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When I was an undergraduate I went, in my first days as a freshman, to my own college's version of the Aims of Education address. The talk was no doubt meant to introduce me to the university and to persuade me to take the right attitude towards my studies. I had arrived in the autumn of 1976, in the aftermath of a glorious celebration of our nation's bicentennial. The fireworks had been particularly splendid that July. Hundreds of tall ships like those used in the revolutionary era sailed up the east coast in a triumphant reenactment of the past. Tea was dumped into Boston harbor. People wore festive hats. 1976 was also the aftermath of the less glorious Vietnam war and the great social upheaval that had turned society upside down. Race, class, and (most recently) gender were no longer supposed to define the roles people chose to play at work or at home. This turned out to be an illusion, of course, but only partly an illusion. People who came of age with my generation had possibilities before them that were simply unthinkable in earlier times. I was part of a brave new world in which I and my classmates could simply choose to be whatever and whoever we wanted to be. This filled us with terror.

I remember being at that talk and looking around at all the people. I remember how large the auditorium was, and how small the lecturer looked, how far away he was from me, and I remember what it felt like sitting there, one nervous excited person among a vastness of other people. Four years seemed like an eternity. Even though I had picked out my courses and chosen a major, I remember even now how uncertain I was about everything and about how it would all turn out. Unfortunately, I can't remember a single word of the lecture. This does raise the question of what we are doing here today. But it also suggests to me how I can be most helpful, by talking about why you are anxious and uncertain, as I expect you are, and why a liberal education will help you to cope.

These are the years of your greatest confidence and your greatest insecurity. To borrow from a famous pen, for you these are the best of times and the worst of times—because of the era in which we live, because of the place and class in which we are located, and because of your age, your point, as it were, of development. You are not bound by many obvious external limitations. Simply by being here, you establish your place in the middle class. Last year the Aims address was delivered by a member of the university's sociology department, Andy Abbott, who garnered the data from recent graduating classes and figured out that those who graduate from this university end up taking jobs that place them well within the upper income brackets in this country. It doesn't matter what major you choose. It doesn't even matter what grades you get. If the economy of the near future is anything at all like the economy of the near

past, you will do well in life, at least materially. The real uncertainty is not whether you will succeed economically, but how you will choose to do it—what you will actually do. You have before you all the wonderful possibilities of who you can become, an infinitude of possible selves. This is a wonderful opportunity and a terrible, nearly unbearable, burden.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote an ethnography about your stage of life, called *Coming of Age in Samoa*. She spent nine months on a palm-strewn island in the South Pacific hanging out with adolescent girls, and she wrote in her famous book that these girls came to adulthood relatively untroubled by the emotional storms and generational conflicts of American adolescents. The book became famous because Mead suggested, in 1928, that a little hands-on experience with sex was good for young people. (She also thought that a little hands-on experience with death and corpses was good for them, but somehow, American parents found that point less interesting.) Mead drew a most compelling picture of paradise. Here she describes the end of a village day:

Girls gather flowers to weave into necklaces; children, lusty from their naps and bound to no particular task, play circular games in the half shade of the late afternoon. Finally the sun sets, in a flame which stretches from the mountain behind to the horizon on the sea, the last bather comes up from the beach, children straggle home, dark little figures etched against the sky; lights shine in the houses, and each household gathers for its evening meal . . . Sometimes sleep will not descend upon the village until long past midnight; then at last there is only the mellow thunder of the reef and the whisper of lovers, as the village rests until dawn (pp. 18–19).

Some years later, another anthropologist went back to the community and reported that the villagers were outraged by these slanderous tales of easy, untroubled sex among the young people. Mead had spoken to the young women; this new anthropologist spoke to the fathers, and the difference in their accounts was a bit like the difference between what you might tell a friend about a party you'd attended and what your parents might say if the University of Chicago admissions counselor had asked them, at the interview, for a description of your after-school activities.

In any event, the conclusions Mead drew still ring true. She pointed out that in a place like Samoa, where social roles are clear and for the most part prescribed by tradition, the emotional challenge of adulthood is very different than in our own. Young men and women in the Samoan village of Mead's fieldwork come to adulthood with a very clear idea of what they will do in the years ahead. They will fish and cultivate taro in the fields; they will live in huts thatched with palm and floored with stone; they will tend the younger children; and then as their children age, their older children will tend the younger babies. Men and women have different tasks, and those tasks are well understood. The burden of cooking falls upon women and the burden of planting, house building, and fishing upon the men, though each to some extent will learn the skills of both. Women also are the weavers, and the worth of a girl can be

seen partly in the quality of the mats and baskets and blinds she weaves from the ever-present palm fronds she must gather. She does not aim to be the best weaver on the island; for her there are no rewards for unbridled excellence. She just needs to be good enough. The boys have a harder time in Samoa. Senior men will give some of them, as they age, the right to sit in assembly with community leaders, to drink ceremonial kava with them, and to have status and authority in their village, and the competition to be chosen is fierce and subtle. But all men and women know the religion they will follow, all know the means by which they will gain their living, and all know the people with whom they will pass their lives.

You know none of that. You enter into adulthood—and these four years of college are really your transition into adulthood— with more choice than the world has ever known. Take, for example, what it is to be female. About half of you are female. Some of you see your future selves as defined by your intellectual work. You imagine that work to be your first commitment. If it so happens that you never have children or never even marry, that will be okay in the eyes of your peers. There will be many women like you at your 20th reunion. Others of you who are female see your future selves as primarily mothers and wives. You imagine your yet-to-be-born children as your first commitment, and if you never have much of a professional career, that too will be okay in the eyes of your peers. There will also be many women like you at the 20th reunion. If you are a middle-class woman in our society it's okay to be a stay-at-home mom, or a childless professional, or to balance both career and family. For that matter, it's okay to go to a sperm bank and have a kid on your own or even with another woman. I went to college in an era when for the first time it was possible and widely acceptable for women to delay pregnancy so that they could decide whether and when to have a child and when, again for the first time, deciding to go to graduate school had become a normal and acceptable choice for women. Now, the barriers have fallen even further. There are fewer prejudices about women in traditionally male-dominated fields and fewer presumptions about how and when to raise a family. None of you will be as constrained as previous generations were by gender, by sexual orientation, by skin color, by the class status of your parents, nor even by your accent or the language of your birth. This is not to say that the world is fair or just. It isn't, in spades. But now more than ever it is easier to do whatever you want without as much of the prejudice that held previous generations back. It is also easier to think that because no one is holding you back, if you are not successful in your terms at the path you have chosen, there is no one to blame but yourself.

So you are anxious. I think a lot about anxiety, as it happens, because I am the sort of anthropologist who looks at emotions, particularly the disturbing ones, which means that I immerse myself in a community and try to figure out what people feel, how they understand those feelings, and what they do about them. One of the things you learn fast in my line of work is that most people don't think of themselves as caught within a fine web of social structure. They think that they feel bad because they are bad, in some way, or at least that they are not very good at coping. In other words, you think you are anxious because you're afraid

that you're not clever enough or tough enough to manage at the University of Chicago. I think you are anxious because of the social role you occupy at the dawn of the twenty-first century, because you have so much apparent freedom to choose and so many apparent opportunities that it can freeze you like a startled rabbit in the headlights of an oncoming car.

What earthly good can it do to read Weber, Marx, and Durkheim when you are trying to decide whether to be a neuroscientist or a science fiction writer, or when your earnest parents want you to be a doctor and you are trying to drum up the nerve to tell them you are planning a career in jazz ballet? A liberal arts education, if you use it wisely, teaches you how to make choices because it shows you how other people have chosen. Most people sit in the mudpuddle of their own fretful fears, peering out at the world through protective goggles. We all live in what the psychiatrist Jerome Frank called "assumptive worlds," sets of assumptions we make about the world that seem so natural, so commonsensical, that their very existence as assumptions fades until they become as real as concrete.

I think about these assumptive worlds when I hold office hours. When I teach a class, everyone in the classroom has exactly the same data about me. They've all heard the same lectures and seen me wear the same clothes and make the same gestures. Yet when members of that class come to see me one by one, it turns out that they each have very different ideas about the sort of person I am and how they should treat me. The person who comes at 3 o'clock assumes that I'm a big sister and the person who comes at 3:15 expects me to be a judge, and for each of them, those assumptions are reasonable based on what they know of the world, based on the assumptions they have drawn from their own experience about the way the world proceeds. That's fine for office hours. It's not so fine for making life choices, because the world is more complex than you are able to perceive when looking out at it through muddy goggles from your puddle. And you can't just decide to abandon those assumptions about how the world works because to you they are not assumptions, but iron facts. You no longer realize that you invented them in the first place. As the old saying has it, fish can't tell you much about the water. They don't know it's there. But the courses you take here can give you the tools to clamber out of the puddle, or at least to see the water, if you treat the authors you read as people like yourselves, struggling to make sense of the world, desperately trying to figure out what kinds of moral and intellectual commitments are worth making, what kind of life is worth living. Nearly everyone you read in the core was once an anxious 18-year-old. He or she made a decision about what was worth writing about and why, and if you take as your task the burden of trying to understand deeply what the author thought was important to argue for and against and why, you will understand how his or her commitments were forged. And that will help you to understand and manage the forging of your own. At the heart of a liberal education stands the oldest human paradox: that the more deeply and intimately you understand other human beings—the more you understand their unique predicaments and their idiosyncratic pain—the more clearly you will see yourselves. If you would follow the inscription at Delphi—to know thyself—know others first.

In short, one aim of education is to improve your capacity for empathy. By that I do not mean a feel-good state of squishy oneness. I mean that if you genuinely try to understand—to read with compassion for the difficulty of the problem the writer was trying to solve and respect for the way he or she tried to solve it, to read from the inside out, trying to understand the author from the author’s perspective, located in his or her time and space, struggling with the same existential issues that bother you but struggling with them in a way that is specific, historically particular, unique, you will be in a position to think. And thinking, as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has pointed out, is a moral act. Anthropology is in the peculiar position of doing with real people what most scholars do with texts. When you read *The Grapes of Wrath*, you feel the suffocating dust of the baked, cracked ground and the despair of the migrant farmhands who traveled west on empty promises and a car strung together with twisted wire, but then you can close the book. When you do fieldwork with homeless women in a drop-in shelter, as I have done, you smell the clothes a woman cannot wash and you feel her terror of having nowhere to go that is safe, and then at the end of the interview the woman sometimes screams at you or hugs you and there is no way to pretend that you are detached and distant and purely scientific. You react with moral outrage—at the society, at the institution, sometimes at the women themselves—and then you have to hold back your judgment, and try to understand. This is what all great writing does, if we let it; it grabs at our guts and we respond to it, and then we have to step back, to understand. Geertz points out that the impossibility of separating your scholarly work from your life forces you to recognize that thinking well demands that we tolerate the enormous tension between our initial moral reaction and our scientific observation. Thinking is a moral act because it is a commitment to understand first and then to judge. And that tension is what forces us to grow and teaches us to choose and makes us who we become. Somewhere Picasso remarks that if you hope to draw a circle that is uniquely your own, you should try to draw a circle that is as true to geometric form as you can. You will fail to draw that perfect circle, but only in the attempt to thrust yourself away will you find the virtue of your own perspective.

This may seem like counterintuitive advice. Many young Americans think that to know themselves they need to find themselves, and they hold the naive belief that if they could just strip off everyday life like layers of an onion they would reach their true core, unadulterated by other people’s expectations and the distractions of a fastpaced world. They believe that they have a true core, an essence, and that it sits inside of them waiting to be discovered, and that once they find it they will know whether they ought to be a doctor or a lawyer or a philosophy professor. Sometimes these young people go to Europe and work their way through Mediterranean countries picking grapes, confident that their true self will emerge somewhere en route to Italy. But people who believe that the self is like an onion and their true self is its core have not spent much time in the kitchen. Peel an onion down to its core and all you will find is air. You are not an untouched core. You are and will become the sum of your commitments, your choices—moral, intellectual, and practical—they amount to much the same thing in the

end. To find yourself, don't dig under the surface of your life. Look at what you actually do, at what you come to care for, at what you fight to defend. Look at the small choices you make every day in the classroom, in the way that you read and interpret and argue, and the big choices will sort themselves out by themselves.

To help you on your way, I have a few pieces of Wise Advice. I should say that in contemplating this address, I thought perhaps I could bypass my own part in this and simply play the Baz Luhrmann sunscreen song, on the grounds that Baz and I must meet somewhere on the family tree. I'll content myself with reminding you that the song points out that

[a]dvice is a form of nostalgia. Dispensing it is a way of fishing the past from the disposal, wiping it off, painting over the ugly parts and recycling it for more than it's worth.

For what it's worth, here is my advice:

Rule number one: Never answer an important question in the abstract. It's just too easy to import all your assumptions and prejudices and never grasp what the question was really asking. Dormitory rooms were built for late-night discussions about whether God exists, for example, and the question of divine ontology is definitely worth debating. But do not delude yourself into thinking that your logical conclusions will actually tell you anything about how and when people reach towards spirituality. Several years ago, two of my oldest friends found themselves in trouble. Each had a young son diagnosed with a terrible illness. They had gone to the same schools and they came from similar backgrounds. They even married men of similar religious persuasions. One of them told me, as her son lay near death, that she could no longer accept even the possibility that there might be a god. No god, she said, could inflict this agony upon her toddler. The other friend told me that her son's death brought her closer to God, and for the same reason. The incomprehensible injustice, the irrationality, of her child's pain was beyond tolerating. Only God's love could help her bear it.

Whether or not God and the devil live in the details, people certainly do. Their lives are formed in the tiny fissures of the everyday, in the way they cuddle their dog and care for their car and in whether they eat cereal for breakfast. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss once wrote about what he called the science of the concrete. What he meant by this was that the so-called primitive mind was not dumb for lack of a physics or a higher mathematics. People who live in the Neolithic world, for example, the forest-dwelling Amazonian Nambikwara, do not know only what they eat and use; they have an enormous curiosity about the forest, and they can identify hundreds of plants that the poor anthropologist cannot even distinguish. Among people like the Nambikwara, Lévi-Strauss said, "Animals and plants are not known as a result of their usefulness; they are deemed to be useful or interesting because they are first of all known" (*The Savage Mind*, p. 9). And as they are known so are they ordered, so that from the

little details in people's lives you can come to see the categories and principles they live by. Pay attention to the details of your life and of other lives, and learn from those details the driving passions of those lives. You will understand people more deeply; you will also, in the paradoxical mode I am advocating, come to see the world with utter uniqueness, your own. The great thinkers you will read in the core are first and foremost great observers who paid enormously careful attention to phenomena others had seen before but never noticed. A near fanatical attention to detail brought Darwin to evolution, Freud to the dynamic unconscious, and Marx to the labor theory of value. The world hasn't looked the same since. Find your own science of the concrete.

Rule number two: Distrust pretension. I read an essay some time ago that much improved my enjoyment of certain types of academic discourse. You know E. B. White as the author of *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*, but you may not know that he was also perhaps the finest essayist America has produced and co-author of a lovely little book called *The Elements of Style*. In the conservative 1950s he wrote an essay that was ostensibly about politicians. White was an ardent Democrat and, in the spirit of his time, he felt that he should have sharp, clear views on political issues and on what Democrats were doing about them. The essay I like so much was written—again, ostensibly— about three Democrats whose writings White was trying to read one afternoon. He called them bedfellows because he was reading them when he was sick in bed. In the essay, White wrote about the way Truman distrusted the press for being too critical and the way Stevenson distrusted the public for not being critical enough. He pointed out that Acheson praised the loyalty and security measures Democrats first set in place in 1947 and that Acheson then went on to show how they undermined the freedoms they had initially set out to protect.

But the essay is really about Fred. Fred was a dachshund who died in 1948, before the essay was written, but for many years Fred had gallantly allowed White to take care of him. Fred was another one of White's bedfellows. In fact White wrote that he only took the Democrats to bed with him for want of a dachshund and that he still missed Fred's smell, which was as evocative to his mind, he said, as a sudden whiff of cow barn. White wrote that although birds fascinated Fred,

[h]is real hope as he watched the big shade trees outside the window was that a red squirrel would show up. When he sighted a squirrel, Fred would straighten up from his pillow, tense his frame, and then, in a moment or two, begin to tremble. The knuckles of his big forelegs, unstable from old age, would seem to go into spasm, and he would sit there with his eyes glued on the squirrel and his front legs alternately collapsing under him and bearing his weight again ("Bedfellows," p. 102).

The reader of this essay which is ostensibly about politicians but really turns out to be about Fred only gradually understands that for White they are really the same topic. After a little more about Fred, White returned to the subject of politics and an argument, then as now a craggy hill in the political landscape, that prayer is a part of democracy. White didn't think that it was, but he also thought that democracy was a sort of faith, and he worried that in light of this his own views were a trifle inconsistent. And then he pauses, one feels, and draws breath. He remarks to the reader that these politicians are all such sober, thoughtful people. They work to improve and preserve and maintain in good repair this marvelous thing that is American society. Their earnestness, and their sense that this is possible, he implies, is a wonderful thing, and it helps him to feel confident in the face of creeping cynicism. They also remind him of Fred.

It makes me eager to rise and meet the new day, as Fred used to rise to his, with the complete conviction that through vigilance and good work all porcupines, all cats, all skunks, all squirrels, all houseflies, all footballs, all evil birds in the sky could successfully be brought to account and the scene made safe and pleasant for the sensible individual— namely, him (p. 198).

These days, when I read a sophisticated book full of high theory with words so abstract and metaphorical I feel I'd need to read a hundred more books to really get a grip, I no longer feel intimidated and vaguely inadequate. I simply settle into my chair, imagine the author as an eighteen-inch daschshund, and ask myself, So what's his squirrel?

Rule number three: Buy Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. The book is an advocate of clear and precise language. At one point, they take a fine moment in the English language and recast it in lugubrious modern prose. Actually, what they do is to borrow the recasting from George Orwell, a kindred spirit and another fine essayist similarly aggrieved at the contemporary mangling of the English tongue. Here is the original, from the King James translation of Ecclesiastes:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the weak, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Here is Orwell, in modern English:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.

Read this little book before you write any essays yourself. If you want to give your professors a hard time, read it again when you read anything they have written.

Rule number four: Find a writing partner. Just as it is hard to look at your own assumptions and see them as they are, it is hard to read Strunk and White and see your own crabbed sentences for what they actually say, free of the shimmering prose you wrote in your own imagination. It's much easier to pick out the pompous phrase and passive voice in someone else's paper. Choose someone you think you trust among your classmates and edit each other's papers. You don't need to be in the same classes together. You don't even need to know anything about each other's subjects. Exchange your papers, and mark the spots in your partner's paper where you got bored or restless or confused, and then look at the places your partner has marked on yours. Refrain from explaining to such loyal friends their many weaknesses as readers of your prose. Just try to figure out what made your best intentions misleading or unclear to someone who was actually trying to help. If you can do that—and it's not easy—you will write papers that get better every time. If you can learn to write, you can learn to write well, and if you can write well, you can command your destiny.

Rule number five: Know that as you change, the way you understand will also change. Have compassion for the person you are right now. The novelist Mary Gordon wrote that she read George Eliot's *Middlemarch* three times. When she was sixteen, she read it for its breathless romance, and she yearned for Eliot's heroine Dorothea to marry the dashing young Will Ladislaw. The first summer after college, she read it again and found herself suffused with feminist outrage at Eliot, who assumed that Dorothea should live out her life on other people's terms, defined by the men she married. When Gordon was in her forties, she read *Middlemarch* yet again, and this time she understood for the first time that it was a sad book, because it saw so clearly the way all lives are carved out by character and circumstance, how so often the gifts we have are left unused or undeveloped because of events we could not have foreseen and choices we could not allow ourselves to make. Ask of yourself as much as you possibly can, but recognize that your achievements and your failures alike will be in part the result of simple luck. Enjoy the way you will change and embrace your widening understanding. Look back on the person you have been with respect for all you accomplished despite the rain.

Rule number six, my last: Laugh. Back around the time of the Second World war, when social sciences were thought to be invincible and foundations gave grants to sociologists, economists, and anthropologists with the idea that with a little research they would figure out how to win the war on poverty and then go out and do it, a group of social scientists at Harvard University decided to figure out what made people successful. As an aside, foundations still give grants to people who hope to end poverty, but these days everyone seems more humble, both about whether the solution will be a good one and about whether anyone will pay attention even if it is. Democracy, as Plato pointed out, is a mixed blessing. So is

science. Once, for reasons too complicated to explain, I found myself talking to a nuclear weapons scientist at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory who was demoralized and distressed about the way, he said, that nuclear weapons science had gotten out of hand in general and into the wrong hands in particular. At one point he interrupted his diatribe and looked at me and said, “You social scientists have thought a lot about society. You should just take over the government and tell people who to marry and where to live and what to do.” It was a fine, but rare, moment.

In any event, back around the time of the Second World war, some people at Harvard decided that they should select the best and brightest undergraduates and follow them for the course of their lives. They interviewed them and had them evaluated by an array of doctors, nurses, psychologists, vocational counselors, and psychiatrists. They weighed them and surveyed them and made them fill out innumerable charts and tests. They presented them with a series of ambiguous pictures and asked them for the story each picture brought to their minds. They sat down with their mothers and collected childhood anecdotes. They even recorded their brain waves. After the young men graduated—they were, of course, all young men and for that matter white, middle class, and northeastern seaboard men—they followed them with long questionnaires and more surveys and charts and interviews. They kept track of how much they earned and how often they missed work and whether they got divorced and how many kids they had. They sent questionnaires to their wives. More than twenty-five years later, when the study subjects were forty-seven, a young psychiatrist, George Vaillant, was hired to make sense of the data. He chose one hundred of the men to interview yet again and went around the country to meet them one by one.

Not surprisingly, some men had done better than others on conventional measures of success. These conventional measures reflected the era of the study and included whether the man earned more than his father; whether he liked his job; and whether he had been promoted steadily. They included whether he had maintained a marriage for at least ten years and whether he would describe his present marriage as “good”; whether he had children and whether those children were doing well or markedly underperforming; whether he had many friends; whether he enjoyed good physical health; and whether he took vacations (just in case you wondered, taking vacations was regarded as a sign of mental health).

One knew that there would be people who did well on the conventional measures. What was more surprising was that this success was associated with a particular psychological pattern, what Vaillant called “a mature defensive style.” Human life is not easy. Bad things happen to good people, often at the worst possible time. The men in this study with the best life outcomes, Vaillant said, were not men who had avoided pain, but men who handled great unhappiness with humor, with sublimation, with altruism, and with anticipation. These are called defenses because when bad things happen, we try to defend ourselves from the onslaught on our psyches. Some bad things are sudden and unexpected and big. You will get a

phone call. Someone you love has died. Other bad things are slow and subtle, and some are almost embarrassingly small. Your parents have a distant, failing marriage. You do badly on an exam. The girl you ask out says no. There are many different ways to respond to the insults the world throws out at you. You can deny that it ever happened so it doesn't bother you. Some people actually forget, for a little while at least, that they ever answered the phone. You can decide that the person who caused the pain is evil, so it doesn't really matter. You can pretend it doesn't hurt. You can know it hurts and get in a car and drive really, really fast, as if you could leave it behind forever. You can be angry at your professor but blow up at your roommate instead. All of us have employed every one of these defensive habits at different moments. Vaillant used all his surveys and graphs and interviews to argue that the men who reached the age of forty-seven with the most successful careers, the most satisfying marriages, and the best physical health in his study had been more likely to respond to the world's curve balls with grace, laughing at what they could and channeling their disappointment into productivity. Mental health, he said, is not about the absence of unhappiness, but about the way you manage it.

Vaillant knew that his study had limitations. The conventional criteria did not account for the creative artist at all, and he was uneasy about how well they would judge women and how American and middle class and mid-century they were. Still, there is some wisdom in the study. College life can be difficult, and you are anxious. If you can learn to soothe your anxiety by worrying more about Durkheim's problems than about your own, if you can laugh at the absurdity of the grading system and still work to make your papers more convincing, if you conquer your shyness by learning to dance, your year will be more enjoyable and the journey of discovery more exciting. You have already made more choices than you realize. One of the better ones was choosing the University of Chicago. Welcome to the Class of 2007.