

John Adams Academy
Commencement Address
28 May 2021
Terrence O. Moore, Ph.D.

Thank you. It is an honor to be here.

This morning I had an opportunity to meet your children, to meet these graduating scholars, and hear about what books they've most enjoyed, some of their plans, and also the true art of the fist bump, which I am severely unschooled in and still need to work on.

When I got back to my hotel, I did what any modern person does. I did not pick up my copy of Don Quixote, which I hope to read, all 800 pages in Spanish, which is a Quixotic project. No, I opened up my laptop to catch up. One thing I force myself to do every morning before I get consumed in e-mail and Zoom meetings is look at a website called Word Project, which has a daily verse of the Bible, and has the Bible in about forty languages, so besides working on my Biblical literacy, I also work on my mediocre French and very poor Spanish. The only reason I tell you this is because sometimes I'm rather shocked at how this verse of the day hits home. And today it was from Isaiah 50:4:

The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know
how so speak a word in season to him that is weary.

And I thought, "uh-oh. I'm supposed to have the tongue of the learned. So I better figure out how to say something in season—which I think means spot on and that hits home—to those who are weary." No pressure. Now let me just confirm something. Y'all have read a lot of books and done a lot of work at John Adams, haven't you? (Thumbs up or nod.) Do you count yourselves among the weary? Parents, let me ask y'all: are y'all a little bit weary? Well, I hope so. If you're not breathing hard at the end of a Marathon, that means you didn't run very hard. (Every one of those scholars is thinking: yeah, but what happened to the first Marathon runner, Philippides, bringing news of the victory at Marathon back to Athens? We won't say.)

So let's try: to say something both learned and in season.

Graduation is a culmination of a lot of hard work, allows us to see the results of our hopes, dreams, and replaces the gotta-do's with the "I've made its." More than that, graduation is a vindication of the particular enterprise these students and their teachers have embarked upon—if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

For example, these curious words that we only encounter at ceremonies such as these: *valedictorian* and *salutatorian*. Pardon me if y'all already know this, but it deserves an annual mention.

The word *salutatorian* derives from two words: *salve*, (plural, *salvete*) is a term of greeting used by the Romans, which means not so much "hello" as *be well*, or *be healthy*. And *salve* is very close to the noun *saluto*, the greeting, from which we derive the word *salute*, as a military salute.

Salut, in French means *health*, often in conjunction with holding up a glass. Parents, this evening, or when things settle, I strongly urge you to hold up just such a glass and salute each other for the work you have done over the last 18 years.

The word *valedictorian* derives from the Latin verb *valeo*, *valere*, *valui*, which means, to be well, to be strong, to have weight or influence, to succeed, to be valued (which is where we get the word *value* from). *Vale* was thus the way the Romans said good-bye, farewell. Literally, they were saying *be strong, have weight*.

And that is what we do with young folks, isn't it? We invite them into life, or into a school. We want to ensure they are doing well, give them the care that will make them healthy. Then we send them back into the world one day, saying to them, "be strong."

The way we greet each other, as the way we treat each other, speaks volumes of what we think of life.

I'd like to talk a little about that very thing today, to use this opportunity to ask, as a great leader of this nation once did, where are we, and whither are we tending. What is this world we are sending these young people into? What is the torch they will bear? Of course, in keeping with the classical ideal I need to go back a ways to put things in perspective.

I shall read from a letter dated 12 October 1755. This was a *letter*: not a text or a tweet or a meme or a post. No hashtags, nor emoticons. But a letter, written with a quill and ink. It was long letter, of which I shall only excerpt a portion. It was a letter written by a twenty-year-old, so just a couple of years older than these graduates, to a friend. It begins:

If we look into history, we shall find some nations rising from contemptible beginnings, and spreading their influence till the whole globe is subjected to their sway. When they have reached the summit of grandeur, some minute and unsuspected cause commonly effects their ruin, and the empire of the world is transferred to some other place. Immortal Rome was at first but an insignificant village, inhabited only by a few abandoned ruffians; but by degrees rose to a stupendous height, and excelled in arts and arms, all the nations that preceded it. But the demolition of Carthage . . . by removing all danger, suffered it to sink into a debauchery, and made it at length an easy prey to barbarians.

England, immediately upon this, began to increase . . . in power and magnificence, and is now the greatest nation upon the globe. Soon after the Reformation, a few people came over into this new world for conscience sake. Perhaps this apparently trivial incident may transfer the great seat of empire into America. It looks likely to me: for if we can remove the turbulent Gallicks [French], our people, according to the exactest computations, will in another century become more numerous than England itself. Should this be the case, since we have, all the naval stores of the nation in our hands, it will be easy to obtain the mastery of the seas; and then the united force of Europe will not be able to subdue us. The only way to keep us from setting up for ourselves is to disunite us. *Divide et impera*. . . . (Latin for divide and rule).

Such are the reflections of a recent college graduate. Now, any guesses as to who wrote this—at age 20? Of course. John Adams.

The letter does not stop there. The young John Adams explained that these reflections derived from the town he was living in (Worcester, Mass. pop. 1500), which had become “*immersed in politics*.” That should not surprise us since the events that prompted these reflections surrounded what was known as the French and Indian War (Seven Years’ War in Europe) started by shots fired by a party commanded by none other than the young George Washington.

In other words, as the young John Adams was watching and trying to figure out the world, he was still reading and thinking about *the Classics*.

Adams adds these further reflections in writing to his friend Nathan Webb a former classmate:

Friendship is one of the distinguishing glories of man From this (friendship) I expect to receive the chief happiness of my future life; and am sorry that fortune has thrown me at such a distance from those of my friends who have the highest place in my affections.

I bring up this point since there are two things I learned from students this morning. First, they like C.S. Lewis, and, second, they like their friends they have made here at John Adams. May I recommend C.S. Lewis’s reflections on friendship his book, *The Four Loves*?

Now, what are we to make of this letter and what relevance it might bear to us, as well as a few other pointers we might glean from the young John Adams? Can we learn from this founder of our nation, almost two-and-a-half centuries later?

Allow me to say just a couple of things about John Adams at this time in his life.

He was two or three years older than these graduates are because those few young men who went to college back then usually went when younger. He had just graduated from Harvard, whose curriculum, interestingly enough, was a lot closer to what these students have been pursuing the last four years than what that august institution currently serves up in the name of a liberal education. And he had taken on the job of a **schoolmaster**. Why? Because he loved children? No. Because he wanted to change the world by cultivating young minds and hearts? No. Because he wanted to return favor for the education he had received? No. He was a schoolmaster because he needed the money and he hadn’t yet decided what career to pursue, of which there were really three options for college graduates, the so-called liberal professions, or, in the words of Willie and Waylon, doctors and lawyers and such, the *such* being a preacher. And if you hadn’t settled on one of those three, you became a schoolmaster.

Why do I bring this up?

What will be the most asked question of many of these students about three months from now or a couple of years when they are in a four-year college? *What's your major? What's your major? What's your major?*

So frequently is it asked, with an assumption built into it, that *not* to have a major seems unprepared and irresponsible.

Further, the implication is, once you have chosen your major, you're done with all that prerequisite stuff, and now you can get on with your life. Drop your heavy pack, and pick up another, lighter, more practical pack, and never go back for the first pack. Moreover, the assumption and standard practice is, once you are pursuing that major, you have nothing to say to those other subjects ever again. Why would an econ major ever need to think about English poetry or a science major ever ponder history, or vice versa?

Alas, we encounter this even in the humanities—literature, history, philosophy; they don't talk to each other since usually each professor thinks his or her discipline is much more important and interesting than all the rest.

That was not John Adams' approach to choosing his calling. Rather, while teaching school, he also visited the courtroom. What he saw there drew him in. The courtroom was like one of Shakespeare's plays. The lawyers were like actors—learned actors, who regularly quoted Sir Francis Bacon or Cicero or even the poetry of Horace. Thus, once Adams decided upon the law, in addition to reading the classics of English jurisprudence, he continued to read Shakespeare. Who better to give him insights into the “springs of action” that motivate human beings? He practiced aloud Cicero's orations against the conspirator Catiline. And no doubt there was a whole lot of Latin thrown in there.

So, I wish to make a brief case today, at John Adams Academy, for **not** dropping the pack of the classics, and for not becoming insular, no matter whether you become doctor, lawyer, engineer, own your own business, go into the wild world of real estate, or even end up in Silicon Valley programming Siri's voice, which by the way, is pretty lame when it comes to quoting poetry.

Part of the answer lies in the word *classical*. As when we speak of a classic car or classic rock on the radio, we do mean something that stands the test of time. It stands the test of time because it is **the best**. In its simplest sense, that's what a classic is: that which sets the standard, as the best. But it's more than that.

Classical derives from the Roman word *classicum*. A *classicum* was a trumpet/bugle that called the men of Rome to muster in preparation for battle. The *classicum* was a call to action. *Classicus*, the adjective, also referred to the men who were called and the classes or ranks they were divided into. But I would like to stick with the original: the *trumpet*. Anyone who has served in the military or watched formations knows what that sound means: it is a call to order and often a call to action.

From this we might derive a phrase: *The call of the classics*. It is the call of the classics that our times may need most. For our times might not be doing the most to call out the *best* in us. To be called by the classics means to learn from and be inspired by the best of times—the best that has been thought, said, done, and discovered—and to learn *about*, in order to avoid, or diminish, the worst of times—as best we can.

History is not a class; it is not one particular era that we specialize in. History is what we are living right now. Though history changes, it is not entirely made of a different substance. We might be much closer to the past than we think. For example, in reading about the past we regularly encounter war and disease. Worse, war usually comes *with* disease. How did John Adams' father die? He was seventy years old, and he died of influenza or small-pox when half the town of Braintree was put in bed because of it, with the young and the old being the chief victims. That epidemic came during that French & Indian War.

Just under twenty years later, General George Washington as the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army had to make a decision relative to the threat of smallpox: to vaccinate or not to vaccinate. The decision he made was based upon his own suffering from it as a young man in Barbados, thereby gaining immunity, as his older brother, a military hero, died of tuberculosis in front of him.

The 18th Century had plenty of such examples, such as the Peloponnesian War between the Athenians and the Spartans. The Spartans were the greatest warriors, so Pericles, the Athenian, had a perfect plan: build a wall, call in all the farmers surrounding Athens, then wait them out, using the Athenian advantage on the seas. There was only one glitch: the plague. Pericles did not plan for disease. The Classics are talking to us.

Now, I am not prescribing you Covid medication because I'm not a doctor. I'm an historian. Nor am I prescribing the platitude we hear so often about history. *Those who don't learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.* But if I cannot prescribe medicines that make a body physically well, I think as an historian engaged in education reform I can prescribe parts of our tradition that make us mentally and morally well—again. The past is not always something to be avoided.

Would you like to repeat a Renaissance in art? Who is a great artist of our day? Has modern art replaced or even come close to the classic works of art? What about words? Do we live in a poetic age, as in the world of Dickinson, of Wordsworth, of Dryden, of Poe? What great poet have you heard in our times? Would you like to live during a great age of music? You truly classical folks are probably thinking of Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky. I was thinking more along the lines of Chuck Berry, Elvis, Aretha, Billy Joel, Dolly, and—hats off to Folsom—Johnny Cash.

How about a Renaissance in the courts of law? Are lawyers still learning from and leaning on Cicero, Shakespeare, John Adams?

Now, how about this question—the looming question—how about a political Renaissance? Would you like to hear a political debate at the level of, say, Lincoln and Douglas? Are our current leaders, at any level of government, holding that sort of debate or of conversation these days? If not, why not? Aren't citizens supposed to hold their elected representatives accountable?

Furthermore, maybe I am missing something. What about someone in government—in fact, many people in government—who really knew something about science when advising us of scientific matters? Folks we can trust. Where is the Benjamin Franklin of our day?

Or what about a Renaissance in education? Thirty years ago, who was using the term “classical education”? Might that be happening? We cannot repeat the past, but can't we learn from, be inspired by, emulate, and in some small ways, even improve upon the past

—our own traditions? Maybe we have to start with a renaissance, a rebirth, in education, to generate all these others.

What I would like to suggest, as these young men and women march out into the world, is that they call upon the classics to guide them, that they heed the call of the classics in their own work and lives.

Now you may say, this business about reviving and transplanting the classics sounds just a little Quixotic, or, who was that other More guy? The one with only one O? Oh, *Thomas More*. Utopian. And we know what happened to him. And, yes, admittedly John Adams could do that sort of thing in thinking about the past, but that was then, this is now.

I beg to differ. Who knows what your professional calling in life might turn into if you were inspired by the classics? I will offer one example. My own foray outside the field of education, whether college or school level, was in an institution known as the United States Marine Corps. Now when you think of Marines, what do you think of? Fierce warfighters, no doubt. Tough guys maybe. A lot of physical exertion. Using weapons. Wearing camouflage. Devil Dogs or Jarheads, they're known as, terms of endearment. But you probably do not think of the classics, do you. Readin' ol' fancy stuff. Marines?

Think again. Let's put them to the test of some classical elements: great books, music, art, Latin, history, and poetry.

First of all, Marines do answer the call of a bugle every morning. It's called *veille*.

[Second] Great books. I left my undergraduate university, which was then known as home of the great books, having spent four years reading books, some more than once. The one book I remember the most was Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which I had to read in three classes: humanities for the rhetoric of Pericles; Western Civ, for, among other things, being the first narrative history ever written; and politics, for showing the rocky, unstable politics of the world's first democracy. But I was going into the Marine Corps. My reading would be put aside, right? I was soon introduced to the Commandant's Reading List, something started by one of the great Commandants of the Marine Corps, General Gray, an avid reader, only a couple of years before. Guess what was at the top of the list? Thucydides. Been there, done that. But when you are reading Thucydides from a tactical and strategic point of view, it's different, maybe more real.

[Third] Music. One of the best bands in the country is the Marine Band stationed at 8th and I in Washington, D.C., the oldest musical organization in the country. And the Marine Corps has its own song, the Marines' Hymn, which in a very short compass reveals the mission and something of the history of the Corps (I'll spare you my singing):

From the halls of Montezuma
To the shores of Tripoli,
We fight our country's battles
In the air, on land, and sea.

First to fight for right and freedom,
And to keep our honor clean,
We are proud to claim the title
Of United States Marine.

[Fourth] art. Surely, Marines don't care anything about art. Well, art includes sculpture, as any admirer of Michelangelo can tell you. And what is one of the most iconic statues in this country? The Marine Corps War Memorial at Arlington, of the Marines placing the flag atop Mount Suribachi in Iwo Jima.

[Fifth] Latin? Well, Marines have a motto, very simple and very classical: *Semper Fidelis*, which gets abbreviated to Semper Fi. It means, quite simply, always faithful.

[Sixth] History: surely Marines don't care anything about history. Think again. Every 10th of November the Marines celebrate the Marine Corps birthday, and Marines will say to each other "Happy Birthday." And what was the original birthday? When, where, who? Again, every Marine can tell you: the 10th of November 1775, in Philadelphia; more specifically at Tun Tavern. And who was the principal founder? John Adams. That was the same John Adams 20 years later from when we just met him. After the war, when the Marines and the Continental Army were disbanded, who reconstituted them? John Adams, as President, in 1798. A country cannot live without the armed forces to protect it. Maybe even the Founders did not read their Thucydides closely enough.

[Seventh] Poetry. Marines?

In fact, Marine Corps Generals, speaking at the annual Marine Corps Birthday Ball, quite naturally draw upon poetry. Their favorite is taken from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, before the battle of Agincourt, on St. Crispin's Day.

This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother . . .

Now these are leaders. The Marine Corps is an institution, better than any I've ever seen, that trains leaders, leaders who lead from the front. And those leaders quite naturally turn to poetry to inspire those warfighters who will be *first to fight*.

Now I am not telling you this as an active Marine recruiter. I am giving you an example of an institution nearly two-and-a-half centuries old, that has helped preserve this republic, and that clearly understands its mission. It needs and naturally draws upon the classics. Of how many institutions, how many companies, can that be said today, in a way that is genuine and heartfelt? How often do college professors and college presidents turn to poetry? Not nearly as often as you might think.

Young graduates: find ways to bring the classics into your lives and your professions: you will not be disappointed. You will shine.

Well, seeing the rebirth of this kind of learning, and the efforts and the sharp minds and good hearts of these young ladies and gentlemen, leaves me with hope—that the guard will not be let down.

And don't forget. You have friends.