that even though it was fiction, if it dealt with humans and human actions and conflict, it could bring enjoyment, and insight into the human condition. The novel, **Siddhartha**, by Herman Hesse changed my life forever.

Many of us may never become artists, creators of artwork. Still fewer of us will become professional critics, able to judge art philosophically as true, good and beautiful. But remember that there is another component in the arts process beside the artist, the artifact, the critic. It is a most important component...the audience. The ones for whom the artist is creating. Think of it . All the music ever composed, all the paintings and sculptures, the poetry and prose, all the drama and dance ever enacted, were created for us, the **audience**. Brought into existence to "re-create" our spirit and bring us happiness. I invite you to step up to this banquet of pleasure, to become a discerning, knowledgeable audience and partake of the best expressions of humanity.

Many of you know this already. You've experienced the arts bringing our spirits together. If there was one wish that I could have come true for TA students it would be somehow to renew school spirit through the arts. One of the most delightful times for

me this past year happened while driving a van full of students back from the State Drama Festival. What delighted me that night, far more than winning the state drama championship, was the sense of friendship and comraderie of the group after having performed together. How was this evidenced? The group of students sang together all the way back to TA...they sang well too, beautifully. It was a "It doesn't get any better than this " moment for me. I wish all our students could trust each other to want to sing together like that.

In conclusion then, I'd like to paraphrase a charge that Francis Oakley, President of Williams College gave his seniors on the occasion of his retirement .

He said ... At this moment of passage then, may I simply say that what I wish for you over the years to come is that you be inspired by the call to serve others, and blessed by the ability to respond; that you be unafraid to lead and unashamed to follow; that you be generous in your compassion, and loyal in your friendships; that you be magnanimous in your enjoyment of success, and resilient in your encounters with defeat; that you be comforted in your hours of loneliness. And in your moments of great darkness--for surely they too will come--that you remember what you have learned of the lives of others who also have experienced such things, and be filled with hope in the human spirit.

Members of the class of 1998, I wish you every satisfaction and happiness...happiness in the sense that the ancient Greeks defined it; **as the full use of ones powers in a life that grants them scope.** There may be little happiness in being a mathematical genius if you are confined to washing dishes eighty hours a week.

Thank you for letting me share these thoughts with you. And in the words of Garrison Keelior, my inspirational mentor, "Stay healthy, do good works, and keep in touch"...especially with us at Thetford Academy who care so deeply about you.