



EMBRACE CHALLENGE,
DISCOVER YOURSELF.

Thank you Mr. Burner, Ms. Jacobson, Dr. Rosenblum, and Mr. Zajdel. And congratulations to all of our inductees. This honor represents a remarkable achievement, made more outstanding by the circumstances in which you spent your time in high school.

I also want to take a moment to congratulate mock trial and robotics, two of our academic teams for phenomenal seasons. (Over the years, many of the cum laude inductees have participated on one of these two teams.)

When I was Head of Upper School (seems like a million years ago), I used to give a speech every year on Verdian Day. I'd take notes all year regarding what I might want to talk about, and then I'd start writing it around spring break, and everyone in my family had to endure this lengthy process. Just over this past spring break I was saying to my mother what a relief it was that I no longer had to spend break writing that speech or getting ready for awards day.

But it is my firm belief, and here's maybe my only piece of advice to all the cum laude recipients, and everyone else in this room – that if someone hands you the mic, you always take it. You don't get a lot of chances to in life to speak in front of a live 400+ person audience, so don't pass them by.

When Ms. Jacobson asked if I would do this two weeks ago, I said that I would **love** to do it. Then, I bemoaned my fate for a few days, and reflected on the fact that if my ego wasn't so wrapped up in this, I might have said no.

Ah well. Here I am. Here we are. And hopefully, it goes okay for all of us. (It's not that long. I don't believe a movie should be longer than 90 minutes and don't think a speech should go much over 10 minutes.)

When I used to write speeches, I was always teaching sophomore English, and I saw it as a chance to refer to texts that students had in common at this school, and also I used it as a sort of review prior to the final exam for my students. So, I would talk about a few characters or some poetry and connect it to a current event or idea. (They were actually pretty formulaic.)

But I don't really teach a lot of literature any more. Instead, what we've been thinking about all year in AP Seminar: English 10 is research and rhetoric, and it turns out, I have some stuff to say about this as well. (Side note – AP Seminar students, pay attention to which rhetorical devices I'm using throughout this speech. We can talk about in class. And you can tell me what worked and what didn't.) So, you've heard a little about me – your author. The context is a cum laude induction ceremony. The audience is an interesting combination of cum laude inductees, their families and the rest of the upper school. Finally, we have to consider purpose. This gave me pause. What is the purpose of the cum laude speech? Am I trying to persuade? Entertain? Give advice? Deliver a personal didactic narrative? And honestly, I'm not sure. Maybe by the end you can tell me.

What do we mean by rhetoric? A basic answer is that rhetoric has to do with the art of persuasion, and this has major implications. We use language to construct identity, build social groups, effect change. Often, rhetoric is about power. And in a democracy, rhetoric is about political power. Why? Because you have to be able to convince people to support your law, or sign your petition, or vote for you. Maybe another way to



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think about rhetoric is as the intentional use of language to achieve some result – which means it covers pretty much everything – from texts on your phone to texts like the Constitution of the US.

People who are very good at using language to achieve some result can sometimes be viewed in a cynical light. Lobbyists, trial lawyers, politicians can all seem mercenary at times – meaning they are paid to use language to pull the levers of power. And this view has a very long history.

For example, who is the best rhetorician in *Paradise Lost*? Who is the best at persuading others?

In fact, I learned this year, that in book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, Satan’s seduction of Eve maps perfectly on to Aristotle’s structure of a classical argument: Introduction, background and justification, claims, counterclaims, conclusion. Milton puts the greatest powers of persuasion into Satan’s mouth, comparing him to “some orator renowned/ in Athens or free Rome, where eloquence/ flourished,” showing us what **he** thinks about the art of rhetorical persuasion.

And going back to around 380 BC Athens, in one of **his** most passionate and personal dialogues, “Gorgias,” Plato writes of Socrates’ interaction with some of the most prominent rhetoricians of his day. In this dialogue, Plato’s abhorrence of rhetoric is abundantly clear. According to Angie Hobbs, Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy at Sheffield University in the UK (what a cool title, btw, I know a few people who would want that job) this is in part because of his belief that Socrates was put to death due to the persuasive arguments brought against him. Truth was ignored and language was used to achieve an unjust end.

In fact, in the dialogue, it is clear that Plato sees rhetoric as the enemy of the truth – just a way to convince people of your claim regardless of what the truth is. Plato champions subtle dialogue, with constant questioning, as the way of reaching the elusive truth, while rhetoric is portrayed as more of a blunt weaponized type of speech used to push people to accept your argument against their best interests.

And yet the 1st quarter of the 21st century has shown us that truth is a remarkably slippery concept. Both sides often believe they have special access to the truth, and there is no agreed upon authority who determines the truth.

What we have is our judicial system, our messy, flawed, laws, litigators, judges and juries of our peers. It could be argued that our judicial system, which we borrowed from English Common Law when this country was founded, is the real reason our young democratic republic flourished when so many other fledgling democracies falter. The recent case *Dominion Voting Systems v. Fox News Network* shows us that when two versions of reality are presented, we have our judicial system as remedy. It isn’t perfect, but it’s what we’ve got. And the pandemic shows us that even **that** most revered repository of truth -- “science” -- doesn’t always carry the day. Why? turns out numbers alone don’t persuade most of us. The “data-story” matters. And to construct the data story, you need rhetoric.



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The last 20 years have shown us that you can have all the logic and data in the world, but as ee cummings says, “since feeling is first . . .” we need data stories – appeals to emotion to win arguments. But we also need to know when people are using the rhetorician’s bag of tricks to manipulate us so we don’t succumb to faulty logic, charlatan experts, and exploitative appeals to emotion.

Research and statistics can also be abused and misinterpreted and weaponized- “it’s research based” becomes a magic panacea, or a cloak of invisibility, or a desperate wish that something is solid and a foundation of truth sits somewhere in a pile of spreadsheets.

And so, what we all need to be trained in is critical thinking, meaning we need to know how to debunk inadequate research studies used to prop up policies, initiatives, and interventions that rest more on opinion rife with confirmation bias than solid research.

Finally, as daily discourse gets more contentious, we hear more about the importance of people getting in a room and telling each other their stories. In fact, we are hosting an event here this evening where folks will share stories regarding belonging at Nichols. The idea here is that we really get to know one another and so have a more nuanced understanding of why people may disagree with us or feel strongly about something that doesn’t matter so much to us. At this event, there will be more questions than answers, so it seems as if this sort of discourse falls more on the side of Plato’s truth-seeking dialogue than self-serving rhetoric. And yet, if we return to my opening basic definition of rhetoric as the intentional use of language to achieve some result, doesn’t dialogue fall within that category? **How** you tell your story matters. Dr. Alexander asked me to share something this evening, and I am absolutely thinking about the words and sentences that I will use to do that.

Research and rhetoric **can** be used to manipulate – and they often are – but they can also be used to move people in an ethical direction.

In fact, in the end, rhetoric and research may be all the fragments that we have left to shore against our ruins.

Cum laude inductees of the class of 2023, I hope that we are sending you out into the world ready to cast a cold eye on weaponized statistics, self-help books, cure-alls, and speeches such as this. If you were sitting here thinking of all the ways you could shred this address, good. Then we have done our job.