



.David Chamberlain-History Teacher

2019 Graduation Speech

To begin I would like to extend a warm welcome to our guests--family, friends, and alumni--who are gathered here to take part in one of Burke's most eccentric and touching rituals: commencement. On behalf of the school, I offer our gratitude to all of you for supporting our mission and making so many sacrifices to keep the Burke experiment alive.

I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues seated behind me. Their dedication, passion, humor, and optimism inspire me in my own work. Although I was selected to speak here today, I trust that my remarks will speak to their experiences and honor the work they do each day with our students.

And to the graduates, thank you for giving me the privilege to speak on a milestone day in your lives. I hope that my words bring some closure to your time here and perhaps shine a light down the road of life that now winds away from Alpine Lane.

The topic of my address to all of you today is the importance of gambling. This may seem an odd choice at a high school graduation but please hear me out. The word gamble, of course, means to take a risky action in hope of a reward and is often associated with betting money on a game of chance. I'm sure that some of the parents out there at times thought that they were making a gamble of sorts as they wrote out tuition checks. Would this bet pay off by helping my child get into an elite college, by placing them on a national team, or shaping them into a well rounded, more refined human being?

I'm a history teacher so I want to trace this idea of gambling back to the beginning, the beginning of Burke Mountain Academy in 1970. Warren Witherell, the founder of our school,



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began his career teaching at traditional prep schools but was deeply dissatisfied by what passed for education in such places. Against the advice of his friends, he took a gamble and founded a new school where he could realize his vision for education in partnership with his students. The graduates here today are the still-ripening fruits of that initial bet he made nearly 50 years ago.

As I think back to the founding of the school and reflect on my own eight years teaching here, I've come to realize that the gamble that Warren made in founding this school and establishing its peculiar norms was a wager based on optimism. In rereading Warren's manuscript, *One School that Works*, I was struck by his rosy, almost Rousseauian, view of human nature. He believed that young people were inherently curious, full of wonder, leaned toward goodness, and that they had agency over their own lives. The problem with conventional schools, in his view, was that they were built on a deep suspicion about the goodness of people. And thus they imposed a system of rules and strict discipline to control students but ended up only creating schools that bred resentment, unhappiness, and apathy. Burke was founded on the gamble that other schools were wrong, that a school could be designed that maximized students' freedom, allowed them a voice at the table to make decisions, and presumed that they would act ethically rather than unethically.

So much of what they graduates did here daily over their high school lives was shaped by this gamble over the fundamental nature of human beings. The graduates you see before you today never received a grade on a report card here. We wagered that they would learn for the love of learning itself because people are innately curious and find delight in knowledge and truth and that they would keep learning all their lives. The graduates on the stage today shared dormitories with members of the opposite sex. We wagered that they would act with dignity and that this freedom would, over the course of their lives, lend itself toward more mature, respectful relationships. The graduates here participated in lively, passionate, and sometimes contentious all school meetings to address community concerns. We wagered that



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they wanted to have a kind, inclusive, and safe school that is committed to common values and that this experience is critical training for life in a republic. This last point is dear to me. Don't forget, I'm a history teacher. There is a dangerous belief afoot culturally that maintains that citizenship does not require much from us apart from voting and paying taxes. At our all school meetings we tried to foster a much more expansive understanding of citizenship, a citizenship that demands engagement, fact-finding, honesty, collaboration with your friends and especially your adversaries, compromise, empathy, and forgiveness.

In the world of investing, which let's acknowledge is a form of data-driven gambling, there are short term traders, who hope to turn a quick profit on their bet by buying and selling frequently, and there are those who buy and hold for the long term. At Burke, I like to think that the gambles we make with students are of the later, long term variety. The success or failure of the bets we have placed on you are not clear even as you sit here today. Nor will they be certain when you graduate from college in coming years. We will only know the results of the gamble that we made on each of you in the fullness of time.

There have been some "dark nights of the soul," to quote from a 16th-century Catholic mystic when I have questioned whether the systems and culture that we have at our school are too risky a gamble to make on teenagers. It is easy to succumb to pessimism about human nature when you wander into the foul squalor of the dorm in Withy basement and it seems like an excess of freedom has produced feral teenagers. And from the looks of many of the mothers who have seen this same sight I have realized that I am not alone in my doubts. I've held my face in my hands for comfort on a few days after class when I've suspected that the absence of grades is contributing to intellectual enfeeblement. And some of my most earnest students over the years have confided in me that, at times, they have shared similar misgivings. But on those days I've reminded myself that ours is a long term gamble and that the only true test of the Burke gamble is a well-lived life--a life of wonder, of kindness, one that answers the call of the mind and body, and most importantly a life of integrity. As you



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drive away from school today and for all of the days of your life I would ask that you strive to vindicate the optimistic gamble that we made on you when you entered here. Only a life of substance will suffice.

Of course, not all gambles are for such high stakes. Words, like schools, have histories of their own. The word gamble came down to us from the Old English *gamenian* and then morphed into *gammlen* after the Norman conquest of 1066. Both words carried the connotation of jest, of merriment, and play. I hope that the gamble the seniors and their parents made to come to Burke has brought them joy. Seniors, as you reflect back on your experience here I hope it is the playful gambles like the ones you took so often on the training hill or during Darrell's punishing workouts that you remember all your days. But as your old teacher, I hope you came to see that the most rewarding and yes joyous gambling was that which took place in a classroom when you took conversational risks and shared your ideas and interpretations even when you were uncertain or leery of what others would think. It is the intellectual gambles that you made that will remain like fossils of your passing in my own memory.

Graduates, it is vital that you continue to make playful gambles throughout your lives. So approach that intriguing lady or man and try to win a date. Order something off a restaurant menu that you've never tried and can't even pronounce. To borrow from my favorite T.S. Eliot poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, "Dare to eat a peach." Or to use ski speak, which, mind you, is not my native language, hew closely to the fall line and seek out the steep runs for they are the most beautiful and rewarding. Graduates, I hope that you have come to see that gambles are usually worth the risk.

Congratulations to the Burke Mountain Academy class of 2019.