

Commencement Address
By Dr. Herbert B. Barks
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A couple of Friday's ago I walked with my two grandchildren on the wilderness side of the south campus with Mr. Mancke. In the first few steps he exclaimed, "WOW, look here." There was Mr. Mancke kneeling by a branch, my two grandchildren taking turns looking through the magnifying glass. "It's a spittle bug. See those little black eyes. He is looking back at you." What I really want for you is not that we have given you so much information, or that you can now pass tests, but instead that we have taught you to look at life, at your world, with a kind of wonder.

The truly educated person gets it. Gets that amid all of the flood of information we are, in fact, surrounded by mystery. We know so little about so much that counts. Our culture is so arrogant, so busy finding blame, creating fear, addicted to drama and crisis.

Any sense of "wonder" is lost in the noise. To be surprised by the total mystery of trees and flowing water. Life is this amazing fabric of strands that are woven in some pattern that we never truly comprehend. But I know this much...The best way to approach life is to enter it with the eyes of wonder. Don't listen to the culture's voice that says, "Look at all of the stuff that can go wrong." If you open yourself to wonder, life will greet you with grace and mystery, and your days and hours will become filled with a kind of resonance that vibrates the heart.

I have four things to say to you, but all of them take on a new life if we approach life with an awareness of how deeply we are surrounded by mystery. Our heart beating with an electrical current for decades without stopping. Our breath processing the oxygen that we use to live without our approval. Our eyes documenting color and movement and depth without

our knowing how. We are walking puzzles, mysteries with names and social security numbers. There are spittle bugs looking back at us.

First, how do you know what to do with your life? Our culture tells you that you are a consumer. What will make you happy is money and things. My advice is to find out what melts your heart and follow it.

For twenty years I was a Presbyterian minister, (still am actually.) I preached for years in pulpits just like this in Shreveport, Los Angeles and Lynchburg, but I began as a youth

minister working with students. Yet slowly I drifted into being a senior pastor and administrator, away from young people, and at age thirty eight I asked the question, "What opens my heart? What is it that causes me to resonate? What do I love to do? Where do I want to be?" The answer is "with you." Watching you this week run rivers, climb cliffs, jump in lakes, try to drink a gallon of milk in twenty minutes. It is what I do. How do you know what opens your heart and melts you? Pay attention to what calls you out.

I was on the river with a senior years ago at lunch. A young man named Mark Lyle. He turned to me right in the middle of lunch sitting on a rock in the Chattooga River and said to me, "Dr. Barks, I am going to be a raft guide." I said, "Mark, that is a terrible idea." He said, "No, you don't understand I see what I want to do." I said, "We didn't spend all of this time and money and effort to make you into a raft guide."

He became the number one rodeo paddler in the world and he has designed all of the boats for Dagger boats. He paid attention.

All around us people work for money so they can leave their work, the work they dislike, to travel or to do something else for a week and then return to the drudgery of their work. Their work is a necessary evil to support something else. But, what if work were the joy? The place where you were renewed. What if I could learn to do what I do in such a way with a kind of mindfulness, so that it becomes a source of pride and fun and peace for my life. If you follow what melts your heart, you will do what you love and love what you do.

Second, my weird and wonderful brother Coleman has all of these great Rumi stories. My favorite is the one where one of Rumi's disciples comes and asks him, "Where the treasure is?" I want to find life's treasure and Rumi says, "Wherever the arrow falls, there is the treasure." The student took his bow and shot the arrow and when it landed he rushed there with a shovel and dug. There were holes all over the landscape. He finally went back to Rumi and said, "I have dug up the whole field. I have dug where the arrow has landed. I have shot it over and over." Rumi said, "Who said shoot the arrow? Just drop the arrow where ever you are, at your feet. That is where the treasure is."

Learn to live completely where you are. It is so easy to live somewhere else. Right in the middle of a rapid you can turn and say, "What's for supper?" Being somewhere else. Be here now for your own graduation. Let it fill your heart. Don't live out in front of yourself.

College is not “preparation for life.” It is life. All we have is today. (We have learned that this year, right?) Stay in the present. It is enough.

Third, welcome fear and change, and being uncomfortable. If you fight it, ignore it, try and push it away, you will give it power. We stand on the edge of change. The community that has taught you, nurtured you, your family, the home where you live, all of that is going away. You are leaving, and that is scary. I am retiring; I am leaving, so it is scary for me. I won't have a job. I have worked since I was nineteen years old. I have run schools for thirty five years, every day. That is going away. Friends have said, “Herb, you won't do real well with retirement.” Well, thanks a lot. I know one thing that is true, if I don't admit I am scared, if I don't allow the fear and the anxiety, then it will get me. What I have learned and what I have tried to teach you and myself with trips like this week and Belize is that if we welcome uncomfortableness we can go through it and come out the other end and it becomes transformed into something else. It is okay to be scared. It is like a storm. It will pass through. Sure it is going to be hard. Sure it is going to be frightening. It is like the 400 foot rapel, or corkscrew rapid, it is okay to scream and be scared. Just do it. You know, if you can live through the stuff we have done the last three months, you can live through college, and I will survive retirement. Just accept fear as a part of the process. Welcome it for what it is...Our teacher.

Fourth and last, quit worrying about what you are entitled to, about your rights, about what you should get, and instead, give yourself away. Pour out your life for others. Life isn't some finite amount of sand contained in a bottle so that if you pour out half, one half is gone. No, the mystery is, the paradox is, the more you pour out, the more you have.

You have been loved by all of these people behind me and by all of the people behind you, your parents and your family. This does not mean you have always been liked. That is different. That implies that we are similar and that is not always true. We are not always similar. Love is something else. Love is to act towards another so as to teach and heal and benefit them. This faculty has loved you, has acted towards you for years so as to teach, heal, and benefit you. Our culture tells us to look out for number one, to hoard what we have, to gather, to worry about what is due us, our rights. I am telling you to give your life away.

I think about Margaret Juan in Belize in that run down clinic with few resources, with tears in her eyes just to see you arrive. She came there at age seventeen to stay three months and got melted and stayed thirty years, pouring out her life.

There is an amazing story of Jesus at a dinner with religious leaders, it was all very proper and then a prostitute comes in and kneels and takes out a very expensive bottle of oil, breaks it and pours it on Jesus' feet. Judas says, "That is all very interesting, but you do know there was a better use for that oil. We could have sold it and fed a lot of people," and Jesus says, "Leave her alone. What she has done is right and good. She has done what is best. She broke her treasure and poured it out." Break your life. Pour it out.

What is the secret of life? Follow what melts your heart. What calls you out? Live into what is at your feet. What you search for is at your feet. Don't run away from fear. Welcome it and it will let loose of your throat and become you teacher. Break open whatever you are and pour it out for someone other than yourself and you will have more.

What a joy it has been for me to have had this time with you to become a part of your life. I want you to know that you will remain in my heart forever.

Thank you class of 2006.