

LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE

Remarks for the Opening Convocation
August 22, 2022

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another (Proverbs 27: 17).

...in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful... (II Peter 1: 5-8).

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5: 14-16).

Not long after I graduated from college as I was starting my career, an older woman living in my apartment building introduced herself to me. I found out that this wasn't an unusual activity for her and that she made a point of meeting young people wherever she encountered them. In fact, she had made meeting and mentoring young people one of the purposes of her life. And I also found out that she wasn't just any older woman, but that she had a distinguished career as a scientist, first at Rockefeller University and then at the National Institutes of Health and World Health Organization. Among her many accomplishments, she had developed the pertussis or whooping cough vaccine, and though she had been officially retired for many years, she still maintained a laboratory at NIH and went to work every weekday.

Once we were acquainted, I started receiving a variety of items from her in my mailbox or slipped under my apartment door, or given to me when she'd invite me and others to her apartment for dinner. Some items were magazine articles she had clipped decades before, some were articles from the latest issue of *Science* or *The Economist*. One time, the item she shared was a small piece of paper on which she had written "Fosdick's Prescription for Life." Harry Emerson Fosdick was one of the most famous pastors of the 20th century, serving many of New York City's most prominent churches, and "Fosdick's Prescription for Life" is to "Find a high purpose, and build your life around it. Give yourself to it with all your heart."

I want you students to remember that quotation for the rest of your life just as I have, and during the balance of my remarks today, I will speak about the importance of having a high purpose. Specifically, I want to make three points: First, that your life needs a purpose; second, that you need to be disciplined about pursuing that purpose; and finally, I'll conclude by focusing on our collective purpose here at Hampden-Sydney.

I. The Importance of Purpose

Let me begin with why you need a purpose. We are living in one of those in-between times in history when much of life seems to be in disequilibrium. Everything seems to be in transition or uncertain—whether it is the way we communicate with one another, travel, supply electricity, face new global conflicts and the risk of nuclear war, or see an eroding of the traditional foundations of our morality. And, for the last two years, we’ve had to cope with the disorientation and uncertainty resulting from a new and often deadly virus. It’s alleged that Cicero coined the phrase, “O tempora! O mores!” but the saying has been a fair assessment of many times in history, just as it is today.

It’s understandable, given our times and situation, that we are anxious. And, it’s estimated that one in five Americans suffers from anxiety, sometimes so severe that it can be paralyzing. While I’m not qualified to offer a diagnosis or to prescribe treatment, I have to believe that having a sense of purpose is likely to be an important antidote to the anxiety and the uncertainty that are being produced by our present time.

All of us have aspirations and dreams, which are important and essential parts of our humanity. And, for most of us those aspirations involve doing something more ambitious than making a lot of money, or owning a big pick-up truck, or having a house in the suburbs. Most of us want to make a contribution that will outlast us, that will mean that our lives and living mattered. And, we are fortunate to be in a country that holds as one of its central tenets the freedom to pursue happiness and our aspirations. So, I urge you to put your aspirations and dreams at the center of your life and make one or more of them your high purpose.

Building your life around a purpose that is bigger than your own immediate comfort and satisfaction will make for a much more satisfying life. While self-reflection is essential, a self-centered or narcissistic life is an empty life. Your world will be too small if you don’t attach yourself to something that is bigger than yourself.

Many of you already know that a purpose will make you more motivated, engaged, and ambitious. In short, a purpose provides your life with meaning. People with a purpose are more likely to persevere and stay motivated when they face challenges and times get tough. Students with a purpose find relevance and connections in their classes that enhance their learning. Seemingly unconnected classes and experiences will begin to make sense and fit together as life becomes more unified and focused around a purpose.

A purpose is also an essential part of being a good man and a good citizen. For our founders, that word “good” in our mission meant not only being a “good person” as we understand that phrase today, but it also meant a willingness to serve to a bigger cause than self; it meant being a contributor.

II. You Need to Embrace Your Purpose

Having focused on the importance of having a purpose, I want to suggest how you should embrace that purpose. A purpose demands action. The most important message that our alumnus, Ken Woodley, shared with the audience during his Baccalaureate address—with the same title as this address—this past May is that when you have identified a purpose, the only acceptable response is

to do something about it. If you don't pursue your purpose, you might as well not even have a purpose.

Many who do make their aspirations their purpose, don't do a very good job of pursuing their purpose. Two of the reasons are time and procrastination. We all have at least a vague notion of what we want to accomplish before we retire and die. And, we all know what we need to accomplish in the next 24 hours. But most of us are challenged when it comes to managing and using the time in between those two extremes. We too often live our lives responding to the urgent or luxuriating in the weekends, but not very focused on what we need to do tomorrow, next week, later this month, or yet this year if we are going to fulfill our aspirations. Last spring's commencement speaker captured this challenge well when he reminded the Class of 2022 that "the days are long, but our lives are short." You have a lot of time each day, but the days will pass very quickly!

Yes, we want you to make the most of every day, but making the most of every day entails using some part of that day as preparation. Don't put off until tomorrow what you can and should do today. Have the discipline to spend some part of each day, each week, each month, and each year focusing on your purpose. Another great quote by Harry Emerson Fosdick is this: "No life ever grows great until it is focused, dedicated, and disciplined."

Over the years, I have stressed to various audiences that the words "college" and "colleague" have the same root, and that root means "partnership." So, I also urge you students to make our faculty, coaches, and staff members, as well as your fellow students your partners in both forming *and* pursuing your purpose. One of the advantages of a small college like this one is that, if you let them, your teachers, mentors, and fellow students will get to know you even better than you know yourself. They will see abilities and talents in you that you don't even know you have, and they will also hold you accountable and encourage you to make the most of your time here.

III. Our Common Purpose

Up to now in my remarks, I've emphasized that you have your own specific dreams, aspirations, and goals, which can constitute the purpose for your life. And, I've also emphasized that you must commit to pursuing your purpose. I want to conclude my remarks by emphasizing that all of us are an essential part of this College community, which has its own historic mission and purpose "to form good men and good citizens,"—a mission that was authored nearly 247 years ago by our first president. It is hard to imagine a more distinctive, important, and noble mission and purpose.

So, even as I exhort you to find a high purpose for your life and to pursue it with vigor, I also want us to focus collectively on embracing this College's mission, and enhancing its educational experience and very special culture. One way we can do this is to set and maintain very high expectations and standards for ourselves and for one another. Those high expectations constitute the iron in the Proverb that Andrew Parker read earlier—"as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."

The remarkable Hampden-Sydney brotherhood is an essential part of our student culture. And, while it is a source of much of our fun, it is also what works to bring out the best in each student. Recall the scripture from II Peter that Andrew read earlier that urges us to embrace faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. These are

values that our faculty, coaches, and other staff members urge you to embrace every day, and one of the many great privileges I have is to see how you students encourage each other to embrace these same values and thereby produce good men and good citizens.

In closing, just as I asked you to embrace and pursue your own personal purpose, I now ask every member of this community not only to embrace this College's special mission, but to actively work at making this great College an even better coming-of-age experience for young men. All of you have walked by a plaque that hangs on the east side of Graham Hall commemorating the service of Lewis Garland Chewning, a member of the Class of 1927, and a Trustee and Chairman of the College's Board, but I suspect few of you have stopped to read it. It contains this tribute:

He could not think of his alma mater without thinking of what he could do in her behalf, and he could not decide what to do for her without doing it.

Think about what you can do in her behalf and then do it. Remembering the final passage of scripture that Andrew read for us this afternoon, we have not only an opportunity but a responsibility to work together to create here a shining light on a hill. Let our collective light shine, that all may see our good works, and this College recommit itself this year and every year to pursuing all of the best that young men are capable of achieving.