

The Integrity of Creation

Distinguished Trustees, Reverend Swann, honored guests, faculty, staff, families, friends, and graduates, thank you for inviting me to share this special evening with you.

As I was preparing to be with you this evening, I read with great interest your school's statement of mission: "to prepare young men and women for lives of intellectual discovery, integrity, and purpose."

I find this mission extremely moving, and I address you graduates with the firm hope that you have indeed drawn from what is best about this school and now find yourselves well prepared for the lives that lay before you, lives you will indeed approach with a zest for intellectual discovery, a sense of purpose, and a commitment to integrity.

It is this last part—integrity—that inspires my comments this evening. What is it to live with integrity? And why is it so important? Well, we are used to marking integrity among the virtues. And we associate it with good stuff: fairness, truth-telling, maintaining a sterling reputation. We are likely to number it among the "thou shalt nots" and see in the call to integrity a call to hold ourselves back from the sins of lying or shameful behavior.

My guess is that you have learned that lesson pretty well. Your presence here, as graduates of this prestigious institution, already demonstrates that you know how to apply yourselves to hard work, how to remain committed to a goal, and how to avoid and tame the worst in yourself.

So as you stand on the brink of moving from this community in which you are very well known to communities in which others will encounter you for the first time, I invite you to look not just at the restrictive "yin" side of integrity, but at its expansive "yang" side as well. To live a life of integrity, we must not only hold back more than we sometimes want to, we must also press forward and expand ourselves in ways that are not immediately comfortable or comforting.

Integrity is connected to wholeness, to living with your whole best self, to being fully and faithfully yourself. And for many of you, this will be the hard part. You will be tempted not by the sins of transgression, but by the sins of withholding. You will let fear limit your voice and your creativity. You will content yourselves with a good enough version of your self rather than finding the courage to leave it all on the field, and you will narrow your possibilities before you've even begun to explore.

You have probably already closed off a host of nascent self-possibilities. "I am just not artistic," you say to yourself. "Or athletic or good at science. ... I am not a leader or a listener or a hero. ... I can't write or swim or heal others." I encourage you to let that voice go and look at yourself afresh. Integrity demands that you seek out even the small places within and give yourself permission to let them open and grow.

Some of my own greatest joys in my adult life have come from exploring the things I do badly. I took up sketching a few years ago even though "I can't draw." I took up yoga even though "I am not an athlete," and I took up meditation even though "I am not able to relax." In each case, I had to ignore the rule in my head that told me to only do what I already do, to only do what I can already do well, and to only count certain parts of myself.

Make a quick list in your head of all the parts of your being you have already written off. And another list of the ways you hold back from fully expressing even those things that matter most to you. That is your integrity "to do" list.

Earlier this week, I was looking at the opening verses of Genesis with my daughter. We were comparing different translations and looking at the Hebrew text as well. What struck us was how exuberant creation is—an exuberance that comes through clearly in the original language but gets muted in most translations.

Here is the language of creation in the Everett Fox translation—which is explicitly trying to get at the grammar and poetry of the Hebrew original:

G-d said:

Let the waters swarm with a swarm of living beings, and let fowl fly above the earth, across the dome of the heavens!

G-d created the great sea serpents and all living beings that crawl about, with which the waters swarmed, after their kind

G-d saw that it was good.

And G-d blessed them, saying: bear fruit and be many and fill the waters in the seas, and let the fowl be many on earth!

There was setting; there was dawning: fifth day.

G-d said:

Let the earth bring forth living beings after their own kind,

Herd animals, crawling things, and the wildlife of the earth after their kind!

It was [yes]!

G-d made the wildlife of the earth after their own kind, and the herd animals after their kind, and all the crawling things of the soil after their kind.

G-d saw that it was good.

G-d holds nothing back. We don't hear G-d saying, "Well, I don't know if I can make a great sea serpent...I've never done it before...I'm not really the sea serpent type." And G-d doesn't just do creation to get it done—for the grade or the bonus pay or the credential. G-d does it for the sake of making things that are good. G-d creates with a fecundity that can only come from a joyous unfolding of being.

Why make one form of life when there could be many? Why make few when there can be multiples? Why bless one when all can be blessed? You can feel the overflowing delight of G-d's creative acts. It was yes! It was good!

What would happen if we took this as our own model for action? If we brought to our endeavors the same joyful exuberance that G-d brings to creation? What if you began each project in the spirit of "yes" and with the aim of being able to look at its completion and see that you have made something good? Could you see this as a way of living? Could you study for a test in that spirit? Or write a term paper like that? Could you make a sandwich in that mode? Or pack for College? Could you bring that ideal to your work and your play? Think of the world you could make if you and all those in your generation could mirror G-d's creation in your own acts of creation. This is the fullness of integrity, of wholeness.

This summer will be a very special time for you. You are standing between the end of one part of your education and the beginning of another, between the home that has been made for you and the one you will begin to make for yourself, and between your childhood and your adult life. Such transitional moments are sacred. Every human culture marks them with ritual, talismans, gifts and blessings for protection.

My prayer for you is that you will use this magical in-between time wisely. Use it to commit to living with integrity—to living wholly and fully—and to inspiring that way of living in those around you. Take a moment and breathe in the blessings that surround you on this evening, then breathe those blessing out to all you encounter. May the world be a better place because of you and your accomplishments.