

## ESA GRADUATION SPEECH

Arthur White 2009

Bishop McPherson, Mr. Kyle, Mr. Taylor, parents family and guests, colleagues (for I still regard you that way), and above all, distinguished graduates; it is no empty courtesy for me to thank you for inviting me to speak here today or to tell you how deeply honored I feel by this opportunity. As you know, you were the first ESA class in twenty years that I did not get to teach. Since I knew so many of you and knew what a gifted and creative class you are, I felt a keen disappointment at missing you. Now, for just a few minutes, I get the chance to teach you perhaps just one, single idea.

The topic I've selected for this brief lesson is this question: What should you take from your ESA education as you go forth into adulthood? We know that you will take a rich store of history, science, mathematics, literature, and art, along with skills in writing, computing, athletics, music, and other things. The experience of our graduates shows that even the least scholarly among you will possess an exceptionally strong basis for further education, career, and other achievements. At the minimum level, this is the result of a simple transaction: your parents pay tuition, you do your assignments – or at least a fair selection of them – and you emerge with the assets and advantages I've named. Let's be honest: there are many other schools that carry out similar transactions successfully.

But you know that something much greater than this has happened to you. I know it, and so does everyone who has ever lived on this campus. In the twenty-two years since I first came here I've watched everyone try to explain what that greater something is: what makes ESA special beyond academics? Today I will make another such effort, but with the intention to identify what part of that special ESA "something" you will carry with you into the rest of your lives.

I came out here a month ago, on your last day of classes, just to observe you again in your native habitat. On the deck over there between the offices I found a live rooster in a trash can. Just another day at ESA. I'll leave it to others to explain why the rooster was there. The next day I came back to watch field day and saw the seniors win buc-buc and the juniors parade a two-and-a-half foot alligator through the chapel. Once, earlier in the year, I found Jacob Myer throwing basketballs up into these trees to try to knock down a kite he had lodged in the branches. On any given day you are likely to see something here that's just a bit crazy; something that you know does not happen at other schools – or if it did happen it would bother somebody. We are, in fact, nuts. We all know this, treasure it, and protect it fiercely – the adults as much as the students. Somehow we know that our silliness, our zaniness is very, very important.

When you were in the ninth grade, you made me particularly aware of our precious, creative lunacy because every day I would walk across campus and see the freshmen engaged with great energy in some strange new behavior. I would ask what was going on. At many schools, an adult asking that question of a student would be threatening and would receive the answer, "Oh, nothing." But because the question is not threatening at ESA, someone,

usually Brett Goddell or Hugh Arceneaux, would explain the new game they had invented that day. The next day there would be another, different game.

Now I want to shift gears completely and mention a type of chapel talk that is always very moving even though we hear some variation of it almost every year. The person giving the talk tells us how unhappy he or she was before coming here. Typically that person felt odd, rejected by others for some real or imagined difference. He or she never really expected to fit in anywhere. The person tells about the warm welcome felt on the first day, how he or she expected that welcome and acceptance to change at any moment – but it didn't. Sometimes the speaker says, "I didn't think there were any other people like me, but here I fit in right away."

Each such talk is a story of personal redemption, but the fact that we have so many of them leads me to ask what cause so frequently leads to this effect. That's where the roosters in trash cans come in, along with crashing kites into trees, buc-buc, the daily game in your freshman year, and wearing a fox on your head at graduation. Weird things happen here, but if they do no harm, we do not just accept them: we rejoice in them. We laugh and tell the story and it reminds us of other stories and becomes a sort of celebration. That may be normal behavior among friends, but at ESA, we share our private craziness with the whole school – even crossing the line between students and adults.

Let me give a quick example. One year an Indian student in Mr. Rosen's class brought a cricket bat to school. The computer teacher, Mr. Ducrest, had played cricket a few times in Australia. The two of them got a tennis ball and began to play an approximation of cricket. Others joined in and wanted to learn. It turned out that the father of a recent graduate, a member of the board, had been a semi-pro cricket player was willing to come out and teach us. I joined in and took a few "at bats" myself. The ring-leaders had just learned in Western Civ. I about the "Blues" and the "Greens," teams of chariot racers in Constantinople who led a rebellion against the Byzantine emperor in 532 AD. So they named their cricket teams the "Blues" and "Greens." We never developed a varsity cricket program but we had fun doing something strange and exotic, involving students, faculty, and parents and a touch of academics. The guy that brought the funny-looking bat to school could have been laughed at – at some schools he would have been called to the dean's office and had his 'dangerous weapon' confiscated.

Many things we value highly here have developed in the same way as our brief flirtation with cricket. Someone took a chance on doing something wacky and untried, not knowing where it would lead. Mr. McIntyre started rugby. Some people were very nervous and uncomfortable about that, but it was the beginning of high school rugby in Louisiana. Some of you rugby players love it partly because some people think you're crazy. The medieval banquet started as a whim of mine. The senior trip began because Mr. Tutwiler and Fr. Neilsen, the headmaster at the time, got a completely insane idea about how to culminate the year for our first senior class. They didn't plan it; they just flew the whole class to England and made it up from there. That same headmaster, whose personality is imprinted on everything we do here, said that we were the "Why not?" school. I think that's a name to treasure.

Now what happens to people who live in a “why not” environment like that? Most obviously, it stimulates creativity and innovation – qualities of inestimable value in every aspect of life. But I want to focus on something more subtle and personal. People who live in a zany, anything-is-possible environment repeatedly and habitually see that weird things, unexpected and unconventional things can be good and that, if they’re done right, they can not only be accepted, but shared and celebrated. They begin to think that what’s different about me, my quirks and oddities, things that I’m a bit afraid to show to other people, might be good, might be the best part of me, might be precious. You cannot think this about yourself on any kind of regular basis without starting to see other people’s differences and oddities as potentially valuable too. Thus when a new person joins the class, you want to find out his or her peculiarities. There is a joy in saying, “Oh that’s what’s weird about you? Well, here’s what’s weird about me” – without anybody getting hurt.

Because ESA blesses and fosters the quirky ideas of both students and faculty, those who graduate from here have a powerful, built-in, live-long appreciation for human uniqueness. This is the extra “something” I want you to take from your ESA education. You already have it, but before concluding I want to clarify it a little and tell you why you should treasure it.

C. S. Lewis said that nothing we know is higher or more sacred than personhood. When I first read that, I realized immediately that it was a great truth. No poet, no novelist, no prophet, no scientist has ever been able to understand and explain all the depths and complexities inside of one person. Also, it is persons who bestow value on everything else. We’ve seen pictures from the Hubble telescope that show orange and purple clouds made up of billions of stars and galaxies and it makes us feel that our personhood is small and not very important. But the galaxies, as far as we know, think nothing and feel nothing. If there were no thought and feeling anywhere to recognize all those clouds of stars, it would make no difference whether there were a trillion galaxies or nothing at all. Infinity or absolute void; it takes thought and feeling to care which one it is.

But thought and feeling are not things; they are processes and they only occur within persons. We develop them only through interactions with other persons: a person existing in isolation is an oxymoron. If the only personhood we value is our own, we expect to be first or best at everything and demand perfection from ourselves. Then, since we are not perfect and sometimes even fail, we condemn ourselves, and end up with narcissistic self-hatred instead of self-acceptance.

We have to understand instead that all people, including ourselves, are equally valuable, just as they are, quirks, oddities, and failures included, simply because they are persons, possessing thought and feeling. It is our imperfections, among other things, that make us unique; and uniqueness is what makes each person a separate, independent miracle. Our thoughts and feelings may be a little messed-up, but they can never be replaced by the thoughts and feelings of anyone else. Once we understand the uniqueness, the wholeness, and the infinite value of any person, we love that person – and that works the same way whether we apply it to others or to ourselves. It is putting everyone’s quirks and oddities in full view and celebrating them that teaches us to love uniqueness, both in ourselves and

others. “Love your neighbor as yourself” – I don’t think there’s any way to love them separately. Love is simply the response to really grasping any person’s uniqueness.

This can’t be taught in a classroom; we learn it only by living it and practicing it. Because of the peculiar culture of this place, you get to do that at an age when it is often difficult to do. We don’t do it perfectly of course, but we do it enough to establish it as a habit – and habits can last a lifetime. Seen this way, the oft-mentioned freedom we have at ESA is not a sort of indulgence granted by kind-hearted administrators – it is the core of the education that happens here. To enjoy each other’s uniqueness requires protecting each other from insult and violation. That is why we promise not to lie, cheat, or steal, and why, in a very tolerant place, those things are not tolerated. There are other things we gradually learn not to tolerate, such as the teasing, ridicule, exclusion, and humiliation that make the earlier years of adolescence so painful. I don’t think any of this balance of tolerance and intolerance can be taught by rules or imposed by authority. We only learn these attitudes by experiencing how good it feels to live in the atmosphere they create.

How did this rare atmosphere get started here? Its only formal beginning was the honor code. The rest happened spontaneously because of the people who happened to come together when this school began – people like Mr. Tutwiler, the Tates, Fr. Neilsen, and Tom Olverson, Valerie Cox, and Cecille Garboushian, names you know from the awards that honor them. They came here already at peace with their own uniqueness and revering that of others – including younger others. But it no longer depends on certain individuals. The honoring of uniqueness is imprinted in this community and the enjoyment of it imprints it again on each new class. It is already imprinted in each one of you, and if you continue to nourish it, it will bless you all the days of your life.

May God continue to bless this place and all those who take a piece of it with them wherever they may go in the world.