

BACCALAUREATE 2003 Martha Rich, Head of School

Once I had a four-leaf clover from the side yard of the White Building. Christina Hazelton found it there and gave it to me in 1998, six years ago. Christina was a champion four-leaf clover finder --the best I've ever known.

A clover like this, of course, is said to bring good luck. Out on the north side of the White Building, there was a big patch of them, a bounty of good luck. I even found some myself, after Christina showed me where to look.

Well, that patch of clover got bull-dozed. Those of you who were here in seventh grade remember what happened: the old central parking lot got ground up, there were huge mountains of topsoil all over the playing fields, noise and dirt everywhere. Remember how great it was that spring when the dynamite went off during school? I loved that.

And then... when we came back to school in the fall...the campus was transformed, with pathways and grass seed where there used to be cars. Some of you came on a Saturday that fall and helped plant 86 trees in one day. Those trees are a lot taller now; they give shelter and shade. But the old patch of good-luck clover is gone for good. Only ordinary three-leaf ones grow in that place now. (I know this; I looked.)

I was sort of upset when I discovered this. In the same way I was pleased when I got the lucky clover, I was a little disturbed when it seemed they were all gone. I'm not really superstitious, but like most people, I can't help taking notice of these little folk rituals. Did this mean our luck at TA would run out? Would bad things happen?

Since then, bad things have happened. Some of you have suffered illness and injury and accidents. People in your families have been ill. You've lost places you cared about and beloved relatives and friends. You've had your share of trouble right here at home... and things have been even worse in the larger world. In your junior year, the nation suffered a terrorist attack that none of us could have imagined six years ago--but now that possibility is part of our everyday reality. In your senior year, this country went to war, and came home from war... and you now face your future in a deeply unsettled world.

Good things have happened, too. Yours is an exceptionally fortunate class, with gifts of talent and intelligence and humor and creativity that made you leaders in this school well before senior year. You've won state championships. You've made Thetford Academy a model school for service learning. You've built our Operation Day's Work program into the most successful one in the nation. You've done wonderful work, as thinkers and musicians and athletes and actors, as problem-solvers and writers and builders. You've had the great good luck to be joined in this last year by two classmates from the wider world, and you've welcomed them with the generosity that's always been characteristic of your class.

So I don't know about that clover patch.... Bad things happen and good things, too. Some of them come out of nowhere, catch you by surprise and maybe even transform your

whole life--for better or worse. This happened to you in high school, and it will keep happening. Sometimes, it will feel like blind good luck--just a gift from the universe. Sometimes it will feel like rotten luck--just misfortune, undeserved, without reason.

What makes it especially hard is that some people seem to have more of one than the other. If it seems "some people have all the luck" and you're not one of them....if the universe seems to keep kicking you when you're down... you can get discouraged and bitter...and it would seem you'd have every right to feel that way.

I've come to a different conclusion, though. I believe that whatever happens, you make your luck. What counts in the end, is what you do with whatever happens. That's really all that matters... because when you believe that, you get a chance to handle whatever comes your way. You get to take the next step, whether the luck seemed good or bad.

So how do you do that? I'm going to offer two kinds of advice.

One is from one of the greatest coaches of all time--Paul "Bear" Bryant, the Alabama football legend. (I knew you wouldn't expect this, since I'm not exactly a sports legend myself--so I had to do it.) Bryant liked to say "When you make a mistake, there are only three things you should ever do about it: Admit it, learn from it, and don't repeat it."

Admit it. Learn from it.... and I'd say: "Try not to do it again!" Because you might. My husband says "Hanging sheetrock on a ceiling upside down and backwards? You've got to do that at least twice." In fact, I think there are some kinds of mistakes that are built in to who are, ones where you have to get the lesson again and again. For instance, for me, one of those lessons is about asking for help. I've had to learn about a million times that I cannot do it all myself... but I'll probably try it again next week!

There's another side to this, too. If you get to know the pattern of your mistakes, the kinds of temptation or good intentions that will lead you astray, you can also learn the pattern of your success--you'll get to understand what you're really good at, your strengths--and then you can do those things over and over too.

When you do that, you won't be so much at the mercy of the universe. There won't be so many mistakes. You might look lucky to other people then, but you will have made that luck.

The other advice comes from a poet, Cora Brooks. This poem is for those times when you've tried your hardest, asked all the right questions, done your best, and things still go wrong. This is my favorite poem for those times.

And I'm going to use an audio-visual aid, just to help you see this a little better:

(Here I placed a large dark-blue cushion on my head, and held it there while reading the poem.)

SOMEONE ASKS YOU

Someone asks you how you are and
you wonder if they notice the slab
of darkness you've been given to
balance on your head you

wonder if you should lie about
it if you should say anything
at all Appearing in public
you could try to be clever and
poetic you could say

it is a piece of the shore
a shoulder of the sea
once leaned against

or you could say it is one
of the sections of one of the walls
out of the narrow side of winter

you could say you are just
trying it on for size that you
have it on trial that you only
have to wear it when it's
raining - the rest of the time
you wear it for fun that
despite its bulk it does not
distract you from your purpose
that you feel most exhilarated
most honored to be under its
weight while treading water

the truth is it is an honor

This is the truth I want to leave with you. It is an honor. The challenges the world will throw you--the things that seem so hard and so wrong, the slabs of darkness you'll be given to carry around--those things are an opportunity to feel "most exhilarated," "most alive." Those are the times you can show you will not be distracted from your purpose. You can find your courage and strength and optimism, and you can use them. You can remember that it's an honor to get to do that.

So, to you, a class that will graduate on Friday the 13th, 2003, I say: Go out there and meet what comes. If you find a four-leaf clover along the way, you won't really need it.

But it might help you keep in mind what you're going to do: you're going to make your own luck, and it will be good.