

Valedictorian Commencement Speech, 55th Commencement Address

Ryan Harvey, Class of 2019

I wasn't quite sure whether it was appropriate to bring my blue and white foam finger, so unfortunately I abstained from doing so. I'd firstly like to extend my gratitude to both my family and the families of all the students celebrating in this commencement. Without your support, many of us would not be here today and I am no exception. I'd also like to extend thanks to the professors and administrative professionals that make this school the prestigious institution of higher learning that it has come to be. To be the valedictorian of the Yale graduating class of 2019 is an honor beyond my limited understanding.

In all seriousness, Manchester Community College has provided for me and so many others the opportunity to pursue higher learning in a way many of us likely thought not possible. Beyond the pragmatic and vocational aims of this school, there is a real and powerful ambition towards the serious pursuit of something which the word "knowledge" does not even begin to describe.

Now that the "Thank You's" are more or less done, let me take advantage of the remaining hour and a half I have to speak to try and approach a topic which I, as someone who knows absolutely nothing about absolutely everything, wish to explore. There has been much talk recently about how much things are changing, and how necessary it is to take drastic steps to attempt to manage that change successfully. What I would like to talk about is where institutions like this one fit into this general feeling that the world is changing before our eyes.

There is an analogy I came across when attempting to write this speech that I feel is very poignant. To change is to endure a trauma, for

we are both the artist crafting our lives and the marble it is crafted out of. This change happens whether or not we have a plan for what we want our statue to look like.

One of my favorite things about this school is the number of students here who truly understand the concept of the words “day in, day out”. The automatic and tedious process of letting your life unfold before you, merely reacting as the chisel hits rather than seeking to take control of the places it strikes. This is where the true value of an education lies, not in some set of soft skills or an economic credential, but in the ability to be aware that you fundamentally are steering the wheel that orients your life. You may not have all of the choices you desire, and sometimes the roads you travel might not take you where you want to go, but it is fundamentally your choice when to take the next turn. I don’t mean to imply that it is easy to take ownership of your perspective on the world, or that it is a tangible thing that once acquired will never leave you. In fact it is so difficult to do so that it requires a near continuous process to have both the serenity to accept the things you cannot change and the courage to try to fix the things you can. To pursue higher learning is to remain hungry for something transcendental, to have faith that you are the one holding the chisel in your life, and you fundamentally can make the statue you are carving actively your own.

This is not to say to rejoice in your own suffering, but to work to become aware that your momentary struggles should not dissuade you from pursuing a meaningful life. This work doesn’t end at a place like Manchester Community College but in fact starts here and hopefully will be able to follow you the rest of your worldly days.

The world that is coming may prove difficult in ways that we tonight cannot even imagine. It is likely that just as things have gotten

better in the past, they could very well become worse in the future. Whether it be climate change, economic recession, war or political instability, there will be challenges that face us that have many portions that are fundamentally out of our control as individuals going about our daily lives. This is where the value of higher learning begins to truly matter. Whether or not we realistically can solve the problems we face is affected by the way we choose to view those problems in ways we cannot ever fully appreciate. To be enlightened is not to possess some magical set of esoteric ideas and gadgets which can solve all of the world's problems, but to know how to not just survive the burdens of the world, but to thrive in them. To find yourself viewing the problems you come to face with the grace of someone who knows that even in the tedious and terrifying hides a breath of the sacred and it is up to you whether or not you wish to seek it.

I think my time has more or less come to a close so I would like to end by thanking all of the students who came to see me at the Academic Support Center's Math lab over the nearly two years I spent working there. You gave me both a newfound love for the field that I had previously been pursuing for economic convenience, and true insight into the nature of learning that I never could have acquired in a classroom or textbook. Congratulations to all of the students here tonight, whether I had the opportunity to help you or not, and may this be the beginning of a wonderful journey towards carving yourself into the best and most beautiful piece of art you can.