

Graduation Speech- Conserve School- 24 May 2009- Paul McLeod

Seniors- congratulations on your graduation. You have the honor of being the last group of students to graduate from Conserve as a 4 year high school. It makes me nostalgic.

In April of 2000 I stumbled onto a listserv post on the internet- it sounded flaky and read something like this. A boarding school will be opening in the Wisconsin northwoods on 1200 acres of pristine wilderness. Teachers needed in the following areas. Colon. Biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, geology, English, math, etc. One month later I was standing on this very spot. There was no building here yet- instead, people were arm-waving about what an amazing building was to be erected here. There were only a handful of people here at that time, but the place was filled with imagination, creativity, and potential energy.

We all return to certain references to guide us through our lives. For some, its passages from literature, for others, parables from the scriptures. For me it tends to be scenes from movies. One of the scenes that replays over in my mind is from a haunting film called "Raging Bull" that I first saw around 30 years ago. Robert DeNiro plays the boxer Jake LaMotta and the film tracks his rise and fall. During his fall, LaMotta needs money, and he had only one remaining valuable possession- a gigantic silver belt encrusted with rubies and sapphires that said "world middleweight champion 1949". He phones a pawnbroker to establish the belt's value and to negotiate a price- and then before he brings the belt to the pawnbroker he takes out a hammer, bangs the jewels off the belt, and wraps them in a handkerchief. When he shows up with just the jewels in a handkerchief, the pawnbroker, baffled, asks what happened to the belt. Lamotta explains that he just brought over what made the belt valuable. Then the pawnbroker explains that the jewels represent just a small fraction of what makes the belt valuable, since after all, it's the only belt of its kind in the world. We pity LaMotta for his cluelessness. He is pathetic.

One of the recurring themes in my life is that I have no problem agreeing with people that certain things have great value, but when we try to quantify what that value is and from what it derives, we find we have serious disagreement. The first time I saw the film "Raging Bull", I was in the process of trying to stop the accelerating pace of the demolition of historic buildings in downtown Missoula, MT. The public thought of the buildings as a shared resource, a critical part of their sense of place. The building owners thought of the buildings as private property subject to demolition at will. We argued with the building owners that the buildings promote commerce for downtown businesses, we argued that the buildings were irreplaceable works of art, and we argued that quality of life derives from working and living in a beautiful and historic place. Arguing didn't work. The best we got was that building owners said that after demolition, they would place some of the ornate architectural fragments in our museums or parks. Jewels in a handkerchief. The acceleration of demolition was finally slowed in the late 1980s with Reagan-era tax incentives and growing public awareness that historic preservation is a financial gain rather than loss.

Conserve School had a mysterious beginning. In the film Citizen Kane, wealthy magnate Charles Foster Kane utters the word “rosebud” on his deathbed and provokes an international quest to discover its meaning. Conserve School was James Lowenstine’s rosebud. The posthumous announcement that Lowenstine’s trust would finance a high school on his estate generated confusion, argument, fear, excitement, hope and planning. By 2002 the school had taken shape, and by 2009 no one would argue that we had created something which had great value. Unfortunately, Conserve school is not a shared resource. It is private property subject to the will of its owners. You have had no voice- you have not even been invited into the conversation- if you have good suggestions on how to preserve the school, please keep them to yourself. Even the court has confirmed that you are not invited to participate in the court proceedings. I have no doubt that the players on both sides of the Conserve issue have differing opinions on what makes this a valuable resource. I’d like to take the opportunity to share with you my very personal opinion of what is valuable to me:

Seniors- I like being able to make fun of you.

I like it even better when you make fun of me.

I like when you challenge my ideas in class.

I like when you bug me to take you into the field- even when its cold or raining or snowing.

I like the fact that I have to run to urbandictionary.com every time I talk to you.

I like that I need you to tutor me in computer software.

I like watching you evolve from naive children to capable adults.

I like that you think that I’m smarter than I really am.

I like that you add color to my remote life- like the fact that I share my dorm with a reincarnation of a Prussian Kaiser.

I like that there are guys like Ivan who have taken every single class I’ve ever taught and still want to come back to sit in on more classes.

I like that boys and girls develop such a close connection to each other- something I had trouble doing when I was in high school.

I like that we celebrate the inner nerds in all of us. Nerds have always ruled at Conserve, and I’m especially proud that we have created a safe place for nerds. I worry about what will happen to the nerds that we send back to their old schools.

I like winding down my evenings relaxing in the Rajkumar’s living room watching Dora the Explorer.

I like that the students have created a Paul McLeod appreciation society on facebook.

I like when you discover of what you will study in college- and when some of you even tell me that your work in my classes has helped to determine your path in college.

I like the sense of community that has been the source of much of my strength during my years here, and I’ll look forward to our ongoing sense of community long after the school has been dismantled.

I don’t know what the people who made the decision to close the school found valuable about our community. I would be interested to find out.

When I first told my friends I was moving to Wisconsin to live with teenagers in a boarding school, they laughed hysterically. You've never been a teacher, they said. You've been living in the Bolivian jungles for the last 5 years. You've never had anything to do with teenagers. What makes you think you'll like teenagers? What makes you think teenagers will like you? Why did they even hire you? Man. They had good points. But it was a good choice both for me and for the school. It was fun and rewarding to build our community- and to embark on a hundred different research projects. It has been by far the most work-intensive project of my life and it has also been my biggest personal and professional success- its our biggest success. By the year 2000, the mission statement had already been drafted. I was commissioned with the first group of teachers to develop the conserve focus, values, and pledge, and we took that task very seriously. The environmental focus was a natural. Interestingly, the school chose to hire a mining geologist to teach environmental science- what an offbeat and wonderful idea. Sustainability was a rare thing to have as a focus in 2002. By 2009 most independent schools mention sustainability in their missions. On the surface, sustainability is about the environment, but we also speak of it as an overarching principle- we speak of the sustainability of systems, of governments, of peace, the sustainability of education in the face of stress. I enjoy being a spoiler on sustainability by suggesting that no two people define sustainability in the same way, and that depending on how you define it, its not possible to achieve sustainability in any system which experiences steady growth. This raises the important question of how you can be intellectually honest with teenagers without scaring the crap out of them.

This brings us to our focus on ethics. Teaching about right vs. wrong and how we come to those decisions. Notice that we don't say the focus areas are Environment, Innovation, and Law- because law is carefully spelled out. It's a no-brainer to obey the law. But if you look at the ethical values on our badge- compassion, honesty, justice, respect, responsibility- its an enormous challenge to uphold these values. If a member of our community demonstrates a lack of respect for another, or a lack of compassion, its not against the law. Its not against the law to lack compassion or to lack respect. So how do we address a disregard for these values that we have pledged to uphold? Do we work to educate the offenders? Do we expel offenders from the community? Do they expel themselves by not embracing our values? Do we do nothing? Or do we decide that if these values are too difficult to uphold, then we should come up with a new list of values that are easier to uphold. This year, as a community, we've done a poor job upholding our professed values, so I wonder if its time we created a new set of values that we will be able to uphold.

Seniors- I'll ask you a rhetorical question. You can think about it in your spare time. Is there a pricetag on your ethics? It's a serious question. George Bernard Shaw famously argued that everyone's ethics are negotiable and that the only thing left to determine is what that price is. Its an uncomfortable thing, but every day we see people who have figured out what their pricetag is, and sometimes its not even a very high price. One could make a cogent argument that Bernie Madoff is the most ethical man in America, because he held out for the enormous price of 50 billion dollars before selling his ethics. Are there circumstances under which you will sell out your principles?

If you walk around the LAB and look in the classrooms you will see some familiar portraits on the walls. Gandhi, Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela. We teach about these guys, but in addition, we venerate them. Interestingly, they were all criminals- that is, they all broke the law and they all went to jail for their crimes. Each of these men decided there was an ethical problem with the law, and they decided that when ethics and law conflict, it is imperative that one be guided by the principles of ethics rather than by law. Thoreau thought it unjust that his taxes supported war, Mandela fought government mandated apartheid in South Africa, Gandhi fought against both unjust taxation and discrimination, and King fought an Apartheid-like system supported by federal and state law right here in the US. These four men all decided that it is ethically justifiable and honorable to break the law in order to uphold ethical principles.

Students learn not just from the good things they see adults do, they also learn from adults who make mistakes. And mistakes have been made at Conserve this year. Nevertheless, the students have learned remarkable lessons. The way that your parents and alumni mobilized and responded to what they saw as an ethical problem was nothing short of an inspiring miracle, and as an educator, I find it satisfying that you had your parents and Conserve alums as models of ethical behavior. In addition, you read legal briefs and complaints, you participated in acts of civil disobedience, and you exercised your ability to argue ethics just like you learned to do in seminar class. These experiences will serve you well in your futures. You've all read "The Tragedy of the Commons"- you all know about the need to protect and serve the public good. Now you know something about non-profit corporations and their need to serve the public good. Protection of the public good, protection of the environment, protection of human and civil rights, protection of freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. I am banking on you to become adult leaders who guard all of these things. Be passionate about ethics. Be passionate about what you study in college. Be passionate about the new sense of place you will be experiencing, especially if it's a historic place. Be passionate about your new communities. Be activists. Don't stand by and watch bad things happen. Be fair leaders, remembering that there is a difference between authority and leadership. Authority exercised without the benefit of leadership with judgment, vision, and a focusing ethical mission will never lead to a sustainable desirable future. When you lead, be sure to regularly ask your followers "How's my driving?". Plan ahead. If you don't plan ahead, then you might be forced to make catastrophic knee-jerk reactions to predictable adversity. Don't ever forget to honor your commitments. It's what gives you integrity. It will be your most valuable asset. Finally, don't ever settle for jewels in a handkerchief. Protect what is valuable.

Make this world a better place for our little friend Riya Rajkumar. Good luck class of 2009.