

# 2009 December Graduates Recognition Ceremony

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This is a significant milestone. Congratulations! Congratulations to *all* of you.

**Congratulations to you students.** For years here, you've persevered through ups and downs. You've learned great truths in your classrooms, and in your late night conversations with friends. You've adapted quickly to college life and, sooner than expected, you find yourself about to adapt to a new chapter of life beyond.

**Congratulations also to you parents.** Parental love is a partial mystery to our children, just as we cannot fully understand our own parents' love. As parents, we watch with wonder as our children grow, share our hearts with them - all that is most precious to us, feel a part of us go out into the world, and cheer from the sidelines. We as children owe much to our own parents, and you too deserve honor for your love, which will go on from milestone to milestone and beyond.

Big changes lie beyond this milestone. I'd like to share something with you that I share with my first-year advisees each year, that's just as applicable as you leave and start anew: If we are contemplative and honest, we see that we are indeed creatures of habit. We look to our past actions when we are faced with a situation, a challenge, a choice between alternatives, or the need for a course of action. We can be faced with relatively small decisions, like which toothpaste we reach for in the grocery store, or big decisions, like where we seek fulfillment and find purpose, what we value most deeply.

Big changes lie ahead. And big changes throw many of our habits in a blender. I would encourage you: **When your habits are thrown in a blender, consider adding something to the mix.** See change as opportunity for more change. I find that, when many superficial habits must be reformed anew, many other habits become more malleable, easier to change. This is a precious opportunity. It has been said, "First, we make our habits, and then our habits make us."

So take time regularly to be alone in prayerful contemplation. Look deeply and critically at the habits that form the building blocks of who you are. When I do, it's not a comfortable process. I lay bare my true motivations and discover ways I've been selfish, sometimes justifying my actions to myself in some selfless disguise. I see many ways I fall short of the perfection of God. We don't like to feel uncomfortable.

Big changes throw the comforts of many habits out the window. Mark Twain wrote that "Habit is habit and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time." In times of big change, I propose that habit need only get a good push to fall down the stairs of a quaking house. Embrace the discomfort of change, pop up to meta-level thinking about why we do what we do, and prayerfully consider the new habits you'll intentionally pursue. "Watch your thoughts; they become

words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become [your character].”

Again, when your habits are thrown in a blender, consider adding something to the mix.

Next, I'd like to encourage you to do something that may, at first, seem antithetical to the motto of “Do great work”: **Disappoint everyone in your life by the right amount.** It may seem odd at first to urge disappointment of others expectations, but consider the implications of a person who perceives no such disappointment:

Case 1: The person has very few people in their life and/or establishes very low expectations. They're disconnected from community and/or they're doing poor work. Much of what I believe we're here for can be summed up as *loving God and loving others as ourselves*. We should be so in touch with the needs all around us that we long for a cloning machine that would allow us to dedicate ourselves to others far beyond our few hours on this planet. We should seek our identity in the image of God, lifting our expectations higher, along with the expectations of others as well.

Case 2: A person perceiving no such disappointment may just simply not care to perceive it. Self-interest fills the entire field of vision. Some of this is encouraged by our cultural perceptions of what it means to grow up. Think of a child being able to walk on their own, a new driver gaining autonomy, a first job with a taste of financial independence, or steps towards a secure retirement. In our individualistic, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps culture, we see growing up as growing independent.

I would propose a different definition of true maturity: **Growing up is growing out.** Do take joy in your work and your learning and all that you do, but measure your maturity by the tension you feel from the needs all around you. We can't do it all. We can't be all things to all people. But we can care, and we can be wise and thoughtful in the way we spend the currency of ourselves. I submit to you that a person who, in the terms of my research discipline, allocates limited resources optimally to maximize expected utility, ... No, let's put it simply: the person who uses what they've been given for the best expected effect does great work. It's not about media recognition, level of salary or authority. It's about doing your best with all that you have and all that you are. There's a deep and subtle beauty to it. Don't be afraid to disappoint many with your best within human limitations. There are enough hours in the day to do all that you are meant to do.

Journaling can be honest or dishonest, but there are two types of journals that you keep that will tell you much about what's truly important to you: your checkbook or credit card bill, and your calendar or planner. You devote much of your energy to earning money, so these in combination speak truth to ourselves in how we indeed allocate our limited time and energy.

In conclusion, I want to encourage you to keep playing, keep learning, and keep wondering.

**Keep playing.** We have a tendency to associate play with childhood. Children play. Adults watch children play. Adults watch professionals play for them on TV and online, in the stadium, and in the theater. We tend to go from active players to passive observers. Yet play is vital to our learning

throughout our lives. Plato wrote, “Live must be lived as play.” And Diane Ackerman noted, “Play is our brain’s favorite way of learning.”

There are many forms of play, but let me focus for a moment on a favorite hobby of mine and a focus of my research: games. I enjoy games immensely, and my enjoyment is two-fold: First, each game is its own universe to be explored. Just as a child learns to walk, talk, and reason, each game invites a player to begin anew, stumbling to grasp a new world, finding ways to communicate about it, and comprehending its dynamics.

Second, games can help us know each other better. Plato also wrote, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.” In our play, we reveal how we handle risks, consider options, enjoy accomplishments, and handle disappointments. In our sportsmanship, we see what is more important to us: The players, or the play? The gamers, or the game?

**Keep learning.** Continue learning in one form or another. I like to keep a stack of cast-off intro texts by my bedside and grab whatever my brain’s craving. Discover new wonders. I’m no astronomer, but I’ve been enjoying the Orion Nebula lately in a \$50 starter scope, and enjoying teaching my kids how to find the Andromeda Galaxy with the unaided eye, subtly glowing with light from over 2.5 million years ago. Also discover dimensions of life through those around you. My wife has introduced me to chicken farming this year, as well as the vision of Heifer International. Life is rich with learning possibilities.

**Keep wondering.** Never stop asking the big questions. Why am I here? Why does this universe exist, rather than nothing at all? What should I be doing with my life? Time is precious. I hope these years have been good to you, and I sincerely hope that the years ahead are better yet.

In summary: Examine your habits in this time of change. Do your best with all of your resources, growing up by growing out. Keep playing, keep learning, and keep wondering. And again, congratulations to you, our December graduates. Thank you.

- *Todd Neller*