

Baccalaureate Address by Patrick Stedman Grace Church – June 18, 2006

Nelson Mandela once said: “There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered”. Change. Oh how we have changed. If you pause for a moment to recall yourself in elementary school, it doesn’t really make sense how we have grown from little kids concerned with afternoon snack to adults embarking on higher education and moreover, the real world. I remember my entire day revolved around going home to hang out with Andrew. We’d rush home, and immediately run around the backyard pretending to be soldiers. Though I still look forward to the end of a school day 13 years later, Andrew and I no longer play war, at least not in public. Look at how far we have come. Our class has slowly but surely transformed from children into adults. We’ve grown together, through bliss and tragedy, and we’ve been here for each other when the world has turned its back on us. We’ve shared triumphs, and we’ve comforted each other during failures. We are an fellowship of brothers and sisters. That is why moving on is so hard we will never all be in the same boat together again. We are going our separate ways. Our best friends and families will no longer be with us. We will be building our futures miles away from them, without their immediate support. Seemingly, we will have to start all over with no one else but God and ourselves.

Though uncertainty has always caused man to fear, we must take the strengths we have nurtured within each other these years together and use them to summon the courage to face the future. Ramsey Clark, Attorney General under Lyndon B Johnson, once remarked, Turbulence is life force. It is opportunity. Let’s love turbulence and use it for change. The most difficult moments in our lives define our future. We must keep the memories of our first loves, prom, senior trip, everything we can recall with us to fight on. Life is a struggle, and he who loses faith will falter. We are new soldiers moving to the front. So far, we have only made it through basic training. My advice, as an amateur philosopher, is to remember always to pray and then, persevere.

I offer you two important quotes to remember as you go through life, one from Saint Paul and the other from President Calvin Coolidge. The first, from Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans, reminds us If God be with us, who can be against us. There will come times in your life when you will question the direction you are going, and whether or not you are alone. Regardless of *any* situation, you are not alone you are never alone. God will be with you, and in your times of doubt you must put full faith in him. When the road is dim and you are lost, you must venture out into the darkness with the understanding that you will not be led astray. Years from now you may find yourself somewhere you never expected to be. Humans dread darkness only because they do not know where it leads. Do not

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fear foreign waters, embrace them. There is greater potential in the unknown world than in familiarity. In the movie, “Cool Hand Luke”, Luke manages to beat everyone else at poker with a hand of absolutely nothing. When asked how he did it, Luke simply replied, Sometimes nothing’s a pretty good hand. When you’ve got no idea where to go, when you’ve got nothing, be confident and go all in wherever life takes you. Don’t fight the tide; swimming against it is the only sure way to drown. Be like Luke, and win your game of poker.

The second quote I offer is from President Coolidge. He declared, when asked about the key to success: Nothing in the world can take the place of Persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan 'Press On' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race. Calvin Coolidge never said much, but when he did talk it was surprisingly wise. The talents we have been born with and the knowledge school has taught us are certainly useful, but they are merely tools. Determination is the only thing truly necessary. In J.R.R. Tolkein’s the Lord of the Rings, Gimli, when told he could leave the Fellowship of the Ring whenever he chose to, staunchly replied: Faithless is he who says farewell when the road darkens. Do not run when the going get tough. Life will inevitably spit in your face one day, and when it does, hold onto your faith and persevere through the problem. Optimism and stubbornness are the keys to success and victory. Keep the time we have spent together in your hearts as you cry through the painful moments that will inevitably come. Remember wistfully the quirks of a classmate. Bear through the burden. We are brethren, and no one can take away our memories. They are immortal. I would like to close with a quote from William Cullen Bryant’s poem Thanatopsis. Bryant was only 17, embarking on the same journey as us when he composed this insightful piece. So live, that when thy summons comes to join The innumerable caravan, which moves To that mysterious realm, where each shall take His chamber in the silent halls of death, Thou go not, like the quarry slave at night, Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave, Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch about him, and lies down to pleasant dreams. Live a life worthy of emulation. Do good in the world, and when the time comes for you to gaze down into the abyss, remember where you came from. You are of the class of 2006 and you were destined for greatness. Never, ever, give up.