

GRADUATION DAY: ON PLANS and STORIES, WITH AFFECTION...

June 16, 2018

Dear graduating students of ConVal High School 2018, Dear parents and families and friends, Dear district and high school staff and faculty, Dear everyone, Good morning.

For reasons I hope will become clear, I have titled this speech “GRADUATION DAY: ON PLANS and STORIES, WITH AFFECTION”

And before digging in, let me say as a student and graduate of ConVal, as a once young teacher at ConVal who then went away and then came back a not-young teacher, I am fortunate to be a part of this community -- as I have always been.

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Dear ConVal class of 2018, I am lucky to have met and come to know something of many of you during your time here at ConVal. And I am lucky, and a little daunted, to have been asked to join you as a speaker on this day.

This is a beautiful June morning, and I will do my best to share just a little bit of what has been on my mind and in my heart and body and bones as I have thought about things and about you these past few days.

The truth is the first time I came to ConVal, I hadn't really planned to. It was the summer of 1978, I was eleven years old and through some neighborly and fluky confluence of circumstances hard to imagine unfolding today, I ended up working, part-time, in nearby Greenville, where I grew up, working for a seventy-something-years-old, semi-retired Acme Chemical Co. salesman – I'm serious, named Albert Delano Bourke. As a side note, I have to say I've only ever heard of two Delano's in my life, and there, too, I count myself lucky, because most of us, I suspect, only know one.

Now, Albert Delano Bourke sold custodial supplies to public institutions, mostly schools. And as a matter of what we now may think of as an old-school practice, Mr. Bourke liked to deliver some small part of his school district, town, or other municipality roster of clients' custodial supply orders himself. I suspect, in order to keep up relationships and monitor the custodial supply field's ever-changing landscape. This modest and somewhat quirky collection of clients, captained mostly by custodians, that Mr. Bourke and I served, were mostly in places -- small towns, really -- situated along the Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire borders.

Now, as I have already said, the first time I came to ConVal, I hadn't really planned to. I woke up that July morning; got dressed -- a well-appointed olive green tank top with darker green piping and Tough-skins jeans; I had breakfast – Skippy peanut butter on white buttered toast, and I went to work. The only thing I knew that warm July morning

was Mr. Bourke and I were going to head out of town to make some deliveries – in Jaffrey, then Peterborough, and then Hillsborough. Maybe we'd be home before lunch, maybe after. Now, because I was eleven and because I lived in Greenville, these towns I had passed through with my folks, but I didn't know them really. Still, I was up for the adventure, plus I was earning \$2 an hour.

The first time I came to ConVal when I hadn't really planned to, we entered through the loading dock, and I helped lug boxes of toilet brushes and urinal cakes, of aerosol cans of gum remover, 5 gallon pails of floor stripping chemicals and floor wax, countless boxes of trash bags—clear and buff. I met ConVal's head custodian that day, George Johnson was his name I think – though I can be shaky with names, and I remember George Johnson, an older man himself, spoke to Mr. Bourke with calm and respect.

Now this story doesn't have high stakes. It's pretty mild as far as "first time" stories go. We could call it a human interest story, and maybe you can tell I sort of like this story. I mention it because I think of it regularly – in fact I park near the loading dock often these days: and when I think of this story, it joins one of probably hundreds if not thousands of quick thoughts and stories I encounter in my head and heart and body and bones and that I encounter in the external world every day.

And as is the way with such things, this particular story from when I was eleven, the *thought* of it, often makes me smile a little, it makes me feel good.

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First time I came to ConVal: I *tell* this story every once in a long while. This isn't my first time telling it, I admit. I may have told some of you. It's one of those stories. You have one, too. We all have them. We all have lots of them.

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First Time stories, all kinds of stories, we understand, help us connect -- with ourselves and with other people, and they help us understand the world. They help us feel alive. These stories, thoughts too, as we know, have energy, and they can work in positive, negative, or somewhere-in-between ways.

Today, most of us can guess, is an obviously good day for good stories -- for short, long, maybe weird, maybe kind, and certainly, celebratory stories.

And if we think about it, really, any communication, report, description, remembrance, however brief -- any object made, even, can be called a story. *A best friend says, "She arrived five minutes ago!" A class advisor says, "It's not going to rain on Saturday." An Auntie says, "You always liked bright socks with stripes!" A Colleague says, "She brought her famous five-alarm queso dip.*

That's another interesting thing about stories. We tell them in the moment, and while at times the telling serves a purpose, stories also generally point to something in the past or something in the future.

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Another story, and one I have paraphrased for classes once in a while, comes from the diplomat and public servant, John Kenneth Galbraith, who according to the impressive and dedicated writer and teacher of writing, Donald Murray, said, "There is your truth, and my truth, and the truth."

One could say also, "There is your story, and my story, and the story." Hmmm. *The Story*.

A substantial part of my livelihood over the years has come from ways of considering The Story. And as part of my work in recent years, I have spent time reading David Loy, who is a professor and writer of Eastern Philosophy. And one of the things from him I learned is that it wasn't until the 17th century that western cultures really started to make the distinction between stories that are true and stories that are factually true.

Loy's observation makes me wonder about stories then and stories now. I wonder if cultures back then had a greater capacity to discern and embrace the truth in all their stories. And, naturally, I wonder about now. What capacity do we, today's culture, have to discern and embrace the truth in *all our* stories?

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Class of 2018, the effect of having met and known you just a little bit over these years is I know I have barely begun to hear and know your stories and the truths in each of them. And I know that your stories will keep changing.

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On graduation day and the lead up and for a little while after, one inevitable story to come up for you is the story or topic called "Plans." It's an understandable and curious phenomenon around graduation time.

Many of us here today will hear or say or think: *What are you doing after the graduation today? What are you doing this evening? For the summer? For next year? For your life?*

Be sure, plans are a kind of story, too, of course. Plans are stories about the future. And in a way, plans are great. I love to plan – at least some of the time. Most of us do. And I love hearing people's plans. Listening to other people's plans, I suppose, provides us with the vicarious, exciting, and informative experience of living a life that isn't quite our

own, but in some way could be. And in part, such experiences, make us reflect on our own current raft of plans, or our own current lack of plans. We think, *Oh, maybe I could work at that job or start a business like that. Maybe I could study what they're studying. Or even, Oh, I'd never fall for something or someone like that!*

One way and another, we all make and attempt to follow our plans – be they grand or small. We set off most days and nights to tend to them. And often as not, I suspect, we look back on these days and nights, and to ourselves or others, we tell some story of how we followed or deviated or altogether abandoned our plans.

Class of 2018, if you can manage it, don't worry too much about plans. Ask most people how they got to where they are today, and most will admit much of it wasn't planned.

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On your graduation day, ConVal Class of 2018, the best my brain and heart and body and bones can give you is about stories and plans.

We live in a time super-saturated with stories and thoughts and communications and reports. Do your best to be discerning about these things, be discerning with the stories you hold on to, and the ones you repeat. We have hundreds and thousands of stories -- about life, about events, about plans, about high school, about each other – our friends, our class- and teammates, our co-workers and family, our teachers and peers.

Be discerning with your stories: What ones will we hold onto and for how long and to what end?

And as much as you can, remember the richest things in life – love and friendship and service and laughter and hard work and rest, a good life – are often found by dropping all our stories – whether they're positive, negative, or somewhere in between.

Drop these stories, leave them all alone, and on a regular basis. When by yourself and with others, make room for no story, no thought -- no action even. Instead enjoy the quiet and the stillness for a while. And no worries, from there, soon enough, new experiences will unfold, and new plans and new stories.

Plans and no plans, stories and no stories, make room for all of it. You have room for all of it.

Much love and affection to you Class of 2018. Congratulations!

Jason Lambert
Message To Seniors
ConVal High School Graduation
June 16, 2018