

BWYA Graduation Speech

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Good afternoon. I am honored to be here.

Let me first say congratulations to the graduating class of 2009. You've made it through high school alive . . . and with all of the hair on top of your head, which is something that I was not able to do. You don't need me to tell you how tough the IB program is. You deserve much praise for completing it. So again, congratulations.

As you know, my time at BWYA has coincided perfectly with your time in the IB diploma program—I arrived when you began your IB1 year, and I am leaving as you finish your IB2 year. My only regret as I leave is that I have been a part of this community for far too short a time. Two years is not enough. And so, unfortunately, I only know half of you half as well as I would like, and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve.¹

Nevertheless, these two years have been great. I have amassed a collection of wonderful memories, of which you all are a part, and which will remain dear to me for the rest of my life. And it is because you are all so dear to me that as you depart from here, I wish to give you as valuable a message as possible. So here are four pieces of advice that I hope you will take to heart as you set off into the future.

My first piece of advice is to take your education and your life into your own hands. This is the moral of a story from my own life, which some of you have already heard, about nuclear physics and cows.

When I was in college, I took a course in nuclear physics. Now, I imagined that nuclear physics was the most exciting subject in the world, and I was really looking forward to it. But as it turned out, the class was no good. The professor was absent half the time because she kept going to different countries to do nuclear physics experiments. And every time she returned from one of her trips, instead of teaching us about nuclear physics, she showed us pictures of cows. (I'm not kidding.)

Nuclear physics labs are always out in the countryside, so there were lots of cows at all of the labs that our professor visited. Apparently, she really loved cows, because that's what she took pictures of, and that's what she told us about when she got back.

So at the end of the course, I could identify ten different breeds of cow, but I had learned nothing about nuclear physics. That part of my semester had been a waste of time. And I blamed the professor.

But now, as I look back, I realize that it was *my* fault—not the professor's fault—that that semester was a waste of time.

My mistake was this: I was holding the *professor* responsible for my education. And so when I received no education, I assumed it was her fault. But really, *I* was to blame. If I had really been determined to learn nuclear physics, I could have done so. I could have read the textbook on my own; I could have checked out books

from the library; I could have asked questions of other professors. But I did none of these things, and as a result, the semester was indeed a waste of time for me.

When you go to university, don't make the same mistake. You must understand that *you* are responsible for your education. Not your teachers. Not your parents. Only you. Don't just passively take the information that is given to you in class and assume that you are receiving an education. If that's what you do, your years in university will be wasted! When you go to university, go there to learn for the sake of learning, not for the sake of getting a good grade. Take your education into your own hands. Love learning. Pursue knowledge on your own, not because you have to, but because it is rewarding.

And it is not just your education that you should take into your own hands, but your *life*. Hold *yourself* responsible for your future. Don't expect your college, your degree program, your teachers, or even your parents to prepare you automatically for success in life. Nothing will happen if you don't make it happen. You are an adult now. Your life belongs to you, and you are the only one responsible for what you do with it.

My second piece of advice is this: Be prepared to fail, and throughout life, use your failures as stepping stones to success.

Apart from the stresses of the IB program, most of you have led very comfortable lives so far. You were lucky enough to be born to parents who take good care of you. You've never gone without food, education, or even the luxury of entertainment. And you were lucky enough to be born with intelligent minds and the ability to learn and do well in school. All of these things are your good fortune, which you must not be proud of or take for granted.

Because of this good fortune, most of you have never experienced true failure. Oh sure, maybe you've failed a few tests and quizzes now and then—maybe quite a few, especially if you were in my physics class. But that's not the kind of failure I'm talking about. Overall, you've been successful at just about every step in your life.

And so maybe you don't expect ever to fail in the future. Or maybe you're afraid of failing. Maybe you think that if you fail, you will have a black mark on your record, something to be ashamed of. But you must not be afraid to fail, and you must not be ashamed of your failures. Rather, you should see failure as a prerequisite to success.

Winston Churchill wrote that “success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”²

If anyone knew about success, it was Winston Churchill. He was the prime minister of the UK during World War II and a Nobel Prize winning author. But on the road to his successes, he first met with many failures.

If you are to be successful, chances are that your road will also take you through failure first. If and when you do fail, you must pick yourself up and keep working toward your goals with persistence and perseverance. Because failing will not make you a failure; it's giving up that will make you a failure.

My third piece of advice is: Learn to be content in whatever circumstances life hands you. Understand that true happiness comes from wanting what you have, not having what you want.

Throughout life, many people just can't wait to get out of their present stage and move on to the next. When you're in high school, you can't wait to get out. When you're in college, you think things will be great when you graduate and start working. When you're single, you think life will be good once you get married. Then you look forward to having kids. Then, once you have kids, you can't wait until they grow up and move out. Then you look forward to retirement.

If that's how you live out your life, then when you reach the end you'll realize that you haven't lived; you never once enjoyed your present situation! Don't let that happen to you. Too many people race through life, just trying to get to the next level as fast as they can. But life is not a race, and you must not treat it as a race. Make sure that you enjoy each stage as it comes, without being too eager to move on to the next one.

At every stage in life, be content with who you are, what you have, what you have achieved—regardless of how much or how little it may seem.

You all have great talent and great aspirations. But it is an ugly fact of life that a bright future is guaranteed to no one. There's a good chance that in the future you will find yourself living an ordinary life, with an ordinary family and an ordinary job. That's probably not what you're hoping for; not many people say "I want to be ordinary when I grow up!" But that might be what you get.

If that's where you find yourself, be content. Know that true greatness has nothing to do with power or wealth. The most ordinary person in the world can be the greatest person in the world—whether anybody else realizes it or not. And certainly, there is no less joy to be had in a well-lived ordinary life than in the life of a king. Be content.

My fourth and final piece of advice is the most important of all. And it is this: Live a life of integrity. What does that mean? You are adults now—men and women. And to live a life of integrity means simply to be a good man or to be a good woman.

You all have wonderful aspirations—to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, CEOs, world leaders. And I wish you all success in pursuing these dreams. I will be proud of you, and happy to know that I played some part, no matter how small, in helping you to get there. But your accomplishment of these goals will become meaningless if you sacrifice your integrity on the way.

As you set out to achieve your aims, you must promise yourself this: that you will always hold tightly, no matter what, to the admirable qualities that make a good person good—you know what they are—because it is these qualities, more than any amount of financial or political success, that will enable you, even in the midst of failure, to be happy.

In holding onto integrity, you will be doing a great favor both to yourself and

to the world. Because in truth, what the world really needs most is not another great businessman, doctor, lawyer, or leader. What the world needs are more people who are faithful, honest, and loyal to their families and friends; more people who are kind, patient, unselfish, and generous. These qualities will fill your souls in a way that no amount of power or money ever could. Cultivate them and hold onto them tightly no matter what happens.

So, that is my advice for you as you go out into the world as adults. Take your education . . . and your future . . . into your own hands. Be prepared to persevere through failure. Be content in whatever circumstances life hands you. And be a good person.

Let me close by saying that you have been an excellent group of students. My fellow teachers and I are extremely proud of you, and we're very sad to see you go. The IB I's and the pre-IB students look up to you a lot, and they'll never feel like they were able to fill your shoes completely. Most of all, your parents are more proud of you at this moment than they ever have been before. I've already heard you thank them and acknowledge that they are the ones who got you here. Maintain that spirit of thankfulness as you go out from here.

Congratulations again.

Notes:

1. From *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien. (Please note that this sentence is just a joke—don't try to interpret it literally.)
2. This is a popular quotation; but unfortunately, I wasn't able to trace it to the original source.
3. Special thanks to Colm Moore for his excellent suggestions, which helped me improve this speech immeasurably.