

ConVal Graduation
June 17, 2017

Message To Seniors: What Matters?

Thank you for inviting me to speak. I am really honored.

It's the end of your time at ConVal...your last day ever in public school. It's your last day with these beautiful people. This episode of your life is dead—and you are scattered all over the world, never to be taken up in the same form again.

You'll never again hang out in the art room making art. You'll never eat lunch at that table by the window. You won't be able to learn and laugh in the chemistry lab. You'll never again gather with your friends in the library before school. You'll never play for ConVal on these athletic fields again and you'll never play in that band again. You'll never sit under the main stairs with 20 of your closest friends. You will never gather at the fringe of the parking lot and rev your engines together.

Life is full of change and there is no going back in time. That's why it's really too bad you didn't enjoy the moment.

I'll bet you wish you hadn't taken all of those days with your friends for granted!

That sounds harsh but it is real. I'm trying to make sure you feel something! You need to feel the finality because it's too easy not to feel anything. This is a special day and one of the reasons I'm being so blunt is that I think we have lost our sense that some things MATTER in the world. When we lose the sense that some things MATTER, we fail to really live life. We're so afraid to feel pain that we often fail to feel joy...or anything.

I think we have learned how not to care, how not to commit, how to say things don't really MATTER. Our words and conventions often have no meaning. It's easy to be insincere. It's the ultimate cop out—avoid pain and emotion by simply not caring about anything. When you do this, you fail to find anything that really matters to care about (and as a result you start to chase after stuff that DOESN'T matter).

It might be hard for some of you to suddenly start taking things seriously.

Add up how frequently you have heard sarcasm, teasing, and facetiousness as compared to sincere praise, healing words, and blatant honesty. I don't like the numbers I come up with.

Think about all the mean or dumb things we have all done simply because we didn't think anything really mattered.

This is your graduation and it MATTERS—a lot. Look around. There are people in neckties and dresses. People traveled to be here. They sent out invitations to this. Ms. Coyne and Ms. Nixon and others worked really hard on this.

But there are people who ironically dressed down for this. There are some who are secretly mocking this ceremony. Some are downplaying Conval and what you do here and all of your accomplishments. Some people, when they look at you today will congratulate you and say “good riddance to Conval!” Some people just want this ceremony to end so they can go to a cookout.

People do these things partly because they don't know how to deal with how joyous—and bittersweet—your graduation is. Just like people vandalize pretty buildings, or undermine your class elections. It's easier not to care. It's easy to avoid the work of really investing in things. It's easier to be sarcastic than it is to be sincere. It's easier to be flippant than it is to choose your words carefully. But words and actions and things DO matter, and your graduation is still one of those things. I want to say it, over and over, so we can start to get sincerity back.

Since the 1990s (the decade in which you were born) we have done a good job of teaching you to challenge tradition, to not give too much blind allegiance to what doesn't matter—and I am all in favor of that. I celebrate critical thinking. But we haven't done a great job of helping you to fill in what DOES matter. And thus, irony and insincerity rule the day.

Princeton professor Christy Wampole wrote about how insincere we have become in a New York Times article in 2012: “Irony is the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices....To live ironically is to hide in public. It is flagrantly indirect, a form of subterfuge....Somehow, directness has become unbearable to us.”

I think she's got it. She continues:

“If life has become merely a clutter of kitsch objects, an endless series of sarcastic jokes and pop references, a competition to see who can care the least, it seems we've made a collective misstep.”

I think we have been living in a state of self defense since the 1990s, telling ourselves that we don't care, so we can avoid dealing with the pain of the day to day, the fear of failure, and the risk of being criticized. But living this way has not made us tougher—the opposite, we are soft, morally, noncommittal on too many things that really matter. We make vague statements that have no grounding in Truth. And we can easily bail out because we don't really CARE. We have undermined honesty, ignored injustice, developed our bunker mentality that protects us from the world yet makes us more selfish and less caring about things that really matter. “We need to be better.”

We are so surrounded by irony that it clouds our ability to see sincerity when it is right in front of us. Remember when watching *The Office* that behind all the irony and cringing, the show has heart. When Michael was the only person to show up at Pam's art opening, you should have had a lump in your throat. Michael showed a sense of what MATTERS. Or on *Parks and Recreation* when Ron Swanson's gruff exterior melts away and he shows his care for Lesley. He could occasionally set aside his snark and show love. While those characters can be remarkably (yet typically) shallow, there is enough heart and goodness to keep it from going over the edge. I feel as though we are headed over that edge.

For teenagers, irony takes many forms. The kid who laughs it off when he gets another F? It probably hurts too much for him to start caring now. That kid who only likes music that no one else has heard of? He could be avoiding criticism by liking something esoteric and mysterious. He might as well have a girlfriend in Canada too. The cool hipster wearing a trucker hat ironically? It sort of says "I don't care about fashion," but it sure seems like he's trying to look a certain way. Those people can so easily bail out from criticism by simply stating that you don't understand what they mean. Those are benign examples, but I think we all know those people who practice this dishonesty in much more dangerous ways. They make sexist jokes; They make racist comments; They "playfully" bully people—but they're just kidding. They make jokes about their misbehavior, but you can never tell if they're being serious (they are). It's all in good fun, but it's a symptom of a big problem; we are becoming untethered, because we have forgotten that things MATTER.

We need to take some things seriously and be more sincere.

But taking things seriously and feeling sincerity doesn't just mean acknowledging the harsh reality and the pain of life. It also means feeling true joy for real things that MATTER. When we recognize that some things really MATTER, we can move beyond shallow living and experience real joy. Sensual satisfaction will be no substitute for a lasting, loving relationship. Creating something will be far more satisfying than buying something. Watching baseball highlights can be fun, but watching a real game that unfolds over time will have a certain beauty to it. Mocking an experience might be good for cheap laughs or temporary comfort, but it will not compare to the tears of joy you will be shedding at a funeral, a wedding, or a graduation.

So let's practice by looking at today for just how special it is. Don't be sarcastic about it. Don't downplay it. Don't say things you don't mean and then hide behind the fact that you were just kidding. Look someone in the eye, feel that awkwardness until it melts away and you feel the warmth, and you see deep into someone else's soul, for a change. When we do this, we will feel sad for all that we're leaving behind, but we'll also feel full joy for having experienced it at all. And if we start today, maybe we can all be part of a movement that lives life more deeply, more meaningfully. We can create a world where your word means something. Being there for someone matters.

Defending the powerless is good. Breaking the endless cycle of selfishness means something. Things MATTER. And when we discover that they matter (or we MAKE them matter) we will experience the joy so much more.

When someone says "please don't do that," let's assume they mean it.

When someone says "this is meaningful to me," let's ask them why, and listen for a real answer.

Notice that the pressure is on the speaker as well as the listener in those examples. If we want people to treat us as if we're being sincere, we have to reciprocate by actually being sincere in our actions.

We need to counter the wave of irony, cynicism, and sarcasm. We need to give meaning to things.

You can do it. We give meaning to things all the time: the sticker in the back of our cars that honors the memory of Cole. That is just a sticker, but it has deep meaning. We are giving it meaning.

Things have meaning. Words have meaning.

One of my favorite thinkers, Henri Nouwen says it this way: "We choose love by taking small steps of love every time there is an opportunity. A smile, a handshake, a word of encouragement, a phone call, a card, an embrace, a kind greeting, a gesture of support, a moment of attention, a helping hand, a present, a visit...all these are little steps toward love. Each step is like a candle burning in the night. It does not take the darkness away, but it guides us through the darkness. (When we look back after many small steps of love, we will discover that we have made a long and beautiful journey)."

Nouwen is talking about sincerity in life. Things matter. Attitudes matter. Actions matter. Graduation matters. Words matter. We need to practice. I'll start: "Today is a big day. I am here for you. I am incredibly proud of you. I love you."