

Good evening and welcome, Mr. Kaden, members of the Board, Dr. Shea, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, guests and members of the class of 2009. We have assembled ourselves here this evening to witness these commencement exercises and to honor the young men and women you see before you for their academic and personal growth and accomplishments. I have said numerous times in numerous venues over the past several weeks, and I'll begin by reiterating it today ... this is a very special group of young people.

I am not going to profess that after 4½ decades on this Earth and twenty years in education, I know it all. No one knows it all, despite what he or she may tell you. Nonetheless, at a time when we are about to propel this group into the real world, I was determined to come up with something meaningful; something that might actually remain with our graduates after the excitement of this weekend subsides. Although I typically jot down thoughts as they come to me throughout the year, this year's epiphany was an ephemeral, but significant reflection that occurred during Memorial Day weekend and one that I'd like to share. In a nutshell, I thought about the way we typically go about addressing the business of our daily lives, education-related and otherwise. I grabbed a pen and documented the following, starting with what I determined life is not about or what it should not be defined by. Here goes ...

- Although sometimes it may seem that way, life is not defined by identification cards, exam grades, or anything of the sort. These are representative of the myriad details we consume ourselves with daily. As important as these details may be or seem, they should contribute very little to your sense of personal worth.
- Life is not about sweating the small stuff and agonizing over minutia. In this regard, I ask that you do as I say and not as I do. I am working on it.
- Life is not defined by a driver's license. Despite what many 17-year olds may think, a driver's license will not transform your life; it has and will continue to cause your parents, as well as your principal, a bit of additional stress. Help us to relax and see the automobile only as what it should always be – a practical and safe means of needed transportation.
- Life is not about holding grudges. It's unhealthy to do so. Let them go and move on.
- Life is not defined by grouches. Keep cheerful friends. The grouches pull you down. Do your best to maintain a positive outlook – a glass “half-full” approach.
- Life is not defined by guilt trips. Take a trip to the mall, Manhattan, to a foreign country, but not to where the guilt is.
- Life is not defined by non-essential numbers. For example, age is simply a frame of mind and we can do nothing about the price of gas.
- Life is not about “keeping up with the Joneses.” In short, it's not about what others have or what's important to others. It's all about what you have and what's important to you and your family.
- Life is not about conformity. Don't necessarily dare to be different, but dare to be yourself. If that doesn't make you different, then something is wrong.

- Life is not about being afraid. Own up to your fears and conquer them in productive fashion. Don't be afraid to make mistakes; if you don't make mistakes, you're not reaching far enough. Don't be afraid to expand yourself, to step out of your comfort zone. That's where the joy and the adventure lie.
- Life is not about appearances. Simply put, life is not about the outward appearance of people and things, but their inner significance.
- That said, life is not defined by what you see on TV, in the movies, or within an X-Box video game. All pre-cast and scripted. Life is not pre-cast and scripted.
- Life is not about making money. Cliché, but true – money can't buy happiness. Argue the point as you may, but the experiences and satisfaction that money produces can be very short lived and don't necessarily add any long-term value and happiness to one's life.
- To quote George Carlin of all people, "life is not defined by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away."

On the contrary, I'd like to share my perceptions of some of the things that might help us to better define life and keep us feeling young and invigorated.

- Life is about loving and finding special people with whom to share the climactic moments, as well the everyday experiences. Surround yourself with whom and with what you love.
- Life is about family and friends. Caring about someone or someones as much as or more than you care about yourself.
- Life is about making routine attempts to make a positive difference in the lives of other beings, human and otherwise.
- Life is about learning. Learn more about technology, to play the guitar, gardening, or whatever. Never let the brain idle. Don't ever minimize the value of your education and your aspirations to take it further.
- Along the same line, life is about gaining experience and learning from mistakes. At one point or another, you are probably going to do something foolish. Deal with it and own up to it. The human brain is a wondrous machine – on the one hand, it drives one to make the mistake; on the other hand, it can make certain that it doesn't happen again.
- Life is about passion – find it in or have it for whatever you do.
- Life is about cherishing your health. If it is good, preserve it. If it is not, improve it. If it is beyond what you can improve, seek help.
- Life is about leaving a place or a situation better than you found it. Members of the Class of 2009 have collectively done just that for Walt Whitman High School.
- Life is about laughing and crying. Laugh often, long and loud. Tears happen on occasion; it is often best to simply let them flow. There will be countless occurrences throughout your life where you will have the chance to laugh and/or cry. Some of us have done both at least four times today alone.
- Life is about expressing your feelings. Do it respectfully, but do it regularly.
- Life is about saying "please" and "thank you." Realize how far such simple words and phrases can take you.
- Life is about embracing differences. Based on my experiences with these young people, this is something that they have been doing throughout their lives.

- Life is about simple things ... a summer barbecue, a walk in the park, a good nap. Baseball, children, and puppies – my own personal metaphors for life’s pleasures. Find yours.
- Life is about how you play the game, not winning or losing. Regardless of the specific “game,” enjoy every moment that you’re in it.
- Life is about fulfilling your dreams. If you can dream it, you can live it as long as you’re willing to work hard enough.
- I don’t recall exactly where I first heard the following metaphor ... life is the art of drawing without an eraser. Never lose sight of the fact that the canvas or template has no boundaries whatsoever.

In reflecting back on the past year and specifically the last few weeks, the Video Yearbook review process sticks in my mind. When the VY staff initially shared with me a draft of the opening animated segment, titled *the Quest to Stop Graduation*, it took me a few days to realize that a detailed investigation of a sinister underground plot was essentially unnecessary. I did, however, continue to question quite a few individuals regarding its true intent. After several such conversations, a particular individual sat in front of me and said and I quote, “Mr. Polansky, don’t you see? We’ve enjoyed our time here. For so many reasons, we are sad to leave.” I am rarely at a loss for words, but that did it, as did the overflowing emotions at the conclusion of the last day of instruction this year. I know that there are varying opinions about the sometimes daily grind associated with high school life, but knowing that such sentiment is engrained within this group of young people clearly adds to the sense of pride within the school community. In terms of graduation, I’ll quote Mr. Joe Pipolo from within that same VY segment, “It’s natural.” Also referencing Mr. Pipolo’s analogy, graduates, you have not reached the top of the ladder today. You have successfully climbed but a few bottom rungs.

Members of the class of 2009 – you are ready. I say this with the utmost of confidence. You are ready to continue ascending the metaphorical ladder. You have achieved academically, athletically, musically, and otherwise, but more importantly, you have grown as individuals and community members. You have developed a sense of admiration and respect for each other, as well as for your school. Your spirit and enthusiasm have been infectious. It now comes the time for you to share your gifts with the world surrounding. There is no doubt in my mind that you leave Walt Whitman High School with the ability and determination to make a positive difference in the lives of others, as well as in your own.

As you pursue your dreams, always remember to take the time to help and serve others, even if doing so slows you down a little. As you continue to explore and develop your unique talents, remain humble, always realizing that your special abilities are gifts not to be taken for granted. As life hands you challenges, welcome them as ways to become smarter and stronger. As you acquire material things, know that your most important possessions are your honesty, integrity, and desire to make that positive difference.

Leave your legacy. I am not talking about leaving your legacy here at Whitman or in any one location. Do many things in life that you, yourself, can be proud of. In the end, you are the one that you must ultimately report to.

One last time, I remind you to enjoy your days the healthy way. Live your lives the meaningful way. Be kind to people and to animals – always remember that the planet is not ours alone. May your path take you everywhere where you wish to go and also bring you an abundance of very pleasant surprises! I am so very proud of each and every one of you. Congratulations and best wishes!