

Love Up Close

Fellow-students of the class of 2009, we have at last finished our Veritas career. The six-year-long road ends tonight. For those of you who were here on that first day six years ago, tonight must truly be special. When you compare that day with this night, that mob of seventh graders with this greatly matured group, how incredible it must be, how inspiring, and how breathtaking.

I cannot know what you now feel; I came three years late, midway, when the party was already in full swing. Those of you who were, shall we say, “on time”: forgive me for my tardiness. I do not know what the spirit of those early years was like. I cannot portray the true magnitude of your accomplishments, cannot make the incredible comparison between that first, bright morning and this final, fading evening. But I do know that in these last three years, years which I observed firsthand, the pace of our intellectual development has only quickened, the contrast of each present year to each former year has grown exponentially, and the performance of the school has become more and more effective and efficient in the attainment of its goal. If all this happened in three short years, I can only wonder at how great that change was which took place over six.

As for the spirit of those early years, then, I can say nothing. But as for the spirit that has developed in the school over these later years: that I think I can describe. We (I mean the students) have many times “lovingly” reflected on the special Veritas spirit, often when we find ourselves talking about *Crime and Punishment* or *The Republic* in our free time, in a restaurant or at a movie theatre. We have, I’m told, even come to such topics in a hot tub. It is some habit you just seem to acquire, springing, I think, from some kind of joy found only in the kind of academic atmosphere which Veritas cultivates. It is a joy and a desire that, sometimes to our horror, nevertheless keeps bringing us back to that Veritas frame of mind, to the unending search for truth, to the Great Conversation.

Make no mistake: we all have had those moments when we supposedly “loathe” Veritas. At least I have, and coincidentally it most often occurred the night before an essay was due. It is not as if we the students have always had fond feelings for our school. And yet, though sometimes we find the workload unappealing or inconvenient, we still cherish this school and hold it in high regard. I think it is because deep down, we do know what great a debt we owe it.

Over these past few years, we have come to understand the school at a deeper level, and from that understanding springs our affection. We knew from the first year *how* Veritas is different. That is not hard to see. But now we start to comprehend the reason for the eccentricities. At last, we have begun to see *why* Veritas is different and *what* it has given us that other schools lack. We see the real reason our school is unique, and we love it for that.

Of course, we are not completely alone. There are now four other Great Hearts Academies with the same philosophy. And there are, I have heard, other high schools around the country that are similar to us. But this still makes for a sad minority, a remarkable few that stand out from the rest. Try as we might to “just be normal”, I am afraid, dear friends, once we came to this school, there was no chance of that.

And yet I wish that Veritas were a “normal school”. I wish it were one among thousands. Yes, the spirit of our school is unique. But in an ideal world, our uniqueness would not be unusual. For our uniqueness is not so much a testament to our accomplishment as it is a condemnation of the failure of our society’s educational institutions. We stand out only because every else has sat down.

And what is Veritas’ uniqueness? Simply put, it is embodied in the Socratic creed: “The unexamined life is not worth living”. On the surface, it is the liberal arts education, aiming to produce within the student a commitment to free inquiry, a passion for ideas, and a love of learning. I think Veritas has become increasingly efficient at attaining this goal. But I also think, and I have heard from good authority, that there is something more profound to this educational model, and that is, that this school is not here, these teachers are not here, to simply make us score well on the AIMS or the SAT or the ACT or the CLEP tests. Fundamentally, this school and these teachers are here with a very different goal in mind. They are here to make us moral people, to make us ethical citizens. Every school claims to make its students “better, more successful” people. But in what sense, I wonder. Have the students only become more adept at taking tests, at memorizing facts, at speaking persuasively? All of those skills are important, and all of them are taught at Veritas. But when the acquisition of a set of skills becomes the ultimate goal, the school has horribly mistaken its purpose.

This is, I think, what makes up the essential difference. At Veritas, cleverness does not take precedence over wisdom; skills do not replace ethics; efficiency does not trump integrity. If we wanted to say it in a different fashion, we could say that above all, this school teaches us how

to treat others, how to respect them. Striving to prepare us for our future lives in society, Veritas endeavors to produce in us the individual character without which society cannot survive. This school, these teachers – and our teachers are not just those who sit behind me; among their ranks are also Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas and Augustine, Dante, Dostoevsky, St. John and St. Paul the Apostles – they, I repeat, do not make their highest priority teaching us a set of skills. No, all such skills are irrelevant and of little use, were not our teachers so utterly resolved on demonstrating to us the importance of social affection, the value of friendship, and the near-sacred duty of loving others as we love ourselves.

Fyodor Dostoevsky devotes much energy to this idea in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, which is, coincidentally, the last book that we read at Veritas. In it, the inwardly tormented Ivan Karamazov admits, “I never could understand how it’s possible to love one’s neighbors. In my opinion, it is precisely one’s neighbors that one cannot possibly love... If we’re to come to love a man, the man himself should stay hidden, because as soon as he shows his face, love vanishes.” For Ivan, it is a part of man’s nature to show indifference to the suffering of others. It is quite easy to justify apathy, and man finds no lack of excuses. Faultfinding, even in the most saintly figure, seems to be one of our fondest pastimes. Ivan concludes with bitter sarcasm, that “it’s still possible to love one’s neighbors abstractly, and even occasionally from a distance, but hardly ever up close.”

There is, I think, a measure of truth in Ivan Karamazov’s words, though he uttered them from the depths of inward despair. For developing a life characterized by this genuine respect and active love is truly difficult. I do not mean to sermonize or to sound “preachy”, and yet I am convinced that this is the truth behind Veritas. This rousing sympathy for others; this humble compassion; this sacrificial love, love “up close” as Ivan puts it, is no easy task. And yet it is the most important. I thank God that I have been blessed to attend a school that understands that.

And so, my fellow-classmates, my friends, as we come to the end of our six-year journey at Veritas, let us not yield to dreamy fantasy. Let us always remember the bitterness of this necessary duty, the difficulty of this love for others. But let us all the more eagerly make the attainment of it our goal. How fortunate we are to have participated in a school that placed due weight on the essential things. We have been given such a valuable awareness. For I am certain that a life without compassion, friendship, or love, however full of worldly success it may be, is,

more than all other lives that men live on this earth, not worth living. That life is perhaps the most unexamined life of all.

Thank you.

I, Joel Malkin, give my permission to Great Hearts Academies to publish this speech.