

David Maxwell  
Undergraduate Commencement  
May 13, 2012

As most of today's graduating seniors know, right after Spring Break I sent an email noting that I would be speaking for a few minutes at their Commencement exercises, and asking for suggestions—what's on their minds as they take this next step? I want to first thank the many of you who responded for your thoughtfulness, responsiveness and—most of all—for your honesty in sharing your aspirations, fears, hopes and concerns with me.

I want to provide you with a composite view of the Class of 2012 as you're about to graduate, based on what you've collectively told me (you'll note that it's a study in contradictions!): you are anxious because you don't know exactly what you're doing next and excited about the opportunities that lie ahead; you are wondering if you'll ever find a job, and you're eager to get started on your new job; you are thrilled with your acceptance into a graduate program, and fearful that you're not prepared for it; you're nervous about the uncertainty of the future, and confident that your Drake education has prepared you for anything; you are worried about work/life balance and justifiably proud of the ways in which you've managed studying, community service and recreation during your time at Drake; you can't wait to get on with the next stage of your life, and you don't want to leave all of your friends and the security of Drake behind. And I suspect that most of you are feeling *all* of these things at one time or another.

After 41 years in higher education, I think that I have both the experience and the credibility to reassure you that this is all normal, it comes with the territory – it's the simultaneous Double-A of the graduating senior: Anxiety and Affirmation. I'd be worried if you didn't feel all of these things—graduating from college and taking that next big step in your life should catalyze an avalanche of often-contradictory thoughts and feelings. The anxiety derives from uncertainty—no one really *knows* what's going to happen next, even if you think you do. The affirmation derives from your many achievements thus far, the confidence that comes from knowing that you've managed uncertainty in the past. I recognize that having the Double-A – anxiety and affirmation—both in your head at the same time can be a bit unsettling! You're human examples of quantum physics – you *can* be in two different places at the same time!

So I'd like to address the Double-A in two ways: I want to offer a few thoughts about the reality immediately ahead of you, and then—predictably, for those of you who know my background as a literature scholar—I will say a few words about creating your own narrative.

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In order to do the first, I want to share with you an excerpt from an article by Elyse Ashburn, entitled “Rhetoric vs. Reality:”

‘ . . .college prices [are] soaring, straining ‘all but the fattest family budgets,’ the curriculum [is] in disarray, students [are] graduating without the requisite skills for the job market, and recession [has] winnowed the number of jobs for the college educated.

‘For the first time since the Great Depression, numerous graduates today are standing in unemployment lines beside less-educated Americans or taking jobs for which they are conspicuously over-qualified. One recent study suggests that as much as 27 percent of the nation’s workforce may now be made up of people who are ‘overeducated’ for the jobs they hold.’

That sounds really disheartening, doesn’t it! Well, that was taken from a cover story in *Newsweek* magazine published in 1976, 36 years ago! As Ashburn goes on to point out:

Of course, the struggling youth of the 1970s, along with their slightly older compatriots, went on to remake the world of work and usher in the greatest prosperity the planet has ever seen. Along the way, they birthed the ideas of a meritocracy and a flat world.

I share this with you to emphasize a very simple, but important, fact: almost every aspect of the world around you is changing all the time, offering both challenges and opportunities—and sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference between the two. But it is clear that the students graduating from college 36 years ago in a very challenging economic environment tackled those challenges with vision, energy, creativity, optimism and enthusiasm—and they changed the world.

And I know from your responses to my request for input, and even more from the hundreds of conversations I’ve had with many of you during your time at Drake University that you have the will, the ability, the vision and the education to do exactly what those young people a generation before you did. You’re going to not only *find* opportunities in the challenges, you’re going to *make* opportunities happen. You’re going to change the world in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

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If you look at your lives as stories, as narratives—which they are—the anxiety and frustration that you are experiencing comes from the fact that you don't know the last chapter—you don't even know most of the chapters yet. John Irving, one of my very favorite contemporary American novelists, writes the final sentences of his novel first, before he's written anything else. You can do that when you're writing fiction – you can't do it when you're writing the narrative of a life not yet fully lived.

Another of my favorite writers, Kurt Vonnegut, has this to say about some beings from outer space, the Tralfamadorians, in his brilliant novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*:

All moments, past, present and future, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we [earthlings] can see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone, it is gone forever.

So, if you're troubled by anxiety because you can't see the whole mountain chain of your life from here to the end, it's because that's the stuff of fantasy and fiction—that's the world in which John Irving can see the end before he knows the beginning; that's the world in which Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians can see any moment in time they want to.

That doesn't mean that you can't write the narrative of your own life—quite the opposite: you *should* be writing that narrative. But it's a real narrative, not fiction, and it's going to have to unfold chronologically, serially, without really knowing what the last chapter will involve until you're in the midst of writing it.

But there *are* two parts of the narrative over which you have complete control: the *themes* of the narrative that is your life, and the *epilogue*. The themes are those things that define you and define your story: *you* can decide what is important to you, what your values are, what your beliefs are, how you serve others, what your purpose is, what your connectedness is to the rest of the universe. No matter what events unfold in the next chapters, no matter what characters appear to join you in the narrative, *you* are the omniscient narrator who determines those themes that hold all the chapters together—that will make it a cohesive whole, rather than a loose assemblage of disconnected events.

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What are the defining features of your life, the things that make it *matter* that you are here, the things that make you *whole*?

And while you can't be John Irving and write the last chapter first, you can draft the *epilogue*—you can write those concluding paragraphs that define the consequence a life well-lived, a life that had purpose and meaning, a life in which the human condition was enriched because you spent time on earth. Wealth, stature and power have no place in that epilogue, because they will disappear when the narrative is over. It is up to you to write a story—to live a life—whose themes, meanings, and memories endure in the lives and minds of others long after the book is closed.

If your vision today is focused not just on the day after graduation, not just on a job, or on graduate school, but on that epilogue—*who* do you want to be and *how* you will become that person, not just *what* you want to do and what you want to *have*—I am confident that you will be writing stories that you find immensely rewarding, stories for which all of us will be grateful, and that all of us will find inspiring and meaningful.

I'd like to close by sharing part of the *last* paragraph of John Irving's recent novel, *Last Night in Twisted River* (remember, that's the paragraph he wrote *first!*):

. . . but Danny knew how stories were marvels—how they simply couldn't be stopped. He felt that the great adventure of his life was just beginning...

Congratulations on the marvel of your stories, and best of luck as you continue this great adventure...