

# TAFT COMMENCEMENT

REMARKS BY WILLIAM R. MACMULLEN '78  
HEADMASTER

MAY 30, 2009

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## “The Risk Takers”

It is so difficult to capture the essence of a class, and perhaps I should resist the urge. But that's what you do: a class becomes a single living thing, a being—with its attendant strengths and frailties. When I asked seniors what made this group unique, I heard this: “We are outspoken and fearless... [and also] reliable friends, dedicated scholars, and active participants”; “We move forward even in tough times”; “We are driven, we are stubborn and we don't accept failure”; “We are independent and bold, powerful thinkers and advocates for free will.”

The poet would say you were like flint and steel, hard-edged and sharp, and throwing sparks, then flame, then warmth, like Thursday night. You were like an August thunderstorm, your years a single hour that sees a full display of power: potent charge and released energy, flashes of lightning, rumbles of thunder, the arcing rainbow of today.

I think you have been like some large, loud family, in a small car, on a long drive: a lot of love, a lot of noise. At times I wanted to turn around to the back seat and say, “We're almost there!” You fought with each other, the way strong, smart siblings do, each of you convinced you were right. When the faculty said, “I think we are going to turn to the left,” you said, “The right looks kind of interesting, too.” And you asked tough questions, as if to say, “You have trained us to be critical thinkers: well, here I am, thinking and critical.” You asked us to do our best teaching. So we have been rolling along together, going places we have never been, and now we've arrived. I can't tell you how glad I am we took the trip together.

This class? They are risk-takers: really bold, drawn to challenges in all areas. One of them signs his emails, “I ain't neva scared.” Last weekend, a couple of girls got in a car and drove to Vermont and ran a marathon. On Senior Skip Day, one boy was out on a 50-mile bike ride by 9 a.m. Several others went skydiving. Now that is a metaphor that says it all. And, by the way, it lets me repeat the advice I gave Thursday in Morning Meeting: seek risks, go fast but be safe.

They are very, very bright. Crowded at the top of the class are some of the most powerful intellects we have ever seen. It is not a surprise that their college results were extraordinary and that our nation's top universities were competing for them.

They are incredibly engaged and active, debating, asking questions and taking part in the dialogue of literature, politics, history, current events and global citizenship. Several did extremely thoughtful work in feminist studies. Many began journeys into human rights that will continue, I am sure, for many years. Some shaped the dialogue about environmental stewardship; others led a provocative conversation about sexual, racial or religious identity. Still more observed, debated and took part in the presidential election, loud voices heard from both sides of the aisle.

They made very funny movies and wrote edgy poetry, powerful fiction and original drama. They created beautiful sounds and played to audiences around the world. They did things in the athletic arena that were inspiring. And they served in the neighborhoods and around the globe, fiercely determined to act out our school motto.

They are as persevering and resilient as any group I have seen here. When they erred, they learned; when they were set back individually, they rose up together. When they were wounded, they healed each other.

I have thought about this group of young men and women constantly, and I think that the Class of 2009 will write a legacy that is unique. I have a prediction of all of you, and I am willing to be specific. Hold me to this. This I believe:

I believe that in disproportionate numbers in four areas you will...

- Be engaged in the civic process: voting in elections, running for office, active in local governance and sitting on the judicial bench;
- publish research papers, screenplays, poetry and novels;
- lead in venture and entrepreneurial enterprises;
- be committed to service, finding ways to serve and solve problems in small and large ways, here and on foreign soils;

But me making a prediction does not mean this will happen.

Many of you know a recently published book, Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers: The Theory of Success*. Gladwell takes on a fascinating question: how do we explain why some people become far more successful in a field than anyone else? What accounts for these "outliers," like Bill Gates, the rock group The Beatles, today's most decorated athletes and successful lawyers? Gladwell tells us that the very successful people did not achieve what they did because they were inherently smarter or more talented than the next person. Instead, he argues that two things happen. First, these outliers had some fortunate accident of timing, of history and place—they lived in a moment where they were offered the unique conditions that led to the possibility success. And second, they worked harder than anyone else, what he calls "the 10,000 hour rule."

If you did not live at that time and place, and if you did not put in the hours, you would miss the chance—no matter how talented you were.

Something in me says that this year is one of those potent years, and I think history will prove that this class has a lot of outliers in it. Some combination of the world outside these walls—the economic storm, the shifting sands of global relations, the winds of technological change—and the experience of these seniors in this school has created a singular moment, akin to what Gladwell describes.

I like to think that twenty years from now, we will look at where this class is, and at what they are doing, and we will say, "Well, you had to be at Taft at that moment, and you had to work hard, but if you did? Well, then: you had the chance to become an outlier."

If I am right, seniors, you have been given an opportunity that is staggering, and I hope you realize it. If I am right, you'll carry the lessons of Taft like DNA. If I am right, you will need to work really hard in the years ahead. And if I am right, you might serve and better our world, and this destiny that is both daunting and thrilling. It is that destiny that lies just beyond that arch.