

## **BACCALAUREATE 2010 Martha Rich, Head of School**

Class of 2010: The year I came to Thetford Academy was the year you came into the world.

Some of the important events here at school happened on days that were REALLY important in your families:

- On the day of the first-ever Woods Trail Run in 1991, Molly Mundy was born.
- On Mountain Day that year, the Munro family welcomed Micah.
- Founders' Day, the school's birthday, is also the birth day of Lewis Moye-Linehan--we celebrated in '92 the day before.
- On the day the Class of '92 graduated, Théo Albrecht came into the world.

At least one of you, Caileigh Bryant, I met before you were born; your mother was at the Academy as a teaching intern while she was carrying you. So I've been here literally your whole lives. I've had a lot of company: your families and neighbors and other people in the school. Barb was here in that year of your birth, and so were Robin and Coach, Mr. Deffner and Mr. O'Quinn, Mrs. Epstein, Madame, and Mrs. Estes and Pete. We consider it one of the great privileges of working at this school: we get to meet many of you as children and we get see you grow up over six years at the Academy, or four or maybe just one. We've been watching and we remember...

I recall watching Nick Phelps running around the Thetford Elementary School playground while my own kids were playing soccer there. Nick was everybody's favorite little kid. I remember seeing a lot of you when you were little buddies in Primary Partners: you made some of the best sidewalk art ever. I watched you when you got older and performed *Macbeth* and then *Midsummer Night's Dream* at TES.

Some of you were at the Newton School in those days. I saw you do *Midsummer Night's Dream*, too, in Barrett Hall. In Lyme, you did *Kokonut Kapers* that year.

I was watching.... and so were all these other people. All the adults in your community have been your audience, your fans on the sidelines, seeing you play and sing and dance and run...right up through yesterday's state track championship.

We've been watching as your thoughts evolved, too: we've been your listeners and readers, paying attention to your questions and ideas all these years. We've been watching...and watching out.

We didn't see everything. You know that.

But we may have seen more than you think. I love my office window, for instance. Some of you have had the experience of thinking you're just hanging out with your friends on the steps to the side of the White Building by the circle... when suddenly this voice comes out of the air:

“Put down that snowball, please!”

Yes, we've done more than watch; we've been telling you things for all that time, too. Your parents and teachers and coaches and counselors and grandparents and older siblings... all these people giving you advice. Telling you the same old things.

This now is my last chance. My role here this evening is to give you advice... the counsel of an older person to young people. That's our Baccalaureate tradition, and it's a real honor—because only you get to make speeches at your Graduation ceremony.

So what advice should I offer? You're not babies or children anymore. You're voters and drivers and lovers and wage-earners. You're very nearly alumni of this Academy...very nearly adults. In a few years, you'll be legal consumers of alcohol, you'll be parents and home-owners and taxpayers. In recognition of that, I'm going to tell you some new things—or at least tell you that some of those same old things are not completely true. It's time you knew.

Here, then, is my Amended Advice for Adults.

First, “Not everything that's worth doing is worth doing well.”  
Not everything. The truth is that some things you can just call “good enough.” Sometimes even mediocre will do. Everything doesn't have to be perfect.

If you aim to do everything at the same level of excellence, you'll fail. If nothing else, you'll fail to get the rest and renewal you need.

Now you've all seen me on Scarlet Letter Day walking around with my big red “P” for Perfectionist. It's a character flaw I freely admit. I got that advice about not trying to do everything doing well” from one of my mentors more than 30 years ago. I still struggle to follow it.

See, the thing about the Amended Advice of Adult Life is that it's not just something I tell you for your own good, because I know better. These are the things I keep trying to tell myself.... the lessons I keep trying to learn, over and over, in my own adult life.

In the Adult World, I've discovered that real quality is about balance. Pick your battles and choose them wisely. Let the little things go. Save your energy for the important goals. Achieving excellence depends on setting priorities. What counts most is being able to tell what is worth doing well, for you, and focusing your time and energy and talents there.

You will have to make this decision—but I do have some suggestions about things worth doing. This brings us to Amended Advice, Part 2.

There's an old saying that goes back to Shakespeare: “The world is your oyster.” It comes from a time when oysters were abundant and easy to get. They were nourishing and cheap, a favorite food of common people. A few of them even had pearls. So the adage means: There are good things out there waiting for you, yours for the taking. You don't have to be rich or nobly born; with energy and confidence, you can get out there and grab what you want. “The world is your oyster.” Ever since Shakespeare's time, saying that to young people has meant: “Go for it!”

Unfortunately, when you get to those shellfish they're most likely to be covered with crude oil. The world is your oyster, all right, and it comes with a large tar ball. Sorry, but you've got to clean it up before you can even think about pearls. We've all got to hope that your energy and confidence, along with your intelligence and creativity, will be enough to keep the planet alive. We've got to hope that in another generation people won't be forced to stand at graduations and say, The world is your cracked, hollowed-out shell... and don't go out there. Better stay inside and watch something on a screen. I'd say that if we're looking for priorities, for things that are definitely worth doing well, saving our oyster tops the list.

(See, Robin promised you at rehearsal you I'd offer pearls of wisdom. There you go.)

What else is worth your commitment? What else would be worth working hard for and giving the best you can? Well, there's that thing you've heard me say every year on opening day. I've heard you quote it in a lot of Founders' Day skits:

"The mind is capable of an endless growth." In this, Asa Burton was right, as modern neuroscience is demonstrating: the human brain is capable of remarkable elasticity and lifelong growth. "The Mind" is pretty impressive—but yours won't be, not unless you take care of it as you should any other growing thing.

You've heard me say this part before. You've got to feed your mind, give it air and light; you've got to prune it and from time to time transplant it to new soil. Your mind could just hang out like an old geranium plant on a windowsill in winter, getting sort of droopy and brown, not exactly dying but not doing much. Getting it to thrive requires attention and skill and persistence—and I would say that's always worth doing, whether your mind grows from solving problems in astrophysics or reading Russian novels or getting a truck engine tuned to perfection or figuring out where your new septic system should go.

Because here's the new part: it doesn't just happen in school. You might have another few years of that, of people like me helping you organize the cultivation of your mind. After that, the whole rest of your life, it's going to be up to you. So whenever you're in doubt about what to do, choose something that will exercise your mind, give it a challenge and some discipline. That will always be worth doing well.

The final piece of Amended Advice concerns the bedrock message of the graduation ritual, the one that goes: "This is not an end but a beginning." Well, actually, it IS an end. Let's not gloss that over. Let's not pretend the beginning is the only part that matters. Today is the last day of the life that's already behind you, as well as the first day of the rest.

As adults, we have to face up to the fact that every important change is both an end and a beginning. You can look forward to the new adventure, but you must also accept the conclusion. Pay attention and do it justice.

There's something else, too, that hardly ever gets mentioned: There's a time in-between. Sometimes, in fact, the most creative and surprising insights occur at those transition times, when you're sort of in free fall on your way to the new beginning.

As that same mentor told me a long time ago, it's like a trapeze act. You're swinging up there. If you're going to catch the next bar, you've got to let go of the one you're on.... so for a little while, you don't have your hands on anything. If you did the letting-go part right, back there, you'll get to the next bar fine...but meanwhile, you're flying free. It's scary and thrilling and you definitely need to keep your eyes open. You don't forget about the force of gravity, but for a little while you can trust the air. You might even do a somersault.

[Now here I have to tell a story that was not part of my speech until two hours ago. It will interrupt my trapeze metaphor, but I have to tell you. I spent last night in Enfield and was driving back to Thetford this afternoon, thinking about you and my speech and getting my hair dry and which shoe to wear... when I see that in the road in front of me, there's a Jeep and it's at a dead stop. So I pull up behind. I wait. I wait... I'm getting impatient. He's just sitting in the middle of the road and I'm in kind of a hurry; kind of an important day for me here. After a while, I pull past him, really slowly. I look into the window to make sure he's not slumped over the wheel, seeing if I need to be calling 9-1-1 or anything, when very slowly, he lifts his hand and points to the side of the road. So I look and there are some kittens in the tall grass... no, not kittens. Just acting like kittens—but these are the size of large woodchucks, and they're coal black. And then I see the ears and realize we're looking at three black bear cubs, just out fooling around on the roadside. One starts trying to climb a telephone pole but it's too little. I watch and watch and I'm thinking, I really have to get going but I can't... when the mother bear comes loping across the road on a run, gathers those cubs up and leads them up into the woods. Safe.]

I almost missed this. If I hadn't been lucky, if that man in the Jeep hadn't been there... if I hadn't been willing to look around me in that ordinary transition, on that familiar road with my head full of other things, I would have missed something great: an ordinary miracle.

So stay alert in the in-between times, even the little ones. This coming week, as we all know, is one of the big ones. It's your time to pay attention to the end: Finish strong. Say good-bye well. After that, for some of you, there'll be a summer before you go off to catch your next trapeze bar. For some of you, it may be just a weekend; for some, a year.

Whatever time you have, use it well. Learn more about which things, for you, are worth doing. Feed your mind and keep it growing. Do something to repair the earth. Keep your hands and your heart open while you're transition. You'll catch the next thing and keep on swinging high.

As you do, remember that we're still here on the ground, still watching. We're holding the net in case you should need it...

but we know it's time for you to fly.