

Macaulay Honors College

Commencement remarks

June 12, 20017

Dean Pearl, distinguished faculty, parents, friends and most of all, graduating scholars:

My task here, as I understand it, is to ensure that you are not released into the real world until you've been properly sedated. I must warn you I've never failed at this, but you'll be grateful to learn that I have a very simple message for you today. Henry David Thoreau once exclaimed, about all things, "Simplify! Simplify! Simplify!", although many have wondered ever since why he didn't just say, "Simplify!"

So to simplify, I want to talk to you today about a single habit of mind that I hope you've

been developing here, one that your professors would hate for you to lose.

It's the habit of seeing -- purposeful seeing -- seeing what's in plain sight, what's off to the side, and what the world looks like through the eyes of others.

It's perhaps not surprising that an artist would want to talk to you about seeing. It's how he gathers information. It's the first step in making art. But if I could do one thing in my life over, it'd be to go back and learn to see as an artist all over again. There's so much I missed the first time around.

This wasn't always obvious to me. My first year in college, I took a drawing class and dedicated myself to making pleasant figurative sketches until one day my professor looked at

what I was doing and decided he'd seen enough.

Yes, yes, he said in exasperation, he knew I could draw, I clearly had some talent, but what he wanted to know was if I could see.

What I was producing, he said, were charcoal stylings, visual Muzak, filled with decisions I'd made long before I'd entered the studio. Greatly agitated, he ripped the drawing from my board and to the great delight of my classmates, tore it into shreds. I should hasten to point out, this was back before you could sue a teacher for hurting your feelings.

A few years later, I abandoned fine art, but the lesson about inquiry, about opening the mind, and seeing through fresh eyes every day was not lost on me. I'm sure each of you has

written an essay that should have been torn up, or a chemistry project that should have been circling the drain, or a sculpture that should have been returned to its natural state.

When your choices are lazy or facile or indifferent, when you squander the gifts at hand, major opportunities are lost forever. Your education here was about taking a look, and then another, and then another, breaking through walls of complacency, whether they were built on self-deception or prejudice, always challenging the obvious, asking the impertinent question. When you stop looking – or when you see only what you want – as a human being you become a stenographer.

The naturalist Annie Dillard once recalled her early ability to clearly see flying insects.

This is not as simple as it may seem. It means you are focusing on air, not on the reflective surfaces that lie beyond. Dillard spent whole summers training herself to do this. She felt that if she were going to inhabit space with other creatures, she owed them the courtesy of a “look-see.”

Of course, you have to be available to seeing in the first place. All of us start out that way. Young children are all artists with wonderfully egalitarian vision. The great Russian painter Kandinsky was floored by what he called the “universal child.” Why, he asked, why do preschool children around the world – from Eskimos to aborigines -- why do they use the same icons, the same vocabulary of basic symbols, and why is there such uniform beauty in their compositions?

Anyone who has ever been dazzled by the art that decorates first-grade homerooms may have wondered what Kandinsky did – how do we non-children recapture the art of seeing, so pure and unspoiled by personal or cultural agenda?

Moreover, how do we get the blinders off once we've put them on, once we've narrowed our focus, and chosen a path? If we're looking only to the horizon, what are we missing on either side of the road?

A few years ago, a guest on the radio show *Prairie Home Companion* told a story about a man who went to a doctor. “Doc,” he said, “I got a problem: I think I’m a moth.” And the doctor said, “I’m just a general practitioner. I think you need to see a psychiatrist.” And the

man replied, “Well, I was on my way to see him, but I noticed your light was on.”

Well, this is the way life often works. You’re on our way to something else when you find yourself drawn to an unexpected light. Now, maybe that light is just a small, flickering flame, but once it has your attention, maybe it roars up to the sky like a bonfire. Maybe it lights the way to who you were meant to be and what you were meant to do. Or maybe it doesn’t. Maybe it can’t bear the weight of your interest. Stars can seem bright in our peripheral vision, but disappear when we try to look at them directly. But it’s crazy not to try.

The whole reason we have peripheral vision is connected to our survival – back on the prehistoric savannah, things to one side that

were bright or in motion were of great interest. And they still are – or should be. So you have to welcome surprise, revel in wonder, resist the tunnel vision that seems so necessary for success.

But there's more to this seeing. While Macauley has encouraged you in countless ways to look through unprejudiced eyes, it has been no less insistent that you keep your eye on prejudice. Indeed, one of the main points of a liberal arts education at Macaulay – through your explorations of the literature, history, art and science of civilization, through your study grants abroad, through your passports to the cultural treasures of your own city, is to help you see how things connect, to create a broad understanding of – and an appreciation for – the world as people *other* than you experience it.

A few years ago, a sociologist studied the different ways in which very young children solve conflict during games. Boys, she reported, were seen quarreling all the time, and when a particularly acrimonious dispute arose, the final word was “repeat the play,” a solution designed to save the game.

In contrast, when the players were all little girls, the eruption of disputes tended to end the game. The feelings of the aggrieved parties were far more important than the outcome of the game – an unthinkable reversal of male priorities.

We all of us play different styles of baseball – and everything else. If any of you are escaping your youth without having once experienced a sense of being different, of there

being something wrong with you, then there is definitely something wrong with you.

Yet those torments of youth are adaptive: They make you more alert to the struggles of others. Again, it's about seeing – the kind of seeing we call empathy. Without empathy, the one thing we know for sure is there can be no justice. And without justice, we will continue to live in a world gone mad with grievance.

Randy Newman, the wisest of our satirists, once wrote a song about a man who walks out on his family.

“Everybody cried the night I left,” goes the lyric, “Well, almost everybody did/ My little boy just hung his head/ And I put my arm around his shoulder/ And this is what I said/ ‘I just want you to hurt like I do, / I just want you to hurt like I do, honest I do.’”

In the second verse, Newman fantasizes about calling all the people in the world together:

“I’d talk to the people and I’d say, /’It’s a rough, rough world/ and things don’t always go the way we plan/ But there’s one thing we all have in common/ And it’s something everyone can understand/ All over the world, sing along/ I just want you to hurt like I do.’”

Sound familiar? In his chilling, off-hand way, Newman had stripped the human capacity for evil down to its rawest terms. He is explaining how parents are capable of hitting their children, how husbands are capable of abusing wives, how teenagers can shoot each other on the street without a flicker of remorse, how grievance can metastasize into riots and wars and terrorism, how peoples can brutalize

each other for centuries – the endless cycling and recycling of pain: “I just want you to hurt like I do.”

That unreasoning hunger for retribution is a big reason why so much of the world lives in the shadow of fear today. And the only thing I fear more than fear itself is the righteous certainty it seems to engender. In a climate of fear, doubt can be unwelcome and faith can harden into fanaticism, and leaders can come to view themselves as the instruments of God’s will.

And yet it has always been doubt, not certainty, the constant questioning and testing of cherished assumptions, that has moved us closer to a humane and just world. To stop seeing, to stop looking for a better way, to stop trying to experience the world as others do so

as to bind us closer, is to give up on the whole idea of a better world.

We are, after all, wired for empathy. It's in our DNA. Psychologist Alison Gopnik noted this recently while defending toddlers from spurious comparisons to our president. Most children, she wrote, display altruism by the second year of life. By four, they have a "strong moral sense," understand fairness, rules, the feelings of others. Because our early survival in small social units demanded it, we're actually designed to look after each other, to share resources, to sacrifice for the common good. Empathy is a natural adaptation, and yet paradoxically, modern life is its natural enemy.

Two and a half centuries ago, well before evolutionary theory, Benjamin Franklin noticed something on the colonial frontier that utterly baffled him: the unwillingness of settlers who

had been captured during the Indian Wars, to return to their own society once they'd been accustomed to tribal life. Given a choice, they almost always preferred to live in a Stone Age village, often running back to the tribe after they'd been "rescued." As Franklin noted, this raised awkward questions about the supposed virtues of civilization, questions we wrestle with to this day.

The developed world has produced only ever-increasing isolation, where nobody depends on his neighbor for safety or sustenance or solace, where individual autonomy is prized above all else. The natural communal imperative of tribal life, the sense of purpose and belonging, where everyone has a stake in the well-being of others, is hard to replicate -- except on a personal level.

And that's my final wish for you. That in your life of seeing, you never lose sight of your tribe -- the friends you've made here. Don't let our current national tribalism give "tribe" a bad name. See to yours. And when I say see, I mean old school. I mean showing up, leaving your phone in the car, I mean whoop-filled gatherings, excessive embraces, your reassuring, here-for-you physical presence, make that happen – as often as you can. For if you nurture and cherish the relationships you have formed here, they will support you and delight you and sustain you for the rest of your lives.

In closing, let me leave you in the hands of Annie Dillard, whom I mentioned earlier. This is how she summarized her adventures in seeing:

“There are a lot of things to see,” she wrote, “Unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. If you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple. What you see is what you get.”

Thank you and best of luck.