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Don't Ask Yourself What the World Needs

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Baccalaureate Address
Connecticut College
Saturday, May 16th, 2009
Noah Silverman '04

“Don’t Ask Yourself What the World Needs”

Good afternoon. I’d like to thank Dean Highbaugh, Rabbi Rosenberg, Laurie McGrath, the Baccalaureate Committee, and most importantly, the members of the class of 2009 for inviting me and allowing me to speak today. It is really an honor and a pleasure for me to be here. I served on the Baccalaureate Committee for my graduation in 2004, and I remember the conversations we had about whom to select as our speaker at the ceremony. I remember that we were looking for somebody who would be dynamic and engaging, but also convey the spirit of reflection and contemplation appropriate to this particular ceremony. I think most of all, we were looking for someone who could convey a little bit of wisdom. Naturally, we looked to the faculty, and Professor Zimmer addressed my class that day.

So, honestly, I was pretty surprised when Dean Highbaugh called me last fall to say that they had decided to ask alumni to speak, and that I had been chosen. What wisdom do I have to share with this year’s graduating class, I wondered? Initially, I thought I would talk about religious pluralism, as what I do professionally is travel from college to college and give speeches and workshops on interfaith cooperation and religious pluralism. The more I thought about it, however, the more I tried to remember what I was feeling as I was preparing to graduate five years ago and what people said to me then that has helped me on my way. As I put myself back in that place, I remembered that there was really one overwhelming feeling that dominated my thoughts that spring – I was freaking out – and I remember one speaker who said something that helped me not freak out as much and has made a difference in my life. So that’s what I’ll try

to offer you today: a little bit of why I was freaking out, and maybe why I was right to do so, and some advice that may help you on your way.

So, why was I freaking out? I had taken a year off between high school and college, so by my senior year most of my high school friends had already graduated. I remember visiting with one of them over winter break that year and he asked me, “So, has the Terror set in yet?” And he said it in this way that made it clear that “Terror” was spelled with a capital “T.” I laughed and said I didn’t know what he was talking about, but a few short months later, I sure did. I was freaking out because I felt like all of a sudden I had to figure out what to do with “The Rest of My Life” (also all capitalized). The “bubble” of college was ending and I needed to get ready to enter “the Real World.” On top of that, there was all this stuff that I thought I was supposed to learn in college and here I was months away from graduating and I didn’t know half of it. In addition to all that, it was March and I had barely started writing my thesis. I’m sure some of this sounds familiar.

So, after five years of life in the so-called “Real World,” I can tell you there is good news and there is bad news about life after college. I’ll start with the bad news.

Unfortunately, not all the anxiety about college ending is unfounded. The bad news is that when college ends, things do change. All of a sudden, there aren’t whole departments and full time staff dedicated to making each aspect of your life as easy as possible. In the “Real World,” if you have a problem with a roommate, there isn’t a Residential Life Director who will listen to your complaints and try to relocate you. In the “Real World,” if you feel discriminated against because of your race, gender, age, or religion, there isn’t a Multicultural Life Director who will talk with you about how to improve things in your community or workplace. And probably most likely, in the “Real World,” if you turn in an assignment, not only do you not get a

grade relatively instantly to let you know how you're doing, but if you aren't doing well, your boss doesn't necessarily have office hours to help you figure out how to do better.

Ok, that was the bad news. Here comes the good news: You don't have to figure out what you're going to do with the rest of your life and you don't have to figure out what the world needs you to do. You don't even necessarily have to figure out what you're going to do next fall, or worry that if it's not enrolling in an Ivy League grad school or starting a position with a top-notch investment bank that you've wasted your six-figure education. For my part, when I graduated, I moved home, lived with my parents, and worked in a bookstore. That wasn't the only option that I had at the time, and it wasn't the one that seemed most in line with my aspirations to make a difference in the world, but it proved to be the right one. It was the right one because here is what you do need to figure out: you need to figure out what you're passionate about, and for me, moving home allowed me to do that.

As I said, I first heard this good news from a speaker who came to campus during my senior year. That speaker's name was Eboo Patel and he is the founder and executive director of a non-profit called the Interfaith Youth Core, where a year after graduation I ended up getting a job and have now worked for the past four years. Back then, while giving a talk on a new movement called Social Entrepreneurship and how to figure out what to do with one's life, Eboo, who, by the way, is a classic rock devotee, said, "It's real tempting for activists and do-gooders to spend a lot of time thinking about what the world needs and what they owe the world. Let me tell you something, if Jimmy Hendrix had decided as a young man that what the world needed was more teachers, and had gone to join Teach for America (if it had existed at the time), everyone would have lost out. Jimmy Hendrix was meant to play the guitar, and he played it as well as anyone. That was his gift to the world and it was his job to figure that out and do it."

Now, maybe it's because I'm a classic rock fan myself, but I distinctly remember Eboo sharing that story and the relief and optimism I felt when I heard it, and I've taken it with me ever since. So a few months ago when I came across the quotation by the civil rights leader Howard Thurman that is printed in your program, I decided I had found what I wanted to talk about. Dr. Thurman said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

I think that quote speaks volumes about what you ought to be thinking about as you graduate from Connecticut College, though I might make an addendum to it. I might say, "If you're spending all your time asking what the world needs, don't. Ask yourself what makes you come alive. But if you *aren't* asking yourself what the world needs, then you should be." The world right now is in trouble. And it's always been in trouble, and it's always tempting for every generation to think that what they've inherited is so much worse or so much more dire than what their parents did, and I don't know if that is true or not. But I do know that the world is confronting a whole lot of challenges right now, and I know that, honestly, it is up to us to address them. And by us, I specifically mean the young adults in this room. I think one of the most exciting things that is happening in the world right now is the role that young people are playing in shaping its future, and I think if you look at recent history you'll see that when young people start playing a large role, great social change is possible.

You probably already know that Dr. King was only 26 years old when he became the spokesperson for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. And you may even know that the Dalai Llama was only 18 years old when China invaded Tibet and he had to lead his people into exile and began his lifelong struggle for liberation. And perhaps you knew that Dr. King's hero and deep

inspiration, Mohandas Gandhi, was 21 years old when he started organizing for Indian civil rights, first in South Africa, and then went on to lead the Indian independence movement. But what I want to make sure you know is that not only was the leadership of the greatest movements for human freedom, justice, and equality in the 20th century remarkably young – and we could also mention folks like Dorothy Day, Jane Addams, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and many others – but the movements themselves were largely made up of young people. And we may disagree about his politics and policies, and that’s good and healthy, but I think it’s worth noting that the movement that brought the first African-American president into office was a movement of young people. Having grown up in Hyde Park in Chicago, where President Obama lives, I know many of those young people personally. It is people our age, in their twenties, who organized for him across the country and it is folks our age who are currently serving as chief speech writer, Director of the Office for Neighborhood and Community Partnerships, Deputy Secretary of the Interior, and on and on...

So I think you should ask yourself what the world needs because the world has serious problems, but more importantly, I think you should ask yourself what the world needs because, believe it or not, you can do something about it. And not in ten or twenty or thirty years, after accumulating several more letters after your name and working your way up from the bottom to the top of a law firm or investment bank or non-profit agency. You can do something for the betterment of the world pretty much today.

How? By following Dr. Thurman’s advice. “Ask yourself what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” What makes you come alive? What gifts has God or nature or happenstance, or however you explain it, given you? Do you love cooking? Then go and bake and sauté and grill your heart out. Do you love

making and watching films? Then go to Hollywood, or Bollywood, and try your darndest to make that dream come true. Do you love making money? Then go and make lots and lots of money. And have faith that in doing so you will make the world a better place.

I used to feel quite differently about the moneymakers. I used to think that investment bankers and corporate executives were sell-outs who cared more about themselves than the world. But I was dead wrong. You know what caused me to change my mind? When I started working for a non-profit agency dedicated to combating religious intolerance and violence and I quickly realized that my salary was paid for by corporate executives who had made lots of money and were now giving it to my organization and others to do the good work we were doing. We need people who are good at making lots of money to fix the world, because fixing the world isn't cheap and someone has to pay for it.

Figure out what really, truly, makes you come alive and do that. I really believe that, perhaps counter-intuitively, it is the most selfless thing you can do. You'll quickly realize that everyone likes being in the company of people who are doing what they're meant to do. You can sense it. Everyone wants to be with people whom they believe are being true and authentic. Think of your favorite artist or musician, I'm positive what attracts you to their music or art is that you believe them. When I hear Bono sing, I want to sing along because I believe that Bono believes it and is doing what he is meant to do. And I happen to like President Obama because I believe him too, and I'm sure that if you feel differently it's because you don't believe him. Authenticity is the most important trait to nurture in your life.

So, in closing, I'll share what has made me come alive. Before I started at Connecticut College, I spent a year living in Israel/Palestine, and while there I made Israeli friends and I made Palestinian friends. The only catch was that they weren't friends with each other and pretty

quick they wanted me to pick sides too. It's a long story, but the short version is that I decided I shouldn't have to do that. There ought to be a way for a young American Jew to believe in the State of Israel and in the existence of a free and independent Palestine. There ought to be a way to remain loyal to multiple groups. So I set out to do that, and Connecticut College helped me significantly on my way. As I said, I now work for the Interfaith Youth Core, an organization that is dedicated to helping young people from different religious traditions – including no tradition at all – interact peacefully and cooperatively, rather than murder each other to the soundtrack of prayer, because sadly, it is people our age who are doing most of the fighting and the killing and the dying in religious conflicts around the world. In Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Israel/Palestine, in Sri Lanka, the combatants are almost always younger than the graduates in this room.

I mentioned that the greatest movements for human equality and justice in the 20th century were youth movements. They were also religious movements, something that many often forget. Without Jesus, there is no King and no Southern Christian Leadership Council, no Archbishop Tutu and no Forgiveness Theology, no Dorothy Day and no Catholic Worker Movement. Without Hinduism, there is no Gandhi and no *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, no *satyagraha*, or truth force. Without Islam there is no Badshah Khan, Gandhi's senior advisor in the Indian independence movement, and no Aga Khan Foundation, one of the largest players in international development in the world. So when you hear people like Bill Maher or Christopher Hitchens, or my friend and father-in-law – who is here with us today – say that “religion is the source of so many of humanity's problems,” you can share with them that it has also been the source of so much of what is right with humanity. We just have to help it in the right direction.

So, that has been my passion: trying to help people figure out how to maintain their own unique identity and simultaneously reach out to others who hold radically different views and nonetheless work together for a better society.

I have a friend who is trying to make it in Hollywood. Sometimes when we talk, he asks me how “saving the world” is going and jokes self-deprecatingly that all he does is spend his day writing scripts for “Run’s House” on MTV (which, by the way, is scripted even though it purports to be “Reality TV”). But he knows and I know that he is trying to do what makes him come alive, and that is all I’m trying to do too, and so it doesn’t matter that he makes more money than I do or that people may perceive my work to be more respectable. Life’s biggest challenge is finding out what you’re really passionate about, and in that endeavor we truly are all equals and all sisters and brothers. So may you find the strength, and the wisdom, and the grace to find out what makes you come alive and go and do that. Because the world needs you to come alive.

Thank you for listening.