

Commencement Speech by Benjamin Walsh '09

Good morning, and thank you, Mrs. Keidel, for that introduction. I am so incredibly honored and thankful to be your speaker at this very important centennial commencement. I have to say, congratulations to the class of 2016 on graduating today. Alright, parents, that's one expensive piece of paper right there and your sons and daughters have worked very hard to get it, so make sure they don't lose it. I still have mine, right mom?

I have kept many of the mementos and lessons from my Montgomery days. For those lessons, I have a few, belated, "thank you's" to give. Thank you Mrs. Schelhorn for allowing me to explore the study of history freely. I remember the wooden guillotine in your classroom and I am happy to say that you helped motivate me to be a history major. Thank you to Mrs. Sheldrick, without whose practical applications of science, like blowing up sodium in a fishtank or lighting magnesium on fire for peoples' birthdays, I would not have been motivated to pass my natural science classes - which I managed to do, by the way.

There are some not so immediately obvious lessons I've learned from Montgomery School. For example, thanks to the persistence of notebook checks, thanks Mrs. Vessey, I still, to this day, put my name, the date, and the class or activity I'm taking notes for at the top left hand corner of every piece of paper I take notes on. Not only that, but in order to be remotely productive, I need to be wearing a collared shirt of some kind and without any doubt, I can certainly attribute part of that on Montgomery.

I specifically want to talk to you about three things: facts, beliefs, and adventure - which is just my fancy way of defining, in a single word, the trying of new things. We spend a lot of our time in education learning about facts. We even have turns of phrase that embody how much we rely on the idea of facts such as, "as a matter of fact", "and that's a fact!", "in fact", "the fact that", and "the fact of the matter is". We have built this idea of fact up to be infallible, but what, really, *is* a fact? What we consider fact is no more than a consensus about a certain piece of knowledge or an event. In truth, there are no, or at least very few, facts as you understand them right now. This has serious implications to us as scholars and young people caught up in the fervor of learning. Now, don't glare at your teachers accusingly as if they taught you the wrong thing on purpose and don't get me wrong, there are *some* real facts. One added to one makes two, pi is roughly equal to 3.14, the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4th, 1776, and if you don't save a week to write that paper, you're definitely going to fail it. OK, you got me on that last one, but it still stands that the other things are really true.

When I graduated from Montgomery, I earned the prize in history, but the real prize of that occasion is the book Mrs. Schelhorn gave me: *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, by James Loewen. Perhaps one of the most important books I will ever read, it details how the information we are taught is often skewed and sanitized for the sake of preserving our innocence or a particular narrative that society has a vested interest in preserving. That book opened my mind to the idea of double checking the information I was receiving. Plato's Allegory of the Cave best embodies this ideal.

Plato stipulates that the ignorant person lives their life in a cave where illusions are cast by an illusioner. The person learns everything they know from the illusion because they do not know they are illusions. Those same illusions tell the person to not look for other things so the person does not do so. However, if the person climbed out of the cave, they would both see the illusioner and know what they were seeing was an illusion. This allows them to search elsewhere for knowledge and have their eyes opened to the truth. You, like the person in the allegory, must climb out of the cave to unveil the illusioner and be able to find the truth behind what you are being told and shown. This, Plato believes, is the path to enlightenment and knowledge.

To put this in a modern context, when you read a textbook or see a story on the news, don't believe what it says at face value. Remember that what you hear is most likely an opinion based on an analysis of the available evidence. If you keep this in mind and make sure you diversify your sources of knowledge and check them against each other, you will almost always find the truth of the matter and discover what is false - and even what is yet to be determined as truth or falsehood.

Socrates famously said, "the only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing". What Socrates meant is that someone cannot know what they do not know. Simply, if I do not know something, then I do not know that I do not know it. That makes sense, for example, if someone tells me something I did not know, then I had no way of knowing I did not know that thing before it was told me. Now that is a fairly complicated concept, but you can master it and expand that idea to your understanding of the world around you.

A curious mind is the best way to tackle the two challenges provided by these philosophers. Most likely, many of you have discovered an educational passion that you will take with you to high school and beyond - and that's a good thing! Your passions lead you to a thirst for knowledge that will allow you to easily surmount the challenges of Socrates and Plato and will lead you to what is true.

You all graduate from this school having acquired many tools and you must put them to work learning all the great things you'll learn as you grow older, but for everything you are told, for everything you think you know, make sure you are not trapped in Plato's cave and understand the

virtue of knowing that there are things you do not know yet. Instead of relying on facts, dig beyond them to discover truths.

Some things, such as beliefs, are neither true nor false. Beliefs can be wrong, that's accurate, but there are many beliefs that you will form over the course of your lifetime that are neither true nor false and cannot be proven or disproven. Beliefs are very special and I believe that if you really believe in something, then you shouldn't let anyone tell you that you can't believe it. Now that's not to say that beliefs that are incorrect are worthy of being held. For example, gravity doesn't cease existing because I want to believe it doesn't. Beliefs are inherently influenced by our understanding of what we know to be true and of the observable world.

In that vein, we all must be open-minded in what we believe - ever looking for evidence for our beliefs and even against them. Our beliefs are best informed by evidence and we must understand them and the evidence for and against them holistically. Never be too set on what you believe and certainly do not take what is said in favor of your belief at face value. Try to understand why the people who agree with you do so. Perhaps they have similar motives for their beliefs, perhaps they have different ones. Nonetheless, understanding why others agree with you broadens your perspective and teaches you about your own narrative. The same applies, in a much more urgent sense, to those with whom you disagree. Firstly, be civil to them - they have come to their set of beliefs in a similar manner to how you have. Besides, you will never convince someone just by telling them they're wrong and making them feel bad about their views. Secondly, continue to keep your mind open when others tell you what they believe or why they disagree with your beliefs. Do not rebutt them until you understand them.

Truths and beliefs are informed by what you know and the observable world, but what good is an observable world if you choose to shelter yourself from it. Adventure is the last piece of the puzzle I am creating for you today and although not as heavy as beliefs or truths, it is equally important. As you move forward in life, you will find opportunities all over the place to try new things. There are two ways to go about doing this. You can try something that you have never tried before, or you can push the boundaries of what you already know you enjoy. This second option is a little less risky, but no less adventurous.

I strongly believe that you should try investing in a new opportunity only if it doesn't make you feel uncomfortable at all or makes you only a little bit uncomfortable. The old adage about comfort zones is true, but you should never try something that you physically or morally object to. There's no harm in sitting out a round to watch, or choosing not to participate at all.

When I got to college, there are a lot of things I didn't think I'd do because they made me uncomfortable or the thought of them made me uncomfortable. One of those things was to go abroad.

I never thought I would study Hebrew in college, but luckily, the class was paced for beginners and I became more comfortable within a few weeks. Three semesters later I had picked up some Hebrew and was doing well in classes, but I had never gone abroad. To be honest, I didn't even think about Israel as a destination for abroad study or work.

I lived in Jerusalem and most people only spoke (or only chose to speak) Hebrew. Now, I had picked up some Hebrew, but it was really only *some* Hebrew. I had to learn to *live* in Hebrew. It was hard, but I survived, and I think I'm better for having gone and jumped outside my comfort zone.

Your adventures will give you similarly beneficial experiences. Some of your experiences will test your mettle, too. You never know unless you try. However, you can try little things, too. Pushing the boundaries of your current activities is a great way to have tinier, less risky adventures. These adventures vary in size. Perhaps you like to travel, but never went on a backpacking trip or maybe you liked Hamlet, but are unsure about the collected works of William Shakespeare. These little pushes of the envelope are hugely different in scope, but offer the same little thrills. To use an example near and dear to my heart in this very moment, I love public speaking, but I've never, until now, given a commencement address - and you're all still awake which is a great sign.

Truth, belief, and adventure. These three things triangulate to form the most important parts of you. You form your beliefs by knowing, being taught, and adventuring to learn, understand, know, and experience more. Similarly, you could not go on adventures, or know which ones to go on, without some knowledge and a belief about your adventure and what experiences you will gain. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, if you try to find truths without believing there is anything to find, or without the adventurous means by which to find them, they will elude you forever. The challenges are ancient, but your contact with them is new and fresh. Take advantage of your youth, your high school and college days to seize the day, break free from the cave, and be aware of what you do not know. Class of 2016, as you go forth into the world, know that you have had a good foundation laid for you here at Montgomery and if you take nothing else away from this speech, just remember: Without truths and adventures, you cannot have beliefs; without beliefs and truths, you cannot go on adventures; and without adventures and beliefs, you cannot discover truths. Congratulations, again, class of 2016!