Charge to the Class

Jeff Hanna

Class of 2022...somehow, someway, you did it. Getting to this point for some of you was never in question. For others, I question that we let you get to this point. If you feel like that last statement applies to you, today is the day to stop taking pride in doing the bare minimum. We have enough of those people in politics. Today is the day that you should pay attention to everything around you. Today is a celebration of the achievements in your past and a step towards greater responsibility and greater accountability. Today is a chance for me to say that I am proud to have grown close to you, I am proud to have shared in the achievements in your past, and I am honored to be here sharing one last transient moment with you. So let’s get to it.

Class of 2022, congratulations on completing two normal years of high school, whatever that means.

What is normal here at York is not what most people would consider normal. You were given a privilege—made possible by your parents, guardians, host families, and by the generosity of donors who support the school—and it is important to acknowledge that now. A lot of people—many of whom are present here today, many of whom I call colleague and you call teacher, many of whom have never met you but made this experience possible—all of those people have sacrificed to open the doors that give you the chance to sit where you sit today; on behalf of all of those people, we hope you commit to opening doors for someone in your future, we hope you share your privilege with the same generosity that others have shared with you. We wish that you bring hope and opportunity to at least one person, because that person is connected to a family, that family to a community, that community to the world.

What is normal here at York and beyond has changed between the time that you started at York and the time that we call “now.” The concept of a peaceful transition of power—a central tenet of democratic governments—was actually a thing. TikTok wasn’t even popular when you started at York. We have a new Head of School and a new schedule. Seniors got to enjoy Break from the Chapel balcony, but you were forced to sit here in the Gawain Outdoor Theater. What some of you perceive as a loss of a right-of-passage, others among you view as a gained opportunity to create new traditions, to bask with reverence in an outdoor space. If you take some time to look around, it is a privilege to sit on this hill. This view, this space we have—all of this open space around you—was a blessing during the pandemic. This space keeps us safe. This space keeps us sane. This space will forever be a blessing as the availability of natural open spaces continues to decline. The rising likelihood and severity of wildfires could take this all away in a matter of a few minutes. Nearly all of us have experienced the all-too-real threat of that, and some of those here
today experienced the reality of losing everything. Remember that what you have is a privilege, where you’re from is a privilege, and where you’re going is a privilege.

Sandwiched between your two seemingly normal years of high school were two years unlike anything any of us have ever been through. I, for one, never want to teach from the other side of a screen again. The novelty of Google Meet became a trigger of anxiety, staring at motionless avatars of muted cameras and missing the connection of classroom interactions. In a world more connected than ever, we were suddenly so isolated from each other. As much as we might laud the success of our implementation of online learning, it was brutal, it was stressful, and it was lonely. It sucked.

Kurrun Sethi noted in his talk at TEDxYorkSchool, that changing these feelings meant adjusting his perspective. He says: “Instead of fixating on what I couldn’t do because of the pandemic, I focused on what I could do.” A change in perspective might lead you to realize that at least we were able to get online together, to have some semblance of routine and regularity, structure, accountability, and access to the privilege of joining a Google Meet to see each other’s favorite background, our pets, and our uncovered faces. Many people across the globe, let alone this very county, did not have access to that privilege.

As you move beyond York, your path will be unpredictable and full of obstacles and setbacks beyond the extent of your control—some small, some seemingly too large to overcome—how you react to that adversity and what perspective you choose to take are wholly within your control.

There is a well-known Chinese proverb about a farmer and his horse that perfectly encapsulates this idea. It goes like this:

One day, a farmer who raised horses for a living, lost one of his prized horses. After hearing of the misfortune, his neighbor felt sorry for him and came to comfort him. “How unfortunate that your horse ran away,” said the neighbor. “That’s terrible.” But the farmer replied, “Maybe.”

After some time the horse returned to the farmer’s house, accompanied by another horse. The neighbor came over again and congratulated the farmer on his good fortune. But once again, the farmer replied, “Maybe.”

Some time later, when the farmer’s son is out for a ride with the new horse, the boy falls off and breaks his leg. The neighbors once again express their condolences to the farmer because of the catastrophic accident. The farmer’s response to the insinuation: “Maybe.”

Soon thereafter the Emperor’s army arrives at the village to recruit all able-bodied young men to fight in a war. Because of his injury, the farmer’s son could not go off to war, and was spared
from certain death. The farmer’s neighbors change their outlook, and begin to view the boy’s injury as a blessing. But the farmer, who always kept a level outlook, wouldn’t go there. He just said, “Maybe.”

The point is, the future will tell us whether our experiences of the past are good or bad. There’s no way of knowing. You cannot truly see forward without taking the opportunity to look backward. Without taking time to look at who you are, where you’re from, who you know and what you’ve learned from your experiences and privilege, your path forward will be shrouded in the darkness of your own shadow.

Were the disruptions caused by the pandemic good or bad? We can’t say. One of the outcomes of that disruption was learning to control and manage your emotions, your expectations, your perspective, and your willingness to take action. The pandemic thrust all of us into a box and challenged us to think outside of it. In more ways than one, the pandemic challenged each of us to realize our potential.

Realizing your potential is what the next step is all about. This means not only becoming aware of your potential, but also striving to achieve that potential. The catch: There’s not one step you’ll take to help you realize how far you’ve come in regards to realizing that potential.

Realizing your potential is an endless pursuit of your passions through dogged diligence. Realizing your potential will require you to use the talents that have been nurtured by your privilege. Realizing your potential will necessitate that you evaluate and adjust your perspective. And that potential will only be realized for its potential to do good, for its potential to offer privilege and perspective to others.

Realizing your potential means there is potential for this space to continue to be a privilege for others to enjoy. You have the potential to address the impacts of climate change so as to reduce the rising likelihood and severity of wildfires in this area and others like it. The tools for doing so are already in place, but the people are not. As York graduates, that’s where you come in.

Just four days ago 19 children and two adults were killed in yet another mass shooting, this one at an elementary school in Texas. The governor made a statement urging, “all Texans to come together to show our unwavering support to all who are suffering.” I can only speculate on what he meant by “come together to show our unwavering support,” though I’m sure it involved thoughts and prayers and little more. Thoughts and prayers are bandaids on an open wound, just temporary relief on the swollen eyes of the nation before the bandaid is ripped off and the cycle repeats. Thoughts and prayers are too little, too late.
Unfortunately, mass shootings are not shocking news anymore, they’re just sad news because thoughts and prayers have become a substitute for taking action. Remembering the farmer, I think to myself, “Maybe.” Maybe this is the time that thoughts and prayers, a reactive response to say that we’re sorry, turns into a preventative response to show that we care. Why is it okay to strip away the rights of women by claiming the sanctity of life for an embryo, but the sanctity of life for 10-year-olds is not enough for us to impose responsible ownership of firearms? Those regulations are somehow viewed as the taking away of someone’s freedoms, but isn’t losing your life in a senseless act of violence the ultimate loss of freedom? Again, the tools for change are already in place, but again the people are not. As York graduates, that’s where you come in.

Realizing your potential means there is potential for us all to hope for a better future. A future that is driven less by someone’s reelection bid and the pushing aside of national and global issues to fill one’s pockets, and more by the courage to create change through respect and responsibility for the rights that our freedoms grant us. A future in which fear and fake news do not drive people to react with their worst impulses, rather one in which you engage with honesty and compassion by reacting with empathy and awareness. If you fail to realize your potential, you waste your power. When you waste your power, what you’re really doing is giving it to whoever has the most already, and what we see in the world today is that those with the most are coming for those with the least.

In just a few moments, you will be York graduates. And as York graduates, realizing your potential is the task you are charged with as alumni.

Pursue your passions. Share your privilege. Expand your perspective.

Class of 2022… Be well. Enjoy life. And please, realize your potential.