



GRADUATION SPEECH

Hello. My name is Calder. I've been the Global Perspectives teacher for some of your students this year and it is my honor to be able to address you on such an important occasion.

I would like to first thank all of the teachers, parents, and administrators who are here today and are giving me the gift of your attention. In a way, today represents the fruits of your labor. You have worked tirelessly to raise these kids, and while the job of a parent is never truly finished, today you can be proud of what you have accomplished. My heart is full at seeing such a dedicated community here to watch this wonderful group of young people take their first steps into the world. To the students, I am sure some of you are tired of listening to me after a whole year of class, but I hope that you are not too exhausted that I might be able to offer some words of wisdom or comfort for you.

It is only possible to perceive the infinite complexity of life at its thresholds. In the day to day, we have too many minute concerns to truly contemplate the nature of the world and our places within it. But as we near the precipice of a great change, we are forced to take a broader view of what it means to be successful, happy, productive, and alive.

And you all are on the precipice of the greatest change most of you have yet faced in your lives. Regardless of your plans for university, regardless of whether you choose to stay in Vietnam or explore a new and far away country, regardless of what you plan to study or which career you plan to pursue, you are entering a new period of life. The tendency for many in such a time is to look behind you. Direct your view to the past. It is only natural to remember your happiest and saddest moments from high school. Your first days at Nguyen Sieu, your favorite teachers, your most embarrassing social mistakes, your first loves, your closest friendships. However, in this liminal time, when you are afforded a clearer perspective, I encourage you to look ahead.

Sometimes the deepest truths in life are simple. And the simple truth is that contemplating the future is scary. I think that your generation has a deeper understanding of this fact than many. You have lived through the COVID pandemic. You have grown up being showered with terrible news from the distant corners of our planet. You have felt the existential pressure of climate change and the radical advancement of technology. These terrifying realities have been part of your life, likely, since you were old enough to read and they have shown you that we can never be certain about what may happen to us. This knowledge encumbers you with responsibility. You are aware of the problems of the world, and you have the skills to change them.

I think that being surrounded by so many talented students skews your view of yourselves. Some of you who don't score the highest marks on your exams or don't win the highest awards may feel like you are not very smart or that you don't have much to contribute to the world. I hear very often students tell themselves that they are lazy or that they are stupid. I am here to tell you that that is not true in the slightest. You all have unbelievable gifts. When you are surrounded by such immense talent you may feel inadequate or not enough. But you are enough. Each of you has limitless potential to achieve any goal to which you set your mind. You have been the single most exciting class of students I have ever taught.

Every day you challenged me with your creativity and humbled me with your extreme intelligence. I am not sure that you appreciate exactly how much you all have meant to me. Teaching you has made me a happier and more complete human being.

Recently, I have been thinking often about how we discuss the future and how we give advice and I have been especially contemplating the metaphor of the life path. It's something I'm sure everyone in this room has heard. Life is a path that directs you towards success. Education, career, and love are places to visit as we age. But the problem with the life path is that it assumes success and failure as binary and mutually exclusive. We can be on the path or off the path. We can move forward along the path, or we can move backward. It suggests that if we fail a step on the path, such as, say, not getting into our top-choice university, or breaking up with our girl or boy friend, we will lose the path entirely and our life will be ruined. But this is simply not accurate. It is not accurate for anyone in the world. We will all make mistakes, we will all be disappointed, and our all of our lives will continue as an inevitable consequence of time. There is no path.

So, I would like to offer you a different metaphor for visualizing this beautiful journey which we are all undertaking. I suggest to you that life is an infinite space full of beautiful and mysterious objects. There is no up and down, there is no forward and backward. There is no destination and no direction. We have no idea where we are going. We only know where we have been. The objects and people that we have experienced. We should always choose to set some objects as our goals, something to achieve, but there are infinite ways to get to those objects and we never know how long it will take. We may choose to leave some of these objects forever. We may choose to stay. We may lose some temporarily and return to them later. We may miss some objects we wished to experience, but we will certainly experience more that we never intended to find but happened upon by chance. But what matters more than the trajectory we travel, is who we are along the way. Are we kind even when it is inconvenient? Do we fight for what we think is right? Are we good to those who love us? Have we used our skills to improve the people and objects around us? Are we happy?

I think that some of you know, I chose to stay at Nguyen Sieu this year entirely because of you all. I met several of you through school clubs, academic advising, or because I taught your younger siblings. Each of you that I met filled me with wonder. Each was so unique, insightful, kind, and intelligent. My staying at Nguyen Sieu became an inevitability by the time you all reached tenth grade. I simply could not leave without having the opportunity to mentor through your last year of high school.

We cannot know what lies ahead of us, but we can know who we are. So, as you prepare to pass the threshold into adulthood it is this that I wish: for you to recognize and love yourselves, for you to admit your mistakes and value your successes, and for, each of you, to find happiness in whatever form you choose. And it is this that I ask you to remember: I have an unflinching belief in the abilities and intelligence of each and every one of you, and I am endlessly proud of the people you are becoming. Thank you.

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