



Graduation Address given at the Graduation Service
at St John's College, Cambridge
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Not knowing when the Dawn will come,
I open every Door,
Or has it Feathers, like a Bird,
Or Billows, Like a Shore –

Emily Dickinson

There is a sense today that you are flying away. Being gently blown into the future. Setting off on a new journey. Today is a day for taking a leap of faith. A day when we say 'for all that has been thanks, for all that will be, 'yes'.

On behalf of the college, I am here to wish you farewell in the tradition of valedictory speeches- to remind you that *once a Johnian you are always a Johnian*. I am here to remind you that the doors of this college will always be open to you, so please come back, again and again.

I've only been here for one term, I'm so new that I will not have met most of you- yet already I feel embedded in this place and its history, I feel part of the family, so you must feel like part of the furniture! You will know every corner of this college, and its traditions and values and, dare I say it, its funny little ways.

Give thanks for all you have been able to do here, remember that your life is now bound up with this community, you have made your mark, every one of you, you are part of the fabric of this place, your memories are etched in the wood and stones, and wherever you go in the world, this will be one of those places you can come home to.

You will have walked through the doors and gates of this college thousands of times, on the way to lectures and supervisions, on the way to hall, on the way to the bar, (I know this, for I was a student once), and even occasionally into the library. On your journeys around college I know you will have been attentive to the little message that Lady Margaret Beaufort our foundress, kindly sent you. You will know that inscribed above the gates and on the lintels of the doors of this college is the motto: *Souvent me Souvient*, often I remember, think of me often, forget me not.

The motto of this college might mean something rather poignant to you today as you prepare to leave. As you walk through these gates and these doors for the final time before your graduation ceremony, your college whispers to you, remember me often.

At this remarkable threshold moment, as you walk through these doors, what advice can I give you? What wisdom can I share? To prepare for this task I've been researching what others have said in such valedictory addresses: This year, at Dartmouth College in the United States, Roger Federer, Tennis Ace said "Whatever game you choose, give it your best. Go for your shots. Try everything. And most of all, be kind to one another...."

In 1962, at Springfield College, Martin Luther King gave this advice: remain awake through revolutions, and don't fall asleep in periods of great social change- he was referring to the civil rights movement of course, but he reminded his listeners that the world is our neighbourhood and we are called to be siblings to each other. Only through that mutual love which transcends race, and gender, and nations, and creeds, will we be truly free.

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In 2005, Steve Jobs offered a valedictory speech about death- he had recently been diagnosed with Cancer. But reflecting honestly about his own mortality, he advised his audience to live each day as if it were the last, seize every moment, and don't waste the time you are given by living someone else's life. Live your own, he said.

Now I don't know if you remember, but 2020 was a bit of a difficult year for the world, and everyone in it. Oprah Winfrey gave her valedictory speech online to all graduates everywhere. She said to them: The same values, fortitude, and determination, the same guts and imagination that got you to this moment—all those things are the very things that will sustain you through whatever is coming. It's vital that you learn, and we all learn, to be at peace with the discomfort of stepping into the unknown. It's really okay to not have all the answers.

There's wisdom in all these words, but I want to take us back to the simple poem where I began, which in a way, sums them all up quite neatly:
Not knowing when the dawn will come,
I open every door.

The word '*graduate*' comes from the Latin *gradus*, meaning "a step toward something." You might think that today a door is closing, not so. This is just the beginning. Today you graduate and you step toward something new, to open another door.

You may have heard of Alexander Graham Bell, in 1876 it was he who invented the telephone, those cumbersome things with wires- through which people used to speak to each other over vast distances, before they sent gifs, memes and emojis. It was Alexander Graham Bell who said *When one door closes another door opens, but we look so long and so regretfully upon that closed door, that we do not see the one that opens before us.*

Today as you look back, just as you think a door is closing, don't forget to look forward, to the doors waiting to be opened, and step towards them.

Go through these doors courageously, go lovingly, go with an open heart, go and seize the moment, live each day as if it were the first and the last, don't dwell on regret, don't end the day angry, forgive one another, heal the world.

Be kind to one another, live in harmony, make peace, remain awake to revolutions, and don't fall asleep when people cry out for justice. Don't let a closed door define your life. Wherever there is fusty intransigence and resistance to change, open the doors and let the light and the air in. Go and open the door for those in our world who have lost confidence in humanity, be a person of service, always err on the side of generosity, and most importantly, be thankful.

There is another inspirational speaker I want to reference.

He lived around two thousand years ago, and is the one to whom this chapel is ultimately dedicated. On the subject of doors, he said, knock, and the door will be opened to you, seek and you will find.

The same man, opened a great door between heaven and earth, between this world and the next. He healed the broken hearted, brought good news to the poor and shared a vision of the world where all were loved. But for his words and his actions, he was nailed to a wooden cross and buried in a tomb, and a large stone was rolled across its door. His followers thought everything was over.

Then, early on the first day of week, at the dawn of a new day, some women went to the tomb, to weep, to pray, to grieve, to sit quietly in stunned silence. When they got there, stone had been rolled away, the door of the tomb was open. Not even death could close the door on this gift of life and love, and this open door marked a new beginning for us all.

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None of us know what tomorrow will bring.

None of us can really predict what will happen in the next five minutes!

Not one of us can predict the future: but the universe is ours for the taking.

So, finally, from the Lord of all time, to a post-doctoral Time Lord, standing inside the Tardis, who once said to his newest student:

You think you've seen it all? Think again. Outside those doors, we might see anything. We could find new worlds, terrifying monsters, impossible things. And if you come with me... nothing will ever be the same again!

Not knowing when the dawn will come, all any of us can do, is open every door.

So, with love and blessings on your side, step forward,

and open the next door.