

Ms. Prinn's Commencement Speech to the Wellesley High School Class of 2020

July 31, 2020

[YouTube](#) [40:47 - 54:10]

Dr. Lussier, Dr. Chisum, Mr. Kelton, Ms. Matloff, Mr. Shattuck, members of the School Committee, families, friends, faculty and staff watching at home, and, *especially*, members of the resilient and magnificent Wellesley High School Class of 2020—in the immortal words of the Grateful Dead, “Lately, it occurs to me / What a long, strange trip it's been.”

Back in May 2019 when you took over the cafeteria as the new “seniors” with your Zoo theme and animal prints, who could have guessed things would get *this* wild? But here we are, the day your class officers have long fought for—the chance to gather together, in person, to celebrate this milestone as a community. While the carefully orchestrated and well-attended graduation parade *was* pretty awesome, it just couldn't safely provide what you most needed. You were craving the company of your community: the Class of 2020.

Now that we're here, it feels a bit strange, actually, to look out into a gathering of people in real life. Where are all the little Zoom boxes I've grown accustomed to? People yelling, “You're muted” at each other, while dogs bark, someone makes a sandwich, and a distracted classmate is busy uploading a background of Baby Yoda or Jack Nicholson's face from *The Shining*. As the New York Times published recently, “We Live in Zoom Now.” During what should have been your celebratory Senior Spring, in-person events like color wars and prom were replaced by remote learning and social distancing. Hand sanitizer and masks instead of high-fives and hugs.

And yet if we shift our perspective a little bit—while we certainly have sacrificed and endured isolation (and some of us and our families have suffered acutely from illness, loss, or financial insecurity)—we also have grown. You have grown. You have faced great uncertainty and some major disappointments. And you've coped. I mean, we expected nothing less from our Class of 2020 which boasts both the three-time dodgeball champions and powderpuff victors. It's clear you know how to rise to a challenge!

But in all seriousness, if nothing else, COVID-19 has made us all slow down and take stock. We didn't really have a choice.

In the early days of quarantine, the term “essential” became ubiquitous—“*essential* workers” earned our long-overdue gratitude, we only left the house for “*essential* errands,” and perhaps faced the discomfiting experience of encountering store shelves lacking in “*essential* items,” like toilet paper, for one. You probably won’t be surprised to hear that as an English teacher, I love definitions of words, and Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *essential* as “of the utmost importance; indispensable; necessary above all else.”

As you prepare to transition into your next chapter—whatever that exciting adventure might be (and whatever it might look like under the circumstances)—I invite you to reflect on what you now consider “essential.” Perhaps this pandemic and the necessary isolation has actually given you the space to recognize what in your life is essential and what is just noise. Figure that out and don’t waste another minute with the rest. Summon all of your good energy and funnel it into your “essential” pursuits. Imagine you are illustrating Merriam Webster’s definition of “essential;” what image would you put next to “indispensable” and “necessary above all else?” What *is* “of the utmost importance” to you?

I’d like to suggest that some guidance may be found in the literature you’ve read along the way. (What? You thought I would finally get the chance to see you one more time and not talk about books? C’mon...)

Collectively, during your time in your *fabulous* English classes, I hope you’ve experienced a few formative moments through fiction. Perhaps you’ve leapt off the cliff to soar with Milkman in *Song of Solomon* or waited with bated breath to discover which villager drew the black dot in “The Lottery.” Maybe you’ve sat on the porch with Phoeby as Janie tells her life story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or journaled with Justyce McCallister in *Dear Martin*; flown kites with Hassan and Amir in Kabul, or run down the street with Sylvia in “The Lesson,” declaring, “Nobody’s gonna beat me at nothin.”

Now, if you were in my class in ninth grade, this next part will be review!

The best thing, I think, about reading is that books are sometimes **mirrors**—reflecting our familiar identities and experiences back to us, affirming and validating who we are. Books are sometimes windows—offering views into and a chance to explore and understand that which is less familiar, and thus offering us an opportunity to see another’s perspective and grow in our own. We need both. Windows and mirrors.

And my hope is that you read widely in the pursuit of understanding—understanding yourself and building community with others. We need this right now more than ever. Because, as many scholars

and educators tell us, when the lighting is just right, and we're looking closely, the windows can become mirrors reflecting back our *shared* humanity.

To take it one more step, Rudine Sims-Bishop shifts the reading metaphor from a window to a sliding glass door. She writes, "It is the change in our perspective that allows us not only to recognize our shared humanity but also walk through the glass door by means of thoughtful action in our own real lives."

Members of this Class of 2020 are no strangers to thoughtful action. You have been using your voices all along. Some of you have protested and expressed your views through walk-outs for gun control to ensure safer schools, for racial equity and justice and to "Wake Up Wellesley." This is the class of YES—Young Ethnic Scholars—and Black Lives Matter activism that strives to go beyond performance in order to build solidarity and belonging (not just inclusion). You have advocated for changes and policies that create safer spaces for everyone at WHS. You have experience being tenacious leaders. You haven't just read about it in a book. In fact, we are having this ceremony today because you asked for it and persisted in reaching your goal to come together as a community. You took action.

There's just one more thing I want to mention about holding close the "essential" lessons we can learn from literature, and it's a specific example. (If there's one thing you've learned in your four years of English classes, it's how to use textual evidence to back up a claim, right? No, really—you have learned that, right??)

In William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, in which British schoolboys crash onto a tropical island and must organize a society in order to survive, we meet Piggy. As Ralph, the protagonist, recognizes too late, Piggy is wise and true. But Golding also describes Piggy as a corpulent kid with asthma, myopic eyesight, and a penchant for quoting his auntie, and therefore, he never receives the respect he deserves for his intellect and insight. In my favorite scene in the novel, the more dominant boys have just stolen Piggy's glasses and run off, and Piggy plans to confront these peers and demand justice. As he is rehearsing what to say to them, he practices this courageous speech: "Look, I'm goin' to say, you're stronger than I am and you haven't got asthma. You can *see*, I'm goin' to say, and with both eyes. But I don't ask for my glasses back, not as a favor. I don't ask you to be a sport, I'll say, not because you're strong, but because what's right's right. Give me my glasses, I'm going to say—you got to!"

“What’s right’s right...You got to.” Piggy demands justice and strongly believes this moral code to be non-negotiable. It is “essential” to him and his view of humanity. Through Piggy and his resolve, Golding encourages us all to trust our own wisdom, to speak up and effect the changes—even the big systemic ones—you hold to be “right.”

You have now faced historical uncertainty on several fronts, and are facing it still. Do not be afraid. You won’t always have the perfect road map. The perfect recipe for success. The teacher or coach or mentor propping you up with constant validation. You won’t always earn the ‘A’ in what you try to accomplish. So what? That uncomfortable feeling you have when you aren’t sure of the “right” answer or action, that uncertainty—that’s growth. Embrace it. Don’t worry so much about the accolades, the transcript, likes, followers, and retweets. Just let your intellectual curiosity and moral compass, your own code of what’s essential, guide you.

To wrap up, I have one final quotation for you. It’s not from a novel (I read it on Instagram), but it is a play on Charles Dickens’ famous first sentence from *A Tale of Two Cities* (you know the one: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”). This one read: “It was the worst of times, it was the even-worse-than-that of times.” We in this country are living through a major turning point in history which will be studied for many years to come: a global pandemic, a racial reckoning, an economic tipping point—all in a presidential election year. The eyes of future generations are going to be studying this time. Will they be able to tell what was “essential” to you?

In closing, here is my wish for you.

Wherever you go, I hope that you will continue to fight with and for your community, for everyone in it, together, until we all feel a shared sense of equity, dignity, and belonging. You all have your next chapters to write and this time you get to determine your own character, how you look through windows, and face yourself in mirrors. Please throw open that sliding glass door of our shared humanity and step out to act in service of your essential truths. Because “what’s right’s right.” And you’re writing the book on that.

Thank you.