

## Senior Dinner Dance Speech 2010

As I was thinking about this night, when you're on the cusp of graduation, with all of your plans for next year just waiting out there for you, it reminded me of my senior year of high school in a somewhat similar situation. I was in an independent school in Philadelphia, a bit larger than Sayre, and I had been there for just my high school years, although, like Sayre, it went from K thru 12<sup>th</sup> grade and many of my classmates had been there for many, if not all, of those twelve years.

I came from a Catholic grade school to a remarkably different educational environment for high school. It changed me dramatically, not that I fully realized it at the time. But I was conscious of how much harder some classes were, but also how much more interesting learning was at my new school.

Let me give you an example: in my junior year, I took an English elective on African American literature, and read books like *Malcolm X*, Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*. What was possibly even more interesting than the books and our discussions of racism, Black Power and the Black Panthers, was our classroom meeting space. This class was held in a yurt: a perfectly circular building of Central Asian origins that had been built by students to be used as an "outdoor classroom." It had bench seating all around the interior, with walls that tilted somewhat back, and a skylight in the center. So when you sat back you were slightly reclined and looking up at the sky; a way better environment than the classroom, with its uncomfortable, hard plastic desk/chair units, for creative thinking and discussions.

But the school wasn't just about intellectual contemplation. We had good sports teams as well as strong music, drama and arts programs. But the most interesting aspect of the school for me was that it was a Quaker School, and every Wednesday for an hour we held a Quaker Meeting, where the faculty, administration and students sat in silence unless one was inspired to stand and speak. Needless to say, the school had a profound effect on me in many ways that I didn't really understand until years later.

The story I want to share with you tonight occurred in my senior year. The year was 1972, and those of you who know your history will remember that the Vietnam War was winding down, although no one was all too sure of that at the time. In the spring of that year, all of us seniors were contemplating the summer ahead and the expectations of our freshman year at the various colleges we had chosen (I guess some things never change.) But at the same time, we were fixated on another phenomenon as well: the draft lottery. From 1968 through 1972, the military randomly assigned birthdays a number, which decided how low or high your draft number would be. So if your birthday was March 6 that year, you would have been in the first group to be notified to report for induction into the military. That year, the lottery number for my birthday, October 14<sup>th</sup>, was 31, but I wasn't yet eligible to be drafted because I was still just 17 my senior year in high school.

But it did come up at the dinner table one night that spring, when my mom asked me, "what would you do if you got drafted?" I had never asked myself that question directly, nor had anyone else asked me, but I had thought about it some, and talked about it with friends, so when my mother asked, I responded without much hesitation, "I'm not sure that I'd go. I might apply for CO status." CO stands for conscientious objector, someone who is opposed to serving in the armed forces or bearing

arms on the grounds of moral or religious principles. If you were granted CO status, you could still serve but in a noncombative role. Because I was in a Friends School and Quakers are pacifists, it seemed logical that I could at least apply for CO status.

Well, my mother was horrified. In fact, she was so mad at me for even considering such a thing, that she didn't speak to me for a couple of weeks. She gave me the proverbial silent treatment. (Any of you ever get that from your parents? It's rough.) At dinner, she'd sling the plate down in front of me, and if we had to communicate it was always second hand. Fortunately, I had two sisters and a brother who would pass on information like: "Tell your brother he better be ready to leave by 9:00 or we're leaving without him," she'd say to my brother on Saturday night referring to Sunday morning mass. Eventually, we started speaking, but she was upset with me for a long while.

The funny thing was several years later, after I had been out of college and working and the Vietnam War was long over, I heard my mother say at another family gathering that if our country ever went to war again, she'd help her sons leave for Canada rather than send them to fight. An amazing turnaround, I thought, from her feelings in 1972.

So when I came across a novel in the mid 80's while teaching high school English in New Orleans, a book called *Going After Cacciato* by Tim O'Brien which takes place during the Vietnam War, it caught my attention. Paul Berlin, the narrator and main character, like you now, had just finished high school; like you, he started out in college in the fall, but it didn't feel right for him, so he dropped out for a semester to build houses with his dad. But because it was 1968, it wasn't long before he was drafted.

The narrator of the novel describes it this way: "Paul was a typical teen; and one of his high school teachers wrote about him that he was "a conscientious student... a stickler for details...A daydreamer... standoffish, shy and withdrawn, but these would be outgrown." The narrator goes on to say that "he built houses with his dad in the summer: hard work the sun the feel of wood in his hands...earned 28 credits in college then quit and at the age of 19 was drafted."

Like many high school graduates, Paul Berlin didn't automatically know what he wanted to do in college or what he ultimately wanted to do with his life, but in 1968, if you weren't in school the military would expect your services. So for Paul, the decision was made for him, and he went off to war. His father gave him some advice before he left, advice that I'll share with you now because I think it is universally useful and true. His dad said: "you'll see some terrible stuff, I guess. That's how it goes. But try to look for the good things, too. They'll be there if you look. So watch for them."

In Vietnam, Paul Berlin meets this slightly wacky fellow soldier named Cacciato, who is an eternally happy, easy going character. The other guys in Berlin's squad think Cacciato is crazy, because he is too carefree, too relaxed, too happy go lucky, while the rest of them remain generally uptight and afraid. Cacciato does crazy stuff, like fish for hours in bomb craters filled with water from the monsoon season, using as his bobber the lid of a Secret deodorant can. When Berlin tries to be practical and reason with him, saying there are no fish in there it's not a lake it's a bomb crater, Cacciato smiles knowingly at Paul Berlin and says "patience, all you need is patience." And then for seemingly no apparent reason, Cacciato goes awol, absent without leave, mentioning to Berlin before he goes that he intends to walk to Paris which is 8600 miles away.

Paul Berlin's squad is sent after him, to bring him back before he gets too far. While following him, Berlin starts wondering if it's actually possible..."step by step a mile, ten miles, two hundred, eight thousand. Was it really impossible? Or was there a chance, even one in a million that it might truly be done? ...He smiled. It was something to think about."

Does Cacciato make it all the way to Paris? And what happens to Paul Berlin? These are questions I will leave unanswered for now. But I will say that one reason why I love this novel is because it explores the possibilities that are out there; possibilities that if we have the courage to explore may lead to a greater happiness than we could have imagined for ourselves. As the narrator says near the end: "It is one thing to speculate about what might be; it is quite another to act in behalf of our dreams, to treat them as objectives that are achievable and worth achieving. It is one thing to run from unhappiness; it is another to take action to realize those qualities of dignity and well being that are the true standards of the human spirit."

So my recommendation to you tonight, on the cusp of your next big adventure, possibly your first independent adventure, is this: dream big; live your life; take action; don't always settle for what you feel obligated to do. Some of us are Paul Berlins by nature, and always think practically, worry about the details or the consequences; others are like Cacciato, romantics, risk takers, independent thinkers, not necessarily worried about consequences; most of us live somewhere in between these two extremes. But no matter your personality, no matter the life situation you find yourself in: live with dignity and respect, dream big and try to realize those dreams, and look for the good things, they're always there.

Enjoy yourselves tonight: be smart and be safe.

Timothy O'Rourke

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