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Head of School
Commencement Address – Class of 2016

Graduates, your Country Day experience now enters the past tense. Alumni benefits include invitations to social events across the country, bi-annual copies of *Connections* delivered to your mailbox and the right to wear blue and white proudly regardless of your university colors. And, as Mrs. Petre said beautifully in our invocation, you are always welcome to return.

Before returning, however, we ask that you leave. Seriously. We truly love you all, but we need your locker space. Especially from those of you who used four lockers this year.

When you do leave this evening, we do hope that you will begin a joyful adventure. Some advice for the trip, however. When meeting someone for the first time, you will likely be asked a certain question. After some small talk, inevitably, the person will ask, “so, where did you go to school?” In other places, this question means where did you go to college, but here in Cincinnati, it means “Where did you go to high school?”

In Cincy’s past, this query was a way to determine East Side and West Side, but today, with many schools drawing students from throughout the city, it is no longer a geographical tag but rather a way to determine what type of person they may be. This makes sense to me because it is in the years before college when you most fully develop into the person you will be.

And what type of person have you become? Indeed, the success of a school is best measured through its graduates. Tonight, the proof is in the pudding. You are a fantastic bunch. Bunch? Maybe “tribe” is a better word to describe your collective. You are 67 strong before us, but the tribe began gathering long ago. You rang in the millennium in 2000 when four of you enrolled in our early education program. By grade 3, you had swelled to 24 students. By seventh grade, your class had doubled to 47 tween-agers. When you entered the ninth grade, your class had grown 188% from grade 3.

During your years together, you showed us great success.

- You earned at high levels in the classroom and in academic competitions.
- You represented the school superbly on the fields, courts, pitches, diamonds, courses, and lanes.
- You sang, acted and performed beautifully, and created magnificent art.
- You served and donated your time, effort, and talents.

- You enjoyed each other's company.

But you have also persevered through challenges.

- You have been on the losing side of athletic contests.
- You have received grades and feedback that showed "room for growth."
- You made and broke friendships with regularity – usually with the same person.
- You lost classmates when some moved to other parts of the city, country, or world.
- And worst of all, you had to break in a new head of school during your senior year.

Your shared triumphs and failures helped you grow as a collective and learned that the development of character is not a solitary endeavor.

Poet John Donne wrote in the 17th century:

No man [or woman] is an island entire of itself; every man [or woman]
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were

What Donne meant is that we, as human beings, become the sum of the relationships we form. In today's world, inter-continental travel and digital lives may create a larger sum of relationship than found in a 17th century European village, but relationships still shape the core of our identity.

At Country Day, we define a person of character as someone who demonstrates compassion, courage, integrity, respect, and responsibility. It is through your relationships within your tribe that you have calibrated your moral compass. The truth of the moment, therefore, may be obvious but no less powerful - this will be the final time the tribe will be together in total.

Fantastic! You may say. I am ready to make new friends in college, find a job, and perhaps meet a partner and begin a family. We wish you best in these endeavors, but ask that you, please, do not do all three at once.

You will certainly increase the number of relationships in your life but here is the catch; all of these relationships will be forged after your most formative years. You are not done growing, but your character has been cast. From this point, your decisions will become increasingly solitary.

What do I mean by that? Well, for myself, I can remember one of the most important decisions I ever made after leaving my tribe (after marrying Mrs. Jaccaci, of course, but then again, we met in high school)—learning Chinese language and studying politics and economics in college. My timing was good as China began to develop quickly in the 1990s. Under the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, a nation of over 1 billion people was taking his exhortation "to get rich is glorious" to heart. I was going to follow Marco Polo to the Far East and dive, Scrooge McDuck-style, into piles of gold and treasure. Wealth beyond my dreams and all the benefits that came with! There was only one problem. I didn't want to be a businessman. I wanted to teach. I felt it was my calling.

No problem, my brain rationalized. Make millions, retire after that and then do what you want to do. That's success, isn't it? I polished up my resume, sent it to as many firms as I could and then waited for the phone to ring.

I did, in fact, receive interviews, but as I marched according to my plan, my internal compass found true North, and I was struck with a clarity of purpose. If teaching was my calling then follow that path. I did not receive suggestions from former teachers, classmates, or even my parents. I felt the decision deeply.

This was a big decision for me and my family, to be sure, but what about people who need guidance when large numbers of others are affected by their decisions.

Think of the following people: Abraham Lincoln, Ang San Suu Kyi, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Florence Nightingale, Charles Darwin, Frida Kahlo. These are individuals history has remembered because they have demonstrated character of the strongest kind in the face of challenge to the intellect, body or spirit.

Martin Luther King said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

In the future, you may find that when you need to make some of the hardest decisions in your life, either for yourself or for many others, you will feel terribly alone and isolated. Because that is where you will be – alone with your character.

Compassion, courage, integrity, respect, responsibility. As we face an increasingly changing world, these are the character traits the world desperately needs in our leaders today. Therefore, as you go forward Class of 2016, prepare to answer the question of "where did you go to school?" But when you do answer them, do not do so with words. Do so with your actions. Rely upon the training you, as a collective, have received and show your character through example. Do so with humility and grace and with power and strength. Lead through the sheer force of a life well lived. In sum, when asked, "where did you go to school?" you show them, don't tell them.

And remember, in those times when you are feeling alone, look to the right and left of you. These people may not be with you, but the character you have developed together will sustain you.

It now gives me great pleasure, Class of 2016, to say our final farewell to you this evening.

Audience, please join me in offering congratulations to the Class of 2016!