

*The following address was delivered by writer and Newsweek columnist Anna Quindlen, at the College's 180th Commencement ceremony, held on the lawn of Samuel Mather Hall on May 17, 2008.*

Commencement speeches are the most difficult speeches I ever give. This morning is not about what I say, it's about what you've done. And I am always keenly aware that I am now standing between you and your diplomas, and your future, and your parties.

So I will be brief. My text is a simple one.

Be not afraid.

It is an old and honorable directive, found with some variation in both the old and new testaments. That is because it is the secret of a fulfilling life. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point."

Fear not.

Oh, I have enough of a memory to know that at some level it's preposterous to say that at this moment. You are afraid: of leaving what you know, of seeking what you want, of leaving Middle Path, of taking the wrong path, of not finding a path at all but simply muddling along. Your friends are going in one direction, you in another. From this safe little pond with its familiar Adirondack chairs, you pass through the estuary to the ocean. And sometimes the current out there is harsh and the riptides are rough and you will be afraid.

But you must learn to put the fear aside, or at least to refuse to allow it to rule you. It is fear that tamps down our authentic selves, turns us into some patchwork collection of affectations and expectations, mores and mannerisms, some treadmill set to the prevailing speed of universal acceptability, the tyranny of homogeneity, whether the homogeneity of the straight world or the suits of the spiky world of the avant-garde.

The voices of conformity speak so loudly.

Don't listen.

People will tell you what you ought to think and how you ought to feel. They will tell you what to read and how to live. They will urge you to take jobs they themselves loathe, and to follow safe paths they themselves find tedious.

Don't do it.

Only a principled refusal to be ruled by these stingy standards will save you from a Frankenstein life made up of others' expectations grafted onto a poor semblance of existence. You can't afford to do that. It is what has poisoned our culture, our community, and our national character. No one does the right thing from fear. And so many of the wrong things are done in its long shadow. Homophobia, sexism, racism, religious bigotry, xenophobia: they are all bricks in a wall that divides us, bricks cast in the clay of fear, fear of that which is different or unknown.

Our political atmosphere has been dispiriting because so many of our leaders are leaders in name only. They are terrorized by polls and focus groups, by the need to be all things to all people, which means that they are nothing at

all. They are afraid—to be bold, to be decisive, to be inventive, above all to be authentic. If they were, they might lose. As it is, they have often lost their way and their moral compass.

Our workplaces are full of fear: fear of innovation, fear of difference. The most widely used cliché in management today is to think outside the box. The box is not only stale custom. It is terrified paralysis. We need to flatten it and put it outside for the recyclers. If you ever find yourselves uttering the sentence, “We’ve always done it this way,” I urge you to wash your own mouth out with soap and start fresh.

In my own business, fear is the ultimate enemy. In journalism, fear accounts for censorship, obfuscation, the lowest common denominator of the news, when sharp, free, fearless news is more necessary than ever before. Without fear or favor, the news business must provide readers and viewers with stories even if those are stories the powerful do not want you to hear or believe and do not want us to publish or disseminate, even if they are stories that offend, enrage, and distress the very readers we want to inform.

Too often our public discourse fears real engagement; it pitches itself at the lowest possible level, always preaching to the choir, so that no one will be angry. Which usually means that no one will be interested.

What is the point of free speech if we are always afraid to speak freely? Not long ago I asked a professor of religion what she did to suit the comfort level of the diverse group of students in her class. “It is not my job to make people comfortable,” she said. “It is my job to educate them.”

I nearly stood up and cheered. If we fear competing viewpoints, if we fail to state the unpopular or to allow the unpopular or even the unacceptable to be heard because of some sense of plain-vanilla civility, it is not civility at all. It is the denigration of the human capacity for thought, the suggestion that we are fragile flowers incapable of disagreement, argument, or civil intellectual combat.

Forget fragile flowers. You are smart and sure and strong enough to overcome the condescending notion that opposing viewpoints are too much for us to bear—in politics, in journalism, in business, in the academy.

Be brave. Open your mouths. Speak your piece. Fear not.

Believe me, we parents have been paralyzed by fear as well. When you were first born, each of you, our great glory was in thinking you absolutely distinct from every baby who had ever been born. You were a miracle of singularity, and we knew it in every fiber of our being. You shouted “dog.” You lurched across the playground. You put a scrawl of red paint next to a squiggle of green and we put it on the fridge and said, *ohmigod, ohmigod*, you are a painter a poet a prodigy a genius.

But we are only human, and being a parent is a very difficult job, more difficult than any other, because it requires the shaping of other people, which is an act of extraordinary hubris. And over the years we sometimes learned to want for you things that you did not necessarily want for yourself. We learned to want the lead in the play, the place at our own college, the lucrative job offer, the straight and narrow path that often leads absolutely nowhere. We learned to fear

your differences, not to celebrate them. Sometimes we were convinced conformity would make life better, or at least easier for you. Sometimes we had a hard time figuring out where we ended and you began.

Guide us back to where we started. Help us not to make mistakes out of fear disguised as love. Learn not to listen to us when we are wrong. And sometimes we are. We have gone wrong, in the stewardship of this nation, and this planet. We have sometimes gone wrong in the management of our own loves. So I urge you today to sometimes ignore your elders, and begin to say no to the Greek chorus that thinks it knows the parameters of a good life when all it really knows is some one-size-fits-all version of human experience.

Fear not. You can do this. Your generation ought to be the role model for my own. You blow us away. You are more philanthropic, more tolerant, more balanced and open-minded than any in modern history. You have done more community service and world travel than any group of Americans before you. In your own lives you have begun the great work of seeing beyond the old bright lines of race and gender. It is no accident that as all of you became old enough to vote we are finally brave enough to have an election process in which Americans are truly engaged and interested. You have showed us the way. Don't let us talk you out of that in the alleged interests of maturity and of living in the real world. Remember Pinocchio? There is a Jiminy Cricket on your shoulder. It is you, your best self, the one you can trust. The only problem is that it is sometimes hard to hear what it says because all the external voices and messages are so loud, so insistent, so adamant. Voices that loud are always meant to bully.

Do not be bullied.

You already know this. I just want to remind you. Think back. Think back to first grade, when you could still hear the sound of your own voice in your head, when you were too young, too unformed, too fantastic to understand that you were supposed to take on the protective coloration of the expectations of those around you, when you were absolutely, certainly, unapologetically yourself, when you were not afraid of anything.

So I say today, don't just move forward. Go back. Go back to that first-grade self, the fearless self, the audacious self, the authentic self. Go back to who you really are and want to be.

I have a pocket-sized edition of the Tao, the ancient Chinese book of the way, that I keep on my desk. I read a passage from it every morning.

The section I like best says:

*In dwelling, live close to the ground.*

*In thinking, keep to the simple.*

*In conflict, be fair and generous.*

*In governing, don't try to control.*

*In work, do what you enjoy.*

*In family life, be completely present.*

*When you are content to be simply yourself*

*And don't compare or compete*

*Everybody will respect you.*

We live in a world in which the simple, the generous, the enjoyable, the completely present, above all the simply yourself sometimes seem as out of reach as the moon. Do not be fooled. That is not because anyone has found a better way in the millennia since the Tao was written. It is because too often we are people shadowed by fear. The ultimate act of bravery does not take place on a battlefield. It takes place when you are willing to honor your own character, your own intellect, your own inclinations and, yes, your own soul by listening to your own clean clear voice of direction instead of following the muddled messages of a timid and parsimonious world.

I leave you with Thucydides, members of the class of 2008: "The secret of happiness is freedom. The secret of freedom, courage."

Fear not. Congratulations.