Each year on the eve of Commencement, the Senior Dinner is held. A gathering of students and faculty, the focus of the evening are the brief speeches given by teachers about each member of the class. These remarks can be affectionate, funny, moving, and meaningful to the students and teachers alike.

The Senior Dinner also gives me the chance to share a more personal message with the boys. While the subject of my remarks may change annually, the theme often has to do with boys defining their “true north” or convictions about values and ethics and, in this case, both serendipity and sorting out their true political convictions.

It was a perfect New England fall day. The trees were aflame and the noise and anticipation were building for the kick-off at the varsity football game, where most of my freshman team teammates were spending their afternoon.

I chose to spend my Saturday afternoon in the library. The empty library. I was baffled by my readings in history and poli sci. I needed all the time I could get so that I might be able to understand Marc Bloch’s *French Rural History* and Richard Barnet’s *Roots of War*.

After a few hours of plodding through these readings, I left my seat to wander the stacks. No matter what, I was not going to leave the library.

I was in the W section in fiction. I randomly grabbed a book: *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe. I had never heard of Thomas Wolfe, only Tom Wolfe. I opened the book and read the first few paragraphs.

In many ways, everything changed at that moment. I returned to my study carrel and dove into the book. I returned to my dorm room and read more. Wolfe’s sentences can extend into pages. The breathlessness of his prose and the story itself drew me in deeper and deeper. I read his next book, *Of Time and the River*. Then I read biographies and works about his editor, the highly regarded Maxwell Perkins. I was caught in a web of all things Thomas Wolfe—I could not get enough.

I share this with you because there is something very powerful about serendipity. Wolfe inspired me to write, to mimic his style, and to tell stories. Finding that book set me on an independent intellectual journey, one that I crafted. I was following my interests. I built the syllabus. I determined the pace of my learning. I am not advocating going rogue and ignoring your responsibilities—absolutely not. I found a way to fill some of my free time by pursuing my interest in all things Wolfe. It was exciting and fulfilling and meaningful.

You will have very specific and demanding responsibilities for your courses. You will have commitments beyond the classroom that will make demands on your time and energy.
The challenge for us all is to live in a way that is consistent with our true north—that we are guided by those foundational beliefs in all that we do.

Be open to moments of serendipity. It might be wandering the stacks and grabbing a random book. It might be attending a lecture on an unfamiliar or seemingly uninteresting subject. It might be taking a class that will stretch you in multiple ways. I can’t tell you, tonight, that Thomas Wolfe is on my shoulder daily, but that experience opened my mind up in a way that would not have happened otherwise. It was, for me, a turning point—a big step in my intellectual self-reliance and independence.

November 8, 2016 will be a big day for you. An historic day. You will cast your first vote to elect the 45th President of the United States.

You have a choice to make, now. Will your decision be based on blogs, tweets, and talking heads, or will you do the hard work of sorting out your fundamental beliefs about the needs of the nation and your well-considered view of the role of government in addressing our nation’s challenges?

In light of the events of this year and in anticipation of the election, I would next like to read a few passages from Dr. King and then President Johnson.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider. (Letter from Birmingham Jail, August 1963)

But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and State of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life.

Their cause must be our cause too, because it is not just Negroes but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome. (Letter from Birmingham Jail, August 1963)

This great, rich, restless country can offer opportunity and education and hope to all—all black and white, all North and South, sharecropper and city dweller. These are the enemies—poverty, ignorance, disease—they are our enemies, not our fellow man, not our neighbor. And these enemies too—poverty, disease, and ignorance—we shall overcome. (Voting Rights Act Address, March 1965)

It is 50 years later. Where are we as a nation? Are we satisfied with our progress or do we have more work to do? As of today, matters of race and economic inequality may be at the center of the campaign. Some candidates will invoke Johnson and King. Others will repudiate them.

This is the time of year when commencement speakers opine on the next generation solving the problems created by the older generation. I do not think that that is an empty trope. Regardless of your political views, I believe that you—your generational cohort—will lead our nation in narrowing the gap between our ideals and reality. You led us this year. I am confident that it will continue—and pray that it does.

Finally, I ask that you think about your true north; that is, your bedrock beliefs about ethics, government, and justice. Your moral compass will develop more in the years ahead. But you do not start the process at zero. The challenge for us all is to live in a way that is consistent with our true north—that we are guided by those foundational beliefs in all that we do.

Serendipity—embrace it. Our nation’s future and your vote—take it seriously. Finding your true north—work at it and live it.