

**Graduation speech**  
**Composed and delivered by Michael Goodwin**  
**Saturday June 11, 2011**  
**Concord-Carlisle High School**

Good morning!

The sun rises.

Many miles away, someone, at this very moment, sits in silence, watching light come to the world. Let us imagine that we are alongside this individual as the darkness retreats and the world is born; let us too be witness to this daily miracle. Let us hail the coming of the dawn.

And there is the light.

Class of 2011, you sit at a juncture not unlike the transition from night to dawn – as you too are in the midst of movement from one thing to the next.

These moments of transition ever captivate me – the change from fall to winter, forest to field, high school to beyond - - these hinge-like moments tend to be so active, so potent, robust – they are overflowing with fecundity. I love it. So thank you for inviting me to speak here today. I am touched, I am honored and humbled, to be standing here.

I ask that we, that all of us, begin by envisioning a triangle. Now, at each of the three points, the three vertices, I want you to place a single word. First word: teacher. Second word: student. Third word: it.

Student – teacher – it.

This triangular relationship will serve as the basis for my remarks today. This is certainly not my own creation, this construction has been developed, investigated and revised by a host of educational thinkers and researchers over the years – most notably by David Hawkins, who once wrote that: "...in a sense you become educated when you become your own teacher...what we all hope, of course, is that as the formal institutional part of education is finished, its most conspicuous and valuable product will be seen to be the child's ability to educate himself."

This triangular relationship, then, offers not only the basic blueprint for this thing we call school, but for the ongoing process of learning, of living.

Let us first define our terms – student, teacher, it. When we have done this, I will conclude my remarks by offering some guidelines that might help us consider our own interactions with ourselves, with each other, and with our surroundings.

## **Student**

Watching my daughters come into the world and interact with the world has been the most profound experience of my life. Lena, just over one has a knack for walking precisely in the one direction I do not want her to walk. It might be because there is a dangerous step ahead, some poison ivy perhaps, a smattering of food that she had previously tossed to the floor.... And when I pull her away, and face her in another direction, she immediately does an about face and heads right back where I do not want her to go. This is not because she is being willful, nor is she trying to challenge my

authority – though that will come soon enough – I believe it is rather because she wants so badly to know what that thing is. There is something unknown and mysterious in the direction she wants to go, and she will stop at nothing to get there.

Her big sister, Willa, now three years old, asks the question *why?* about two hundred times a day.

Willa: Papa, will the yellow warbler be here in the winter?

Me: No, honey, yellow warblers aren't here in the winter.

Willa: Why?

Me: Because there is no food for them in the winter – they migrate somewhere else?

Willa: Why?

Me: Why what?

Willa: Why do they migrate?

Me: Because the bugs they like to eat are not here in the winter.

Willa: Why?

Me: Because the conditions aren't...right.

Willa: Why?

And so on....

Whenever she and I drill deep into things like this, generally two things happen. First, my basic ignorance surrounding the most fundamental conditions of our existence is revealed. Second, I find myself in awe of her innate and incessant curiosity.

Roll a ball along a frictionless surface and it will travel forever. If we are to remain life long students – as we all must if we are to continue to grow and develop – we are wise to recognize the obstacles that slow us down and to grapple with them. Frequently, the obstacles are ones that we create for ourselves – most notably the false belief that we have things figured out.

When I first began my intense love affair with birds, I aimed to learn all of the common residents of Concord by sight and by sound as quickly as possible.

Black-capped chickadee. Check. Tufted Titmouse. Check. Downy woodpecker. Check. Red-Winged blackbird. Check – a definite check. How could one ever confuse a red-winged blackbird? They are big, they hang out in large numbers by wetlands, the males have bright red-ish orange epaulettes, and their song is unmistakable: *Conkreeeee!*

Here was one bird I had figured out – no need for further exploration.

Later that spring I was out by Great Meadows and heard the strangest, most jarring sound – a strident, guttural whistle shot out of the woods repeatedly, piercing me like a knife.

Here was a new bird! I was on it.

For the next half an hour I ambled through the brush searching for this novel singer. Scraped up and muddied, I eventually turned my binoculars onto this creature...what was it? A red-winged blackbird, of course.

The moment you think you've got it, it's gone.

And to think that an exploration of this bird would stop with a simple identification, is, of course, to investigate only the surface. My daughter Willa is never satisfied with a simple term or definition, neither should we be. As the great hero of our western deserts, Edward Abbey once wrote: "Through naming comes knowing; we grasp

an object, mentally, by giving it a name - hension, prehension, apprehension. And thus through language create a whole world, corresponding to the other world out there. Or we trust that it corresponds. Or perhaps, like a German poet, we cease to care, becoming more concerned with the naming than with the things named; the former becomes more real than the latter. And so in the end the world is lost again. No, the world remains - those unique, particular, incorrigibly individual junipers and sandstone monoliths - and it is we who are lost. Again. Round and round, through the endless labyrinth of thought - the maze.”

A true student is one whose exploration does not cease. And though the compulsory phase of *your* education has come to an end, the journey remains unbroken.

## **Teacher**

I have been blessed, both by accident and design, to have encountered a vast array of teachers in my time here as a student, my time here as a member of the faculty, and through my continued and prolonged exposure to this place. Rather than offer a single definition, I hope that by offering some examples from my own experience we will be left with an impression rather than any one notion of “teacher” or “teaching.” Let us begin...

Henry David Thoreau once wrote that “Life in us is like the water in a river.” A stunning statement. We move, we flow. We are made up of many molecules, we are comprised of different elements, yet we are singular. There is no end point, only change. Egg Rock, that sacred spot just a mile from here, a place revered by the natives who occupied these lands for literally thousands of years before the Europeans arrived on these shores – that spot where the Sudbury and Assabet rivers converge to form the Concord - is perhaps the ultimate marker of this synthesis – and there is much to be learned from watching the waters mingle.

My freshman year here at the high school I was fortunate enough to have Doc Furey as my teacher for World Cultures and Civilizations. Part way through the year I found myself up late at night, almost every night, talking to my girlfriend on the phone, sacrificing hours of much needed sleep in the process. One morning Doc pulled me aside after class, looked into my bloodshot eyes with great concern and said: “Is everything OK?” It was at that moment that I learned that this transaction – between teacher and student – at its best, is about much more than the material, it is a relationship between human beings that needs to be cultivated and honored.

As a senior in Dave Prifti’s photography class, I experimented with the craft formally for the first time, and initially created pictures that...more or less resembled ones I had seen. Looking through a series of my photographs, Dave said: “These look OK...but where are you?” “I don’t get it,” I replied, “I am not in any of these pictures. These are not self portraits.” “No,” he said, “where are *you* - these pictures do not reflect you, who you are.” As Miles Davis once said: “The hardest thing to do in music is to sound like yourself.”

And some of the most powerful teachers in my life have been...you. The compassion and determination you have shown, Kelly Gross, in working with homeless and struggling adults and children in Boston, is admirable, to say the least. Your ability to draw in a host of other students – your ability to inspire, your incessant concern, your

deep-seeded belief that you have an obligation to help others: You offer us an essential lesson through your very actions.

Brima Rogers, after hearing me describe the events in Kansas in 1854 as being “hugely important, big...” you asked me: “You keep using this word – big. What do you mean by that?” What a terrific question, it’s beautiful. One of the most provoking and thoughtful questions I have ever been asked – so basic, yet so complex, so instructive.

Tim Lamere, I will never forget the critique you offered concerning a take home essay I had given the class. You told me, and the class, that if I had not included so many terms that needed to be covered in the essay, you might have been able to compose a more thoughtful piece, less like a list, and more an exploration. More important than the specifics of your feedback (which, of course, were right on – reminds me too of Christian Sandoval-Repizo – part way through the 150 question multiple choice section of the final exam in US History, you said: “Why do you do this to us?” That question has been a guiding question for me ever since, it has changed my approach to teaching, and I thank you for it) - but more important than the specifics of your comments, Tim, was your courage in standing up for yourself and for your classmates – not being afraid to question me simply because I have the formal title of “teacher.” You helped to blur the line between teacher and student that day and I thank you for it.

Lily Cano-Maris. Spirit week, 2008. The theme: characters from the TV show The Office. You came to class as Dwight Schrute – and I mean, you came to class as Dwight Schrute. There was not a single aspect of his attire or demeanor that you missed. You went all out. And why not? If you are going to do something, do it. An important lesson, indeed. Not unlike you, Ben Parra – you seem to devote yourself with equal vigor to all of your many pursuits – track, trumpet, grunge, your commitment to this place and to the people in this place - - you are a wellspring of energy and when you go after something, you go after it.

In putting together the sleep-in to protest the start time of school, Jon Mayer, you realized that you were necessarily going to rub a few people the wrong way. You said “I guess if everyone was happy about this, I would not be doing something right.” Brilliant. When you aim to affect real systemic change, there will inevitably be detractors. Though if the mission is sound, there are often more supporters than not.

A couple weeks ago, at the Senior Project Festival, Heather Morrison and Natalie Collins, you outfitted fifteen of your friends in clothes that you had constructed from scratch and offered, as far as I know, the first full scale fashion show ever conducted in the learning commons. It was a lovely moment. One of the coolest things I have ever seen happen in a school. Aside from the quality of the work, I was most moved by the pride you both had in your work. So to you and to all students who participated in the event that night – you helped to illustrate and affirm a very powerful idea: when you allow students to take ownership of their work, and when you offer students choice - generally speaking - - good things happen. Taking pride in your work is of paramount importance.

And I could go on and on: Catherine Harris – your humble brilliance, Mark O’Toole – your constant kindness, Melissa Mariano – the depth of your creativity, Seth Bird – the lightness of your touch, your being...but aside from the pressure of time, I realize that I am really describing all of you. Your collective spirit has washed over the school, over all of us, and will leave an impression on this place that will shape and dictate the direction we go from here on out.

Finally, the last teacher I will reference here - the hill. Each year, the seniors carve the year of their graduation into the earth – a ritual of sorts, a rite of passage. I remember standing at the base of the hill your freshman year with Greg Gouillart and Lucas Anagnostopoulos – telling them that soon enough, so soon, it would be their turn to scrawl their year into the hill. They looked at me quizzically, as if to say: “Don’t think so pal.” What seemed so far away then is here now. The numbers change, the numbers degrade, and one day will be gone altogether. 1994, the year of my own graduation, has given way to 2011. 2011 will give way to 2012, to 2072, and beyond. I am reminded of a stanza of TS Eliot:

In my beginning is my end. In succession  
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,  
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place  
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.  
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,  
Old fire to ashes, and ashes to earth  
Which is already flesh, fur, and feces  
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf

## It

We now come to the third point of our triangle – “it.”

What is it? For our purposes, let us define the “it” as the essence of the world which courses through our veins yet remains a mystery – the subject of our investigations.

John Keegan concluded his seminal book on the first World War with the following sentiment: “But then the First World War is a mystery. Its origins are mysterious. So is its course. Why did a prosperous continent...choose to risk all it had won for itself and all it offered to the world in the lottery of a vicious...conflict? Why when the hope of bringing the conflict to a quick and decisive conclusion was everywhere dashed to the ground within months of its outbreak, did the combatants decide nevertheless to persist in their military effort to mobilize for total war and eventually to commit the totality of their young manhood to mutually and existentially pointless slaughter....How did the anonymous millions...find the resolution to sustain the struggle and to believe in its purpose?...Men whom the trenches cast into intimacy entered into bonds of mutual dependency and sacrifice of self stronger than any of the friendships made in peace and better times. That is the ultimate mystery of the First World War. If we could understand its loves, as well as its hates, we would be nearer to understanding the mystery of human life.”

I love this comment. Here is a man who has spent a good portion of his life studying the war, and he comes away with more questions than answers – a model student. But what really inspires me about this quotation is that he views the war as a window into understanding the mysteries of human life – that if we study the war simply in order to catalogue its battles and treaties, we lose the opportunity to pursue the mystery of human life - we lose the chance to explore *it*. This type of authentic investigation precludes a construction in which the teacher is the purveyor of information and the

student is simply an empty receptacle waiting to be filled up. It necessitates collaboration, for we are all part of it.

Schools – at their best – are places where teachers and students come together to make these connections to the world. Our classrooms are places where this triangular relationship comes to life. You have been blessed indeed to have experienced this institution - never forget the privilege you all share in having been a student here. By “privilege” I refer to the access you have had to this place, and more importantly, the people in this place. Believe me, after having worked in schools located in deep, deep pockets of rural poverty, I can say with assurance, that you, that we, are fortunate.

But now, you leave this place. And as such, you must become more intentional in this pursuit, this exploration, yourself.

For whether a room in there, a room out there, or a room in here, every square foot of the globe is a classroom. As Annie Dillard once wrote: “What’s the difference between a cathedral and a physics lab? Are not they both saying: hello?”

With this broad and far-ranging definition of “classroom,” I leave you with the following: eleven guidelines for the classrooms the class of 2011 are about to enter. And though directed specifically at you, I hope they are useful to all of us.

One. Make direct contact with the material, develop a relationship with the material. Naturalist Aldo Leopold once wrote: “One day, I buried myself prone in the muck of a muskrat hole.” In his effort to understand this slithery creature, he knew that books would only take him so far, that if he was even to begin to grasp this animal in all its complexity, he would need to...bury himself in its hole and get a muskrat’s view of the world.

Two. At some point in your life, take a figure drawing class. Seriously. Admire the naked human form and try to make sense of it on paper. The hardest assignment I was given in college was a life-size self-portrait. As we had spent the whole semester drawing nude models, I *assumed* that we too should be fully de-robed in our own portraits. On the last day of class, all 40 of us tacked up our portraits in the gallery in order to peruse each other’s work. To my surprise, only one other person than myself had made such an assumption. It was one of the proudest moments of my academic career. But my reason for being in this class in the first place was that I knew it would be a huge challenge – having no real knack for drawing, I felt I would be pushed outside of my comfort zone. I have always learned the most from these moments where I enter into something I am not fully prepared for. I encourage you to do the same.

Three. There is little worse than one who complains without proposing to become part of the solution. Sadly, this tendency is widespread in our society. Do not become a complainer yourself – do not critique unless you are willing to match, nay exceed, the energy of your critique with the energy to solve the problem. If you are dismayed by the widespread disparity of access to a sound education in this country - if it bothers you that 1 out of 8 Americans goes to bed hungry every night - if you recognize that in the process of building our modern society we have ruthlessly plundered the natural world and in the process soiled the water and air, and altered our climate – and if that matters to you...do something about it. Never expect that someone else will do it for you. Have faith that your work will make an impact. My father, in concluding his book on his and the country’s experiences in the 1960s wrote that: “If this book has any purpose at all, it is not to impose a guide on the future, but to remind us that men and women can live as if

their world was malleable to their grasp; and that true or false, to live in this belief is to be most authentically alive.”

Four. Engaging in the critical work of improving our world requires an open and honest dialogue in which all members of the community feel comfortable sharing their views – and it will, by and large, take communities, or cohesive teams - not simply assortments of individuals - to face the challenges before us. Help create and cultivate an atmosphere of openness, honesty, and respect. If you are too afraid to attach your name to something you say, you probably shouldn't say it at all. And though you need not like everyone you come into contact with, a certain amount of respect for all is critical.

Five. Remember that it is often less about what you say and more about how you say it. Tone is critical. If I say (harshly, angrily): “I am so upset by the way you are handling the situation,” I will elicit a certain response. And if I say (in a more subdued manner): “I am upset by the way you are handling the situation,” I will perhaps elicit a different response – one that might be more conducive to actually solving the problem.

Six. Don't cling so steadfastly to your stated beliefs, to where you come down on any particular issue. I remember, sitting where you sit now, on the verge of adulthood and being excited to finally be developing my own sense of where I stood on the things that matter – gun rights, abortion, health-care. I would know, I thought, what I believed in and I would fight for it. I promise you that your convictions will, without fail, be challenged by experience – these things are easy to pin down in the abstract but become much more complex when you have a personal stake in them. My opposition to the war in Iraq was troubled by the fact that my younger brother, a captain in the army, was serving our country patrolling the streets of Baghdad. As a result, I was invested in the conflict in a way I would not have been otherwise, and though my overall notion of the war might not have changed, this personal connection forced me to develop a more nuanced understanding. As Thich Nhat Hanh notes: “When we believe something to be absolute truth and cling to it, we cannot be open to new ideas.” Or as Mark Twain tells us: “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years.”

Seven. Don't be fooled by age – age is often a state of mind. You have to understand that, deep down, I do not feel any older than you though many of you were born the year I sat in your seat. Several years ago, my mother said the same thing to me: “Michael,” she said, “in my mind, in my heart, I am as young as I have always been. I don't feel any older than you.” Though time and will take its inevitable toll, though the body will degrade, it is up to you to define what frame of mind you wish to encounter the world - you have some control over how old you are.

Eight. Don't take yourself so seriously. If you cannot laugh at yourself, you are in big trouble. Period.

Nine. Music is the greatest social lubricant of all, spending time alone is critical, and there is nothing wrong with silence.

Ten. Each moment has its own significance. Ornithologist Lang Elliot tells us that each bird song is a special moment, a unique moment in time never to be repeated again. Remember this. If the things we love become routine, or simply expected, it becomes all too easy to lose sight of the simple and crushing beauty of our existence. And once you begin to take for granted the people that you love, the people that love you, you start to

become hollow. Though my wife and I spend every day with one another, and though we might argue from time to time, we make a point of telling each other every day that we love and respect one another. This is the glue that holds our family together, this is the poultice for the unforeseen yet inevitable pains our family has felt and will feel. Lindsay – I love you.

Finally – things get better. Many of you have already experienced a significant amount of pain and loss, and there is more to come. There is a seat that is empty today because, in part, the sorrow seemed insurmountable. Things do get better. Joy cannot be the opposite of pain if one is not possible without the other - life cannot be the antithesis of death if their synthesis is the most basic feature of our lives. Almost 500 years ago, the Spanish church bought the three-paneled painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights* from the artist Hieronymous Bosch. They saw it as the ultimate description of the human experience – on the left panel: the garden before the fall, in the center panel: people and animals engaged in all manner of unseemly, devious, sordid activity, and on the right panel: a hellish specter of fire and mutilation. Though the church found a clear connection between this linear narrative and their own conception of sin, one wonders if they might have missed another, essential aspect of the painting – when the panels are shut, and the painting is closed, a round sketch of the world is revealed, a simple circle in which everything is contained. It's as if Bosch was telling us: *it's all part of it, baby.*

All part of it. It.

Student – teacher - it.

This is a precious dynamic that spans all peoples and locales, all time and space – it is one of the most fundamental transactions of our existence and must be honored accordingly. And while I hope that the guidelines I have offered here will help us all think about our interactions with the world, it is ultimately up to you to define and redefine the manner in which you enter the host of classrooms – those with walls, and those without – that remain on your journey ahead.

So the day draws to a close. The sun falls, the shadows lengthen, and darkness creeps back into the sky.

As you lay down your head tonight, ask yourself the question: on the whole, in the net, am I doing good? Good for others, good for myself? If you can answer, in the net, in the net: yes - - you are doing something right. You will sleep well through the night.

Set your moral compass north and follow the arrow.

For in the end, you can find the greatest success you desire – you can become a rock star, a CEO, a professional athlete, the President of the United States, a teacher...but it will not amount to very much if you are not good to the people around you, which of course entails being good to yourself.

The sun goes down.

The sun comes up.

Class of 2011, congratulations.

I wish you all much love, comfort, and peace.

Thank you.