

WDS Graduation 2020 Commencement Address **By David Penberg, Ph.D., Head of School**

A gracious and heartfelt “Good Evening” to all of you: parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, family members and to the WDS community, colleagues, faculty and staff, trustees and most especially, to the graduating class of 2020.

Before I begin, there are two things I would like to share. The first is that on the day we rehearsed there appeared a bald eagle. The sighting of one is significant enough. On another level, the bald eagle represents an incredible bird put at risk of extinction through human ignorance; and now represents the best of human ingenuity, in bringing them back from extinction. The other thing is wearing a suit and shoes, something 4 months ago I took for granted. How good it feels to be a social being again at an occasion like this. And tonight is an occasion.

I have to be very honest and say that never in my 35 years in this work did I envision a moment like this. First, that I would be living in a pandemic and second, that I'd be delivering a commencement address in a drive in theatre in Greene county. My experience of Drive Ins is very visceral: as a kid in the 1960's with my parents and brother in the backseat of a black thunderbird in a drive-in located at the foot of the Throgs Neck bridge in the Bronx - experiencing the magic on a big screen.

Well, all the magic of this moment is contained in the 11 lives we've assembled together to celebrate.

To the senior class, you've not merely attained a high school diploma, you have also, by virtue of these last months of virtual learning and pandemic living, earned a graduate degree in life. A course, that is as experiential as it gets: no assignments, no extensions, no text books, no tests - except for one: adapting, coping, managing and maintaining balance in a crisis.

These last months of your graduate course have contained some of life's most precious and requisite skills and dispositions: what we in the world of education have been calling 21st century skills. Let me be explicit:

WOODSTOCK DAY SCHOOL

NURSERY THROUGH GRADE 12

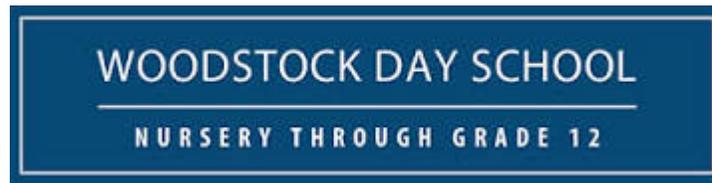
- Managing isolation and the feelings of grief, disconnect and alienation
- Becoming nimble in the face of uncertainty
- Nurturing yourself with structure and routines that build and sustain energy and focus
- Gratitude for the smallest things, taking nothing for granted, like turning to a family member next to you in the car and reminding them how much you love them. I will wait a few seconds.....
- Flexibility and adaptiveness to nearly everything now
- Positivity-- Solution driven in the face of adversity; drawing on the powers of hope, belief and civility to support oneself and others
- Cognitive dexterity: seeing diverse viewpoints, understanding multiple perspectives and appreciating the richness of cultures
- Fortitude-- by humility--and adhering to the staying power and buoyancy of humor
- Commitment: to the things that matter. To taking a stand. To pursuing your dream. To loving and caring. To healing the planet. To live according to your principles
- Kindness: to oneself and others, from a smile of acknowledgment to a passing stranger, to giving your seat on a bus or train or place in line to an elder
- Letting go
- Deploying curiosity and imagination in all endeavors
- Goal setting, one day and week at a time
- Balancing the body and mind
- Eat Sleep and Seek Wellness and Wholeness

There is nothing abstract about these skills and attributes. You've been forced to draw on them every day. And you will need them more than ever.

But I am not going to romanticize what you - what we - have all been experiencing over the last three months, the gamut of emotions: anger, grief, fear, sadness. And you know what? That's Ok. You are not alone. Each of us has been rattled to the core. Yet here we are, standing and celebrating and looking forward. We call this the human spirit.

And as to the world that you are about to inhabit:

I would be disingenuous if I told you the old adage that the world is your oyster. Well, it's no longer about the oyster, because there have never been enough oysters to be equally distributed to begin with, and in the world you are about to enter - even the oyster is at risk.



But, and this is the most important BUT you need to hear and ingest tonight:

This is your moment. This is your time to step up, be heard, and contribute to the changes that this world urgently needs. It is no longer about pursuing our education and our careers as separate pathways from our civic lives and communal responsibilities. Because being on the front lines is also about using your gifts and talents in the service of things, like finding cures for lyme disease, educating children to become stewards of the natural world, making art that illuminates our sense of humanity, building ecologically sound products, making films and music that elevate and color our lives, and healing a very damaged and ailing planet.

This is, most of all, a time of HOPE. The disparities and inequities have been exposed. The curtain of pretense and rhetoric have been laid bare. So in this moment, this turning point not only in your lives, but this nation's, I want you to know this is a time of unification and of solidarity. We are not leaving the world in its unsettled state for you to fix. This is about solidarity. This is about civic mindedness. The need for elders, adults and our children and youth to join together in a way that is unprecedented and life affirming.

I can't finish this commencement without saying something about last week's senior projects and the WDS Film Festival. It was a reminder and an affirmation of the deep wells of talent, vision and humanity of our students. Yes, our world is in a state of tumult. But from where I sit, I see a rebirth, with the guidance of art, science and the hope-filled, mindful, creative, and agile hands of young people like you, parents, teachers and citizens, like us.

With that, graduating Class of 2020, I encourage you to go out to the world and seed it with your projects, visions and energy to make the planet a place of beauty, peace and justice for all.