

## **Anna Quindlen's Commencement Address to the Hamilton College Class of 2006**

It's a pleasure and a privilege to be with all of you here today. Commencement speeches are the most difficult speeches I ever give. This is a transformative moment in your life and in that of all your families. It's also a day of great celebration, and I am keenly aware that I am now all that stands between you and your diplomas, and the parties for the rest of the day.

So I will be brief. My text is a simple one.

"Be Not Afraid."

It is an old and honorable directive, found with some variation in both the Old and the New Testaments. That is because it is the secret of life. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point."

Fear not.

Oh, I have enough of a memory to know that at some level it's preposterous to say that to all of you at this moment. You are certainly afraid of leaving what you know, of seeking what you want, of taking the wrong path, of failing the right one. Your closest friends are going in one direction and you are going in another. From this small, serene, safe pond, you go through that iron estuary at the end of the road to the ocean. And often the current will be harsh, and the rip tides will be rough.

But you have to learn to put fear aside or at least refuse to allow it to rule you. It is fear that tamps down our authentic selves, turns us into some patchwork collection of affectations and expectations, mores and mannerisms, some treadmill set to the prevailing speed of universal acceptability, the tyranny of homogeny, whether the homogeny of the straight world of suits or the spiky world of the avant garde.

The voices of conformity speak so loudly.

Don't listen.

People will tell you what you ought to think and how you ought to feel. They will tell you what to read and how to live. They will urge you to take jobs they themselves loathe, and to follow safe paths that they themselves, find tedious.

Only a principled refusal to be terrorized by these stingy standards can save you from a Frankenstein life made up of others outside expectations grafted together into a poor semblance of existence. You can't afford to do that. That's what has poisoned our culture, our communities, and our national character. No one does the right thing from fear. And so many of the wrong things are done in its long shadow. Homophobia,

sexism, racism, religious bigotry, xenophobia: they are all bricks in a wall that divides us; bricks cast on the clay of fear, fear of that which is different or unknown.

Our political atmosphere today is so dispiriting because so many of our leaders are leaders in name only. They are terrorized by polls and focus groups, by the need to be all things to all people, which means that they wind up being nothing at all.

Our workplaces are full of fear: fear of innovation, fear of difference. The most widely used cliché in management today is to "think outside the box". The box is not only stale custom, it is terrified paralysis. It is not only that we need to think outside it. We need to flatten it and put it outside for the recyclers.

In my own business, fear is the ultimate enemy. It accounts for censorship, obfuscation, the dumbing down and homogenization of the news when sharp, brave, fearless news is more necessary today than ever before.

Without fear or favor the news business must provide readers and viewers with stories, even if those are stories the powerful do not want you to hear and do not want us to publish or disseminate.

Too often our public discourse fears real engagement or intellectual intercourse; It pitches itself at the lowest possible level of homogenization, always preaching to the choir, so that no one will be angry. Which usually means that no one will be interested.

What is the point of free speech if we're always afraid to speak freely? Not long ago I asked a professor of religion what she did to suit the comfort level of the diverse group of students of various religions in her class. And she replied, "It is not my business to make people comfortable. It is my business to educate them." I nearly stood up and cheered. If we fear competing viewpoints, if we fail to allow the unpopular or even the unacceptable to be heard because of some sense of plain-vanilla civility, it is not civility at all. It is the denigration of human capacity for real thought, the suggestion that we are fragile flowers incapable of disagreement, argument, or civil intellectual combat.

Forget fragile flowers. You have to be smart and sure and strong enough to overcome the condescending notion that opposing viewpoints are just too much for us to bear -- in politics, in journalism, in business, in the academy.

Open your mouths. Speak your piece. Fear not.

Believe me, you are not alone in lacking courage. We parents have been paralyzed by fear as well. When you were first born, each of you, I can guarantee you our great glory was in thinking you absolutely distinct from every baby on the face of the earth. You were a miracle of singularity, and we knew it in every fiber of our being. You shouted "dog." You lurched across the playground. You put a scrawl of red paint next to a squiggle of green and we put it on the fridge, and said, ohmigod, ohmigod, you are a painter, a poet, a prodigy, a genius.

But we are only human, and being a parent is a very difficult job, more difficult than any other because it is 24/7, because it is unpaid and unrewarded much of the time,; because it requires the shaping of other people which is an act of extraordinary hubris. And over the years we have learned to want for you the things that you did not necessarily want for yourself. We learned to want the lead in the play, the acceptance to our own college, the straight and narrow path that sometimes leads absolutely nowhere. We learned sometimes to fear your differences, not to celebrate them. Sometimes we were convinced conformity would make life better or at least easier for you. Sometimes we had a hard time figuring out where you ended and we began.

Guide us back to where we started. Help us not to make mistakes, out of fear or out of love. Learn not to listen to us when we are wrong. Begin today to say no to the Greek chorus that thinks it knows the parameters of a happy life, when all it knows is the dumbing down of human experience.

There is plenty to fear out there. Two years ago I gave into myself, writing a column at just this time called "An Apology to Graduates," telling the class of 2004 how sorry I was about the unremitting stress they had been under all their young lives.

In part I wrote, "There's an honorable tradition of starving students; it's just that, between outsourcing of jobs and a boom market in real estate, your generation envisions becoming starving adults. Caught in our peculiar modern nexus of prosperity and insolvency, easy credit and epidemic bankruptcy, you also get toxic messages from the culture about what achievement means. It is no longer enough to make it, you must make it BIG. You all will live longer than any generation in history, yet you were kicked into high gear earlier, as well. Your college applications look like the resumes for middle-level executives. How exhausted you must be.

Well, here is what might await you: you will be offered the option of now becoming exhausted adults, convinced that no achievement is large enough, with resumes as long as short stories. But what if that feels like a betrayal of self, a forced march down a road trodden by other feet at the end of which is -- nothing you really care for?

Fear not. Remember Pinocchio? There is a Jiminy Cricket on your shoulder. It is you, your best self, the one you can trust. The only problem is that it is sometimes hard to hear what it says because all the external voices and messages are so loud, so insistent, so adamant. Voices that loud are always meant to bully.

Do not be bullied.

You already know this. I just need to remind you. Think back. Think back to first grade when you could still hear the sound of your own voice in your head, when you were too young, too unformed, too fantastic to understand that you were supposed to take on the protective coloration of the expectations of those around you, when you were absolutely, certainly, unapologetically yourself. And I think what the writer Catherine

Drinker Bowen once wrote a half century ago: "Many a man who has known himself at 10 forgets himself utterly between 10 and 30." Many a woman, too.

I have a pocket size edition of the Tao that I keep on my desk. I read a passage from it every day. Keeps me honest. The section I like best reads:

"In dwelling, live close to the ground. In thinking, keep to the simple. In conflict, be fair and generous. In governing, don't try to control. In work, do what you enjoy. In family life, be completely present."

When you are content to be simply yourself and don't compare or compete, everybody will respect you.

We live in a world in which the simple, the generous, the enjoyable, and the completely present, above all the simply yourself, sometimes seem to be as out of reach as the moon. Do not be fooled. That is not because anyone has found a better way in the millennia since the Tao was written. It is because too often we are people shadowed by fear. The ultimate act of bravery does not take place on a battlefield. It takes place in your heart, when you have the courage to honor your character, your intellect, your inclinations, and yes, your soul by listening to its clean, clear voice of your own direction, instead of following the muddled messages of a timid world.

Samuel Butler once said, "Life is like playing a violin solo in public, and learning the instrument as one goes on." That sounds terrifying, doesn't it, and difficult, too. But that way lies music. So pick up your violin. Lift your bow. And play. Play your heart out.

Congratulations on your courage.