

Graduates, it has come time for us to say farewell to you. As my parting words to you, I want to offer exhortations about two matters of great importance in the world you go off to tonight.

First:

We have spoken much over these past years, and especially in the last few weeks, about the value of the liberal education you have received here. Tonight you have heard many words about the pricelessness of an education that has invited you to leave the bonds of ignorance, illusion, and appearance, to leave the Cave, and to learn how to see things in the clear light of Truth. In an age of “who’s to say?” relativism and an electronically-enhanced Cave of Illusions, the value of the education you have received here with us cannot be overstated.

But I want to warn you of something. As you go off to college, many of you will find yourselves disappointed by the intellectual, cultural, and moral environment you find there. You may find college professors who are thrilled that you know what a thesis is, surprised that you have studied two years of physics, or who will publicly praise you as the only student in your Western Civ class to have ever read a single word of Plato before. But this will be small comfort to you as you remember fondly your senior Humane Letters Seminar or your junior Calculus class. You will doubtless be frustrated by college peers who scorn serious thinking, and whose passions are for self gratification rather than Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.

I want to ask you that, as much as you have seen and learned in your time here, *do not, Graduates of 2009, let yourselves slip into smugness or superiority.* Do not write off your peers, your professors, or your classes; do not set yourself up as a judge over your fellows. For if you have gained any wisdom in your education thus far, it is the wisdom of Socrates, who simply recognized his ignorance where others might not yet have seen theirs. Graduates, it is my fervent wish and prayer that your time at Veritas has given you not the pride of an Ivan Karamazov, coldly disdainful of others in their weakness, but rather the humble insight of Elder Zosima, who said, “*We are not holier than those in the world because we have come here and shut ourselves within these walls, but, on the contrary, anyone who has come here...knows himself to be worse than all those who are in the world, worse than all on earth*” (*The Brothers Karamazov*, Book IV Chapter 1).

Graduates, if you are to bring anything of value into the world as you go forth from here, you must do it with Zosima’s humility, with love, and in submission and service to others. Condemnation, mockery, or smugness will poison all against you. That would be of no service to the world you are entering now, and it would do no credit to yourselves, your school, or the education you claim to possess. You must be like a tiny grain of wheat—fall into the earth, graduates, die to yourselves—and pray that the harvest might be bountiful for others.

The last thing I wish to speak of is this.

Over the final few months of your senior year, you have been immersed in a great many WORDS. Even more than usual in this most loquacious and logophilic of schools. Your

senior thesis defenses—lots of written and spoken words. The senior banquet—three hours of moving, funny, and poignant WORDS from your teachers to you. That last delightful senior play—Kate and Petruchio are all about WORDS, some of the most energetic and hilarious words that Shakespeare ever wrote. Your final discussions of *Brothers Karamazov*, the endless inscriptions in your yearbooks, the speeches you have heard tonight—to borrow a phrase from Hamlet, *words, words, words* (Act II Scene 2).

Graduates, I also pray and hope that, as you leave us tonight, *you are not disdainful of words*, certain of their cheapness because you have heard, read, written, and spoken so many of them. That would be a travesty.

For there is a great spirit of *misology*—the hatred of words and of reasonable discourse—afoot in the world today. The perversions of modern advertising and politics aside, this has probably always been the case, for we read of this phenomenon—the hatred of speech and argument—in Plato’s *Phaedo*. As to the cause of it—in our age and in any, I cannot help but agree with Socrates, who says this comes to be when “*one puts his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false...and so with another argument and then another...those in particular who spend their time studying contradiction in the end believe themselves to have become very wise and that they alone have understood that there is NO soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument, but that all that exists simply fluctuates up and down... and does not remain in the same place for any time at all*” (*Phaedo* 90b).

Graduates, if you believe that words can be used meaningfully to talk about real things, if you believe that they ought always to be used honestly, to reveal and communicate, and never to conceal or obfuscate; if you strive, as Montaigne exhorts you to, to fit your *words to things and not things to words* (*Essays* I.26), then know that you are not speaking the same language as most people. Your task in the world will be to teach others how to speak this language that you love, the mother tongue of Socrates.

For at this moment, right now, the abuse of language is being committed in our culture on an Orwellian scale by men and women both lofty and low. For decades now, long before you were born, legions of advertisers and politicians have been successfully teaching a different lesson to hundreds of millions of others, and they've been trying to convince you of it too: that you can say anything you want to, however crassly false, in order to sell something; and that you can do anything you want to provided that you use pleasant words to declare benevolent intentions (that you may or may not actually intend.)

Graduates: ours is an age in which true speech-- reasonable discourse--can be a heroic act of leadership, a daring deed.

Go forth, graduates of 2009, to be, as Homer has it, *speakers of words, and ones who accomplish in action* (*Iliad* IX.443).

Do great deeds, and speak the truth.