

Graduation 2017

Faculty Speaker Jermaine Thibodeaux

History Teacher and Dorm Associate

Special guests, beloved parents, esteemed faculty and staff...and most importantly, the dashing dynamic (and extraordinarily woke class of 2017!)

Thank you...

Thank you for two things actually:

First, for rigging and hacking the vote to ensure that I received 115 of the available 87 student votes to be named faculty speaker at this year's graduation. Well done, comrades! Well done.

Secondly, I am profoundly moved that you have entrusted me, yes me, with 8 long minutes of one of the most important and certainly unforgettable days of your lives. In all seriousness, I will try my absolute best to make the next 7.8 minutes the scariest for Jane Moulding and the administration. I can say whatever I want.

No, I promise to be good and play nice.

Ironically, I have now given seven graduation speeches in my teaching career, though I never attended my own high school or college graduations. Despite these personal failures, as some might label them, I recognize just how special these occasions truly are. So, here I stand with a mix of emotions. I feel the joy and excitement reverberating under the tent. There is indeed a small dose of fear running through my veins. And as usual, there is an abiding somberness looming over this ceremony as well. You're all leaving me here...in the sunken place.

But again, today, is a big deal. Today is your big day. This moment, this solemn rite of passage, is indeed an awesome turning point in your young adult lives. And it should probably exceed or rank right up there with the moment when your crush slid into your DMs and asked you to become bae. This moment is huge. Just like that. This moment is transformative. Just like that.

Now, many of you have approached me, even threatened me--to name drop or to put on an all out comedy show filled with my typical sarcasm, snark, irreverence, shade, and of course, brutal compassion. Unfortunately, that Jermaine is still at home sleeping (or eating!). So today, instead, you get Aristotelian Jermaine. Or, Chocolate Plato, to some. He is rather deep, contemplative, erudite, and yes, cheesy. Sorry, but your parents and grandparents are present.

Though I am right in the prime of my Black Don't Crack phase of my life, I am still old enough to have learned a few valuable lessons along my journey up to this point. So, in keeping with what I believe is the purpose of these remarks, I would like to offer you some free, yes, free, because your parents have certainly paid enough!, advice-- or, a few pearls of wisdom about life in the hereafter, or from this moment forward. See, I can philosophy.

So in the tradition of a proud southern Baptist, I'll tell you what I intend to say, then I'll say it, and like nearly every Baptist preacher promises on Sunday morning, I'll say it and get out of the way!

My message to you, the class of 2017, is quite simple. And judging from many of our past classes together, I know how important it is for me to be brief yet impactful. Unfortunately, history teachers love to talk...and we *really* enjoy venturing on tangent after tangent. Any memories of these?

So, what are the two invaluable nuggets (food reference!) that I think you should carry into the world beyond CSW. The answer is two-fold: chart your pathway and in the revised words of Kendrick Lamar, "Be Nice."

Undoubtedly, I encourage each of you to write your own life stories, unapologetically, with limited parameters *yet* with ample room for revision. By write, I merely mean, know that you are the author of this great narrative called your life. It is only beginning to take shape from this day onward. You wield a powerful pen. And with the passage of time, you will compose every paragraph, every page, every chapter by your deeds and actions. So make them count. Again, you are in full control. Some of you may be familiar with the poem "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley in which he proclaims,

*I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.*

While we all get help from others along the way, we are each the authors of our own fates, and thus ultimately responsible for much of how our lives unfold. Don't spend precious life moments attempting to live someone else's dream for you. Waste no energy bending or conforming to other's visions or dreams FOR you. Remember, *you* get to write this singular story. And while others may offer clever ideas, suggestions, or even type a few pages for you (see what I did there! No comment), just recognize that the final product is ultimately yours, and most importantly, *you* will need to be most content with this finished, grand narrative. Know that it is totally acceptable to atone and revise past mistakes or oversights while writing this book. These bold actions make you a stronger, more thoughtful "writer" for sure. But they also attest to your resilience as a human being.

Growing up, many people had big dreams for me. I was destined for the Supreme Court according to my elementary school teachers...and then, life happened. Well, life according to my rules happened. After feeling intense pressure to take the law school route, my college advisor, the famed historian Mary Beth Norton of Cornell, stared at me while eating a chocolate chip cookie and suggested that I try my hand at teaching. She thought I'd be good at it. I didn't. I tried it. I liked it. I left it. And then returned. See, Professor Norton gave me that little nudge, or even planted an idea for one chapter of my larger life story. But without a doubt, I wrote that chapter on my own. And with the passage of time, I continue to draft additional chapters. And hopefully by the middle of this book, which is still in progress, I'll be an acclaimed southern historian at an elite university, teaching one seminar a year with the most brilliant and eager students. One can only dream. Yet, this is the story I am writing. Now ask yourself, what will MY story look like. There's no better time to begin pre-writing and drafting than during those long four years of college. Use that time wisely and explore topics, experiences, and even people.

Now, be more cautious and discerning when exploring the latter! Remember, I said revisions are nice, but who likes retractions? Know what I mean?

Just know that you play an immensely powerful role in shaping both your present and future. Use that power wisely and again, write the most phenomenal story possible. You are the captain of this ship.

My next bit of advice to each of you is to simply recognize and embrace your humanity and the humanity of others. To some extent, this is what you have done consistently during your time here at CSW. Continue along this path. I don't believe this demands further elaboration. Just know that this suggestion is nothing more than the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. We all learned this in kindergarten and it bares repeating at various stages in our lives. You are on your way to encounter a bigger, bolder, and different world. You'll need to invoke this principle at nearly every turn. So let it guide you through some of life's difficult moments, and should you heed this advice, I am certain that you will end up on the proper side of any situation. In short, be kind, be human.

Now, on a personal note, I remain genuinely in awe of this class. And while I have been advised not to do personal shout outs, those of you in the larger boarding community (my Barn girls in particular), those zany Borders, Black Studies, Modern Africa and Markets classes know that you all hold a piece of my heart...no matter how tiny. The clowns, the Junior Statesmen bunch, the bruhs of Men of Color, the residents Warren and Trap and all of you, those of you who have made me a fixture in your Snap stories and those of you who takeover the library and litter that space with your naughty language and off-key singing, you all have made me grow to love CSW all the more. You all have embraced me with open arms and have accepted my flaws and idiosyncrasies as a teacher and person in ways that I believed impossible for seemingly self-absorbed high schoolers. For that, I truly, truly love you and envy your patience. But most importantly, you have allowed me one of the greatest privileges any teacher could ask for, and that is the opportunity to not only watch but to participate in your growth and blossoming into sophisticated, thoughtful, kind, delightful and compassionate young adults. Each of you have made this place all the more magical by blessing us with your many talents and gifts over the last four years. Your cosmopolitanism, intellectualism, creative excellence and social justice DNA, have laid a surest foundation for the remaining underclassmen and have made my fellow faculty colleagues and I both proud and grateful to have played just a minor part in your development. You all have our confidence as you move on to the next chapter and we welcome visits and the occasional note. Just don't try to follow us on Facebook or IG.

So as you prepare to move forward in your lives, never forget to look and reach back to the people and the experiences that propelled you forward. The Cambridge School is now an indelible part of your grand narrative. Claim it with unimpeachable pride and represent it with the fiercest of loyalty. We are.

Godspeed, Class of 2017. You da best!

Thank you.