

**Commencement Address 2009**  
Veritas Preparatory Academy  
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[I should like to thank both Veritas and Great Hearts schools for inviting me to speak on this great occasion. There is simply no overestimating the work that goes into the founding and maintaining of a great school. And the fact that even within the growing charter school and school choice movement that so few places in the nation can boast of a school like this one, indeed a formidable alliance of schools, is a testimony to the hard work and clear thinking on the part of the founders, the teachers and administration, the parents, and the students themselves.]

Our coming together today signifies one of the great watershed moments in a young person's life: the time at which the young man or young woman by accepting a degree contends to be ready, or at least more ready, for the world—the real world—as it is called to the chagrin of all of us in the teaching profession. This ceremony is both a graduation, a leaving, a stepping up or away from the long hours of preparation and toil these young students have spent for a length of time amounting to one-sixth of their lives; and it is a commencement, a beginning, a starting out on a new course of life in which they will be governed less and less by the requirements and directions and wishes of their parents and teachers and more and more by the demands and urges and proclivities of their own dreams and tastes and ambitions. As such, this important rite of passage marks a great birth of freedom and, as every adult in this audience knows, an equally great inheritance of responsibility. Being on your own in the world allows you to take the credit for your achievements. Being on your own in the world also means you have no one else to blame for your failures.

Of course our moment is charged with memories. The memories of the parents must dwell in part on the crying infant who was getting sick or hurting himself every time they looked away, though for a moment; on the toddler who insisted on being played with or having just the right hat to wear or blanket to go to sleep with; on the child who went off to school one day weighed down by a backpack half his size; and, finally, on the teenager

who in one short summer shot up to be the same height as his father or her mother. These fond reflections congregate in the stunned disbelief that this same infant and toddler and child and teenager grew up so fast. Wasn't it only yesterday when the plaintive cry of "Mommy" rang through the house every few minutes, when the reluctant doer of chores asked ineffectually, "Oh, Dad, do I gotta?"?

And for the graduates themselves, there is, I would wager, a kind of war of the memories that is fought on this occasion, not a shooting war but a curious contest of contrasting scenes. On the one hand, they love this school and they love the great things they have done here. They have had the opportunity, at a very early age, to read mind-bending and soul-probing books that few people, at any age, still read today. They have studied languages long dead and sciences, which though very much alive, are normally neglected by all but those who show a predisposition or aptitude for them. Above all, they have loved to talk in class, not to chatter or pass notes, but to talk about important things with men and women who care about them, men and women we call teachers. Behind all this there has been work, long hours of work and preparation. But with work comes joy; with work comes accomplishment; with work comes true friendship. Yet the human soul is hardly a patient creature. The human soul, or we might better say, *thumos*, hates confinement and standing still. The whole time these students have loved seeking truth at Veritas, their ambition has lashed out: "Why is it taking so long? When will we ever reach the end? When will it be our day to graduate, to start our lives? These classes in front of us are going out into the world, or at least off to college. Though, admittedly, we often hear back that freshmen core courses at even prestigious private colleges pale in comparison to the senior year and the senior thesis at Veritas." And so these students themselves come to this day, to the precipice, with more than a little ambivalence.

That ambition to get out into the world is laudable. It is that ambition—that drive—that will make men and women of these boys and girls. It is the level of that ambition on the part of these students of Veritas, and on the part of their fellow classmates around the nation, that will either sustain and improve the institutions and mores of our civil society

or allow them to fall into neglect and decline. But perhaps we should ask what principle ought to govern that ambition, what *logos* ought to serve as a rule for their *thumos*.

As I was preparing for this occasion, I came across a rite of passage in a great and fundamental text that might be taken as somewhat analogous to our situation. In this story a young man is finding out that he will soon have to live on his own and thus take on a large amount of responsibility even as he gains his liberty from the rule of his father. The young man is Solomon, son to King David of Biblical fame. As David is dying—David being, like so many of us parents, that greatest and bravest and yet most flawed of men—he says to his son,

I go the way of all the earth; be strong, therefore, and prove  
yourself a man.

And just as David leaves his son alone, so many of you parents will in only two or three months from now take your sons and daughters off to college and for the first time in their lives leave them alone, although I hope without yourselves “going the way of all the earth.” Therefore it is important to see Solomon’s response to this mighty injunction to be strong and prove himself a man. It is important to know what a king did with his newfound freedom and unavoidable responsibility.

Now let me make a suggestion to these graduates, if I may, about this first time of being alone. The solemn moment of emerging independence is not so momentous if, ten minutes after your parents pull out of the parking lot, as they wipe their tears and trade sentiments of disbelief about how their baby has grown up, you call them on their cell or text them or *Twitter* them asking to know how to do laundry or whether to take morning or afternoon classes or to complain about your roommate’s hygiene. And parents, please realize that you have wiped noses and washed clothes and made sandwiches and given advice for eighteen years. You deserve a break. You don’t have to answer your cell phone every time your darling calls, especially if the darling calls five or six times a day. In fact, one must wonder what Solomon would have said about cellphones. “Spare the cell and spoil the child”? It doesn’t quite work, does it?

At any rate, soon after his father's death, Solomon had a dream. In this dream the Lord appeared and offered these words: "Ask! What shall I give you?" Now if there is a similarly open invitation in all of Western literature that more resembles the "what would you do if you won the lottery?" question of our own time, I do not know what it is. "Ask! What shall I give you" is a golden opportunity to launch one's greatest ambitions, to seize one's most secret desires. Now as these seasoned veterans of classical literature know, sometimes what a character *does not* say is as important as what he *does* say. What *could* have Solomon asked for? What would *you* ask for if God or a genie appeared and promised you anything? What would you spend your lottery money on? Or, as these graduates might ask, what would you do with the Ring of Gyges? What would the *typical* high-school graduate or college freshman have if he or she could have a-n-y-t-h-i-n-g?

Well, Solomon did not ask for riches. He did not ask for a big house. He did not ask for a long life. He did not ask for wine, women, and song. He did not ask for success or a career, although I guess you could argue that he already had a job as King of Israel. He did not ask for an early retirement. He did not even ask to find purpose in his life by giving up his birthright and helping the less fortunate. Here is what he said:

. . . You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.

And Your servant is in the midst of your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted.

Therefore give to your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?

And so Solomon, who could have had anything and who already possessed a great deal, asked, with the deepest humility—and his humility is important—for the one thing he needed to bring all his talents and all his inheritance to fruition. He asked for wisdom. Or, as the graduates of Veritas might say, Solomon asked for *truth*, for the knowledge and judgment necessary to discern between good and evil, combined with, presumably, the will to do the good and to avoid the evil.

It was soon after this dream and this prayer that Solomon's wisdom was tested. He did not actually have to wait long or to go anywhere to be tested. Challenge came to him as it comes to all of us, as it will come to all of these graduates: unexpectedly. He was confronted with an almost impossible situation in which two women each claimed to be mother of the same infant. In those days before DNA testing, there was no way to prove to whom a child belonged. So Solomon called for a sword to be brought and for the child to be cut in two, one half of which would be given to each woman. In response, the first woman offered to give up the whole child to the other woman; the second insisted that the child be divided and she be given her half of the child. Solomon then ordered that the child be given to the first woman for the simple reason that a mother would never, *never* allow harm to come to her child, even if it meant losing him.

Solomon's great insight into the human condition, his *wisdom* about mothers and children, led to his ability to arbitrate an almost impossible situation with justice and humanity. Just such insight into the human condition, just such wisdom that enables us to act justly in our world, is the aim of a liberal education, the education that prepares us to exercise our liberty responsibly, the education that demands that we do so. The reason that I have dwelt on this story so long, this beautiful story that has been retold by authors such as Brecht and artists the likes of Raphael, is that it so perfectly answers this maddening and at times impossible question for the teacher of the classics, one that perhaps you parents have had from time to time and that even these students, despite their love of great books and great conversation, might have asked during those long nights of reading Thucydides or puzzling over the ablative absolute: Why should I spend so much time reading about stories that are fictional and therefore not true, or stories about things that did happen but so long ago that it hardly matters any longer? Shouldn't I be doing something more obviously useful with my time, more modern and up-to-date? The answer to such a question is really straightforward: So that you will know yourself and your fellow human beings; so that you will know yourself as a friend, a worker, a spouse, a parent, a neighbor, and a citizen; so that you will have a clear view of the good you are working toward in your friendships, your calling, your marriage, your family, your

neighborhood, and your nation, which is to say, in your life; so that you will not fall short in those duties and in those capacities by settling for something that is not the good, for something that is not beautiful; so that you will live your life with justice. For without wisdom, there can be no justice.

This answer, however easy to say and obvious to these graduates who have labored in the great books and stories of our tradition, this answer given for centuries in the Western experience on graduation days such as this one, is today plainly counter-cultural, perhaps even revolutionary. Most everything we hear about improving or reforming education these days—and very few say that education does not need reform—comes either in the rather mercenary and short-sighted view of giving young people “the skills they will need to be competitive in the twenty-first-century workforce,” yet without defining what those skills might be; or in the idealistic view of stoking the desire of the nation’s youth to go out and change the world through the power of their good intentions, whatever the road to Hell might have been paved with. In neither case does the first thing come first: on the one hand the true training of the mind that liberates thinking men and women from the static notion of pre-existing skills and instead enables them to invent modes of work that do not now even exist; and on the other, the cultivation of wisdom—of a great-hearted longing for justice directed by a clear-sighted prudence—that must govern the best of intentions lest those intentions be perplexed again and again by the hard school of reality.

Like Solomon, these graduates have inherited a kingdom, but a different kind of kingdom, a kingdom of the mind. They have been given the treasures of the ancient world and of the modern: treasures that continue to grow the more they realize how many great thoughts there are to ponder, how many great deeds there are to emulate, how many great discoveries have been made already and how many are still to be made. But this great kingdom of the mind, it must be understood, is not just a great, big bundle of books to read any more than the true wealth of a nation is the amount of gold it has on hand that might be depleted at any moment by unwise rulers. To believe that attaining a liberal education simply means plowing through the classics is to make an idol out of erudition. Rather the true wealth of the kingdom of the human mind is the perfected ability of

judging human nature and the world around us. It is the wisdom engendered by these books, by the truth that is in them, that is our real inheritance. And it is that wisdom brought to bear on the challenges and crises of our own times that will in turn be the proof of these graduates as men and as women.

As they move out into the world, parents and faculty, we must rejoice in the knowledge that these young graduates for the past several years with every book they have read, every paper they have written, every math problem they have solved, and every scientific experiment they have conducted, with every work of beauty they have listened to or looked at, that these graduates have been making a claim about education—whether they know it or not—and therefore making a claim ultimately about human life. Their claim is that there is truth in the world; that the human mind when properly trained is capable of discovering that truth; and that wisely acting upon that discovered truth is the surest means of achieving that elusive thing we call happiness. Their knowledge of what is good, what is more beautiful, what is higher and nobler in the world will make them better workers, better parents, better citizens, better men and women. That wisdom, if acted upon, will lead these young men and women to take up their posts among a great people, and in a great nation, and from there judge themselves, judge the human condition, and judge our future, with justice and humanity. That wisdom, if acted upon, will make these graduates of today about to commence their lives as independent men and women, teachers to us all—teachers in the real sense of the word—teachers of how a human life ought to be lived. And that is a lesson all of us could stand to learn.

It is with the greatest admiration and the highest hope that we send these graduates of Veritas Preparatory Academy into the world, that we urge them to be strong and to prove themselves men and women. And in so doing we must add our congratulations and our love. Thank you.