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Of Hills and Dales – 2015 Commencement Address

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The following is adapted from a speech delivered on May 9, 2015, at Hillsdale College's 163rd Commencement ceremony.

Class of 2015, honored guests, faculty and members of the board of trustees of Hillsdale College: I bring cordial greetings from your erstwhile colonial overlords. I bear warmest felicitations from Her Majesty The Queen, Professor Stephen Hawking, James Bond, Sherlock Holmes, and the entire cast of *Downton Abbey*.

I think that covers all the important people in England. I, on the other hand, am distinctly unimportant, and so I'm all the more grateful for the invitation to be part of this special day. Thank you for having me. I only hope I can say something worthy of the occasion.

And I must say this, before I say anything else: Congratulations, class of 2015! In the famous words of that great Englishman, Sir Winston Churchill: "This is not

the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

Today you move from the end-of-your-beginning to the start-of-your-Commencement. I come from the Old World and in particular from Oxford, the home of lost causes, where we don’t have “Commencement”: we just graduate and diminish and go into the west and remain embittered. So America’s status as the home of fresh starts, of the pioneer spirit, of beginnings *leading to* commencements, sounds to me alarmingly positive and energetic.

Someone once remarked that if you combine British pessimism with American optimism, you get divine realism. Maybe this is why Churchill, with his British father and American mother, is such an Olympian figure, and I’ll be returning to Churchill at the end of my talk. But this is not yet the end of my talk; it is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.

* * *

You’re about to graduate from a most remarkable institution. I first came to Hillsdale 14 years ago. I was meant to visit for four days but ended up staying for eight—I’ll explain that later. Since that first visit I’ve returned several times; I’ve addressed groups of Hillsdale students in England; I’ve become good personal friends with a number of Hillsdale professors and graduates; and even had the privilege of conducting the wedding of a former Hillsdale student. So I think I

know Hillsdale well for an outsider.

But I know other colleges in America too. I’ve been to nearly 40 of the 50 states in the Union, where I’ve spoken at the better part of a hundred educational institutions, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, and Stanford, so I’m in a good position to compare. And when in the past I’ve made this comparison, I must say, Hillsdale students have always struck me as having a unique quality to them. And what is this unique quality? I’ve often tried to work out what it is, and writing this Commencement speech has given me a good excuse to consider the question in more depth.

Hillsdale isn’t the oldest college in America; though it lacks not for historical sense and all that’s best in the classical tradition. Hillsdale’s not the biggest college; though its building stock has been considerably enlarged and beautified in the years I’ve been coming, and I look forward to seeing its new chapel in due course. It’s not the richest college; though I understand its capital campaign has been going well. It’s not the most famous college; though perhaps some of you here today will eventually make it so, in a good way.

If it’s not the oldest, the biggest, the richest, or the most famous, where else could Hillsdale’s special quality possibly lie? Only in the most important thing: namely its ability to produce quality of mind. Students here have a quality of mind that I’ve not encountered in the same way so reliably elsewhere.

What do I mean by “quality of mind”? To help answer that, I turn to the writer whom I’ve made a

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special study of, C.S. Lewis, who in his article “Willing Slaves of the Welfare State” writes this:

I believe a man is happier, and happy in a richer way, if he has “the freeborn mind.” But I doubt whether he can have this without economic independence, which the new society is abolishing. For economic independence allows an education not controlled by Government; and in adult life it is the man who needs, and asks, nothing of Government who can criticise its acts and snap his fingers at its ideology. Read Montaigne; that’s the voice of a man with his legs under his own table, eating the mutton and turnips raised on his own land.

I think we must allow for a certain hyperbole in what Lewis says when he talks of the man in adult life who needs and asks *nothing* of government. I doubt such a person really exists. All of us need something from government: working sewerage, roads to drive on, armies to defend us. But if we understand Lewis to be talking about education, pure and simple, as I believe he is, then we can see the truth and the importance of what he says.

An education not controlled by government, nor even influenced by government, allows for the freeborn mind. Allows for. Doesn’t automatically and necessarily provide the freeborn mind: One can still be servile or indentured in other ways—shackled by the zeitgeist, for instance, or subject to *parti pris*. But if a college is economically independent of the government, well, there are just certain things its members needn’t be cowed by. One is liberated from cupboard love. One is no longer conditioned to salivate, like a Pavlovian dog, when a fashionable pedagogical bell is rung. You can make your own mind up. If you think the government’s wrong you can snap your fingers. If you think the government’s right you can tip your

hat. But you’re not enthralled. You’ve severed the chain of economic dependence and assumed the high dignity of someone who is educationally freeborn.

In my interactions with Hillsdale students I’ve witnessed this capacity for free thinking in the best sense—thinking that’s free not because it’s anarchic or traditionless, but because it’s untrammelled yet responsible and humane.

I daresay that during the last four years, as you’ve gone about earning the qualifications you’re to receive today, you quite possibly haven’t given a whole lot of thought to the quality of your mind. And if that’s the case I say so much the better. You’ve been *exercising* your liberty, not thinking about it, and by highlighting it today I don’t mean to turn you all into narcissists. It’s the invalid, the hypochondriac, who’s forever thinking about and fetishizing his health; the healthy person just gets on and lives a healthy life.

So, if you’ve been enjoying the liberty of Hillsdale without often reflecting upon how it gives your mind a certain tone, that is quite right and proper. And it’s a wonderful thing to see students breathing the clean air of intellectual liberty. There’s a dignity, even a nobility about students who’ve been formed in this way. And I hold this mirror up to you today not so you may become vain, but in order that you may catch a glimpse, however brief, of your own intellectual shapeliness and give thanks for it. Whenever you eat mutton or turnips, think of this, and then get straight back on with living your life.

My first charge to you then is simply this: Rejoice! Rejoice in the freedom of Hillsdale College and in what it’s made possible for you and, through you, for others! You’re a shining example of what it can mean to be freeborn. You hold up a light illuminating a whole way of being in the world that’s always been needed, always will be needed, and is perhaps needed now more than ever. If America is a beacon of political freedom to the world, Hillsdale is a beacon of educational



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freedom to America. It’s a college set on a hill in the “city set on a hill.”

* * *

This brings me to my second point. (We’re still not at the end of my talk, but this is at least the beginning of the end.)

My second point has to do with Hillsdale’s name. I first heard the name “Hillsdale” in 2001, when an Oxford friend of mine, Andrew Cuneo, was appointed here as an English professor. I remember being immediately intrigued by Hillsdale from a purely philological point of view. Did the dale belong to the hill, I wondered? Was there a possessive apostrophe in there somewhere? Was it one particular hill’s dale? Or were there two or more hills with one dale somewhere in between them?

The more I mulled over the word, the more I liked it—it was something of an oxymoron. “Oxymoron” means literally, in Greek, a “sharp fool,” and you know the standard examples: bittersweet, deafening silence, open secret, pretty ugly, jumbo shrimp, journalistic integrity, bureaucratic efficiency, governmental restraint, French

intelligence, American culture, British humility. So in the months when my friend Dr. Cuneo was preparing to leave Oxford and come to Hillsdale, I kept saying to him, “Where are you going again? What’s this college called? Peaksvale? Headstail? Topibase? Tipspit?” I was particularly pleased with *Tipspit* because that’s a palindrome as well as an oxymoron.

I was all the more intrigued by the name because it had a certain resonance with the great novel I wrote in the years after I graduated. When I say I wrote this great novel, I don’t mean it was ever published. Nor that it was ever really written. But it was extensively imagined. As a 22-year-old graduate in English I thought I was ideally equipped to write the next great British novel, and I spent two-and-a-half years trying—and failing—to do this. And my story was set in an English village called Tordale—“Tor” of course meaning a crag or a rocky peak.

Now there is no actual place in England called Tordale. It was the inventing of my own pure brain, and I made the name up because I thought it would be a subtle yet very profound

symbolic way of suggesting one of the great themes of the novel, which was that the highest doesn't stand without the lowest; the head cannot say to the foot, "I have no need of thee." The scriptural epigraph behind the whole work was going to be Psalm 95, verse 4: "In His hand are the depths of the earth: the strength of the hills is His also."

This theme was of some personal significance to me because I was finding, in those years immediately after graduation, that I'd gone from the heights to the depths. I had had a glorious undergraduate experience at Oxford: I loved my subject; did well academically; made great friends; enjoyed sport and music and drama and church life. It was everything Jude the Obscure could have wanted. My best pal and I would sometimes crystallize this happiness by saying, "Ah, jolly Oxford days!" as if we were already octogenarians summoning up remembrance of things past. And then it all ended. I was back home living with my long-suffering parents; the opportunities and stimulation of college life suddenly withdrawn; relatively few friends; having to come gradually to terms with the fact that I wasn't going to be the next great British novelist.

In those two-and-a-half years, I earned precisely 250 pounds from my pen: 50 pounds every six months, so it was a *regular* income. But it was a major come-down. And I think quite a lot of people find the years straight out of college to be some of the hardest in life. All the educational framework which you've used to hold yourself up, and which in large part you've defined yourself by, is taken away and you're like a climbing rose without a trellis. And you either lie on the ground and rot or allow yourself to be pruned and get turned into a rosebush which can stand in its own integrity.

I rotted for a while and became fairly depressed—I won't pretend otherwise. But then, thank God, that mysterious thing happened that the psalmist mentions in Psalm 84, when he speaks of the man who, going through the vale of

misery, makes it into a well. You lie there in the vale of misery, hitting your head on the ground; and slowly you become aware that the water collecting around you isn't just made up of your own lachrymose self-pity. There's a fresher source of water too. This was a mysterious moment of spiritual and psychological growth for me, but not one I'll dwell on here because this is meant to be a Commencement speech, not a sermon.

Suffice it to say, from that point on things began to improve. By which I don't mean that I jumped straight out of the trough and shot up the greasy pole of success again, nor that I just exchanged low spirits for high spirits. I began to realize that hills and dales are equally impostors—like Kipling's triumph and disaster. Success can't keep its promises and failure can't hold its ground. One shouldn't be bamboozled by either state. The important thing is not to be in a certain state, but to be a certain kind of person in whichever state you find yourself. Sure, I think one has a duty to do as much as one can to fulfill one's potential, to strive for success, certainly to do good and avoid evil, but the outcome of one's efforts is of secondary importance. To quote a certain wizard's advice to a Mr. Underhill (significant name) who was lamenting that he lived in dark days: "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us." Or to paraphrase Mother Teresa: We are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful.

I mention this so you don't set too much store by the little biography about me that you may have read in today's program. Remember: Commencement speakers are invited when they're on the rise or enjoying a mountain view, rarely when they're on the way down or in the dumps. But they know the dumps.

All this is by way of explaining the sudden delight I felt when I discovered that the fictional town of my own inventing, Tordale, had a counterpart in reality in the great State of Michigan. I was genuinely intrigued, and I seized the opportunity to come.

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As I mentioned, my first visit to Hillsdale was intended to be only four days in duration: it turned out to be eight. Why? I arrived here on September 10, 2001. I was staying with my friend, Andrew Cuneo, and on September 11 he brought me onto campus at about nine in the morning. We walked into Delp Hall where his office was, and one of his colleagues greeted us and happened to mention some troubling news out of New York that he'd just heard—something about a plane and the World Trade Center. The rest of that terrible day unfolded and brought a ghastly timeliness to the lecture I was preparing to give on C.S. Lewis's responses to war. It was a truly shocking event, an epoch-defining event. In the course of a morning the whole international outlook was plunged into crisis. That clear blue

September sky was suddenly a cloud of dust and ash.

And so if my first charge to you is to rejoice in the light and air on the hilltop of liberty, my second charge is to take heart when faced with the valley of tears, whether that valley be (God forbid) a grim and grave reversal like that suffered by so many on 9/11, or a comparatively trivial setback like the doldrums I found myself in personally after graduating. You'll have experienced many a low point in the course of your life already, I doubt not. So I'm not saying anything you don't already know. But if my own experience is anything to go by, there's a step change once you're out of college, because, as I say, the whole framework of your life is now different. Now it's much more up to you—or should I say down to you?—how you respond, how you forge a path through this life. That's what

caught me out for a while when I graduated. I wish someone had warned me of it. Perhaps they did and I just didn't listen. But I can at least try to pass on to you what it seems no one told me.

And I say this not to depress you, but to forearm you, should you need forearming. At graduation I thought I'd arrived. Having done all I was told I should accomplish by way of earning a good degree from a good school, I thought I could expect life to unfurl smoothly before me in a series of ever more pleasant and successful scenes. It took me quite a while to realize that this wasn't to be my lot, that this is the lot of nobody, and that life actually proceeds according to what C.S. Lewis calls the "law of undulation." G.K. Chesterton called it the rolling English road.

* * *

Winston Churchill's life is a particularly striking example of the law of undulation, this rolling English road, not only because his was a very long and very public life, but because its heights and depths were of extraordinary amplitude. A happy marriage with five children, but two predeceased him. A glittering early career, marred by the Dardanelles. Restoration to political prominence, but then the wilderness years. The triumph of his combat with Hitler, followed by summary expulsion from national office. And many other ups and downs besides.

But one of the things I admire about Churchill is that he didn't just let these things happen to him. His life may have been a rollercoaster, but he was more than a mere passenger. He knew that the wise man learns from his reverses; he doesn't simply defy them, but turns them to effect. Churchill responded to the low points in his life with the muscle of his will, yes, but also with the artistry of his soul.

I think we see a nice illustration of this in his passionate interest in painting. If you haven't read Churchill's *Painting as a Pastime*, do! It's one of the best things he wrote. He took up painting during the First World War and I have the sense that painting for him was more than a diverting hobby, more than a release valve from the pressures of high office: it was also a way in which he could respond creatively to difficulty, transmuted into something noble and beautiful. The white canvas didn't simply offset the black dog. No, the white canvas became an opportunity for him to represent visually, in color and in contrast, a unified perception of diverse reality. He painted almost all his canvases in oils, and though he naturally inclined towards the brighter colors in his palette and felt, he said, "genuinely sorry for the poor browns," he knew that all landscapes possess darkness as well as light; even a still life requires shadows. Sheer contrast—mere black next to mere white—depicts nothing of interest. There must be engagement between the two and a shattering of white light into the full chromatic spectrum. When Churchill first began to paint he found himself more engaged with reality, looking at things afresh, with new attentiveness, a greater intelligence, a richer integration. He wrote:

One is quite astonished to find how many things there are in the landscape . . . [that] one never noticed before. . . . So many colours on the hillside, each different in shadow and in sunlight.

From genuine Churchill to faux Churchill: This is not the start; it is not even the conclusion of the start. But it is, perhaps, the start of the conclusion.

And what is my conclusion? Simply this: Class of 2015, rejoice in the strength of the hills; take courage in the depths of the earth.

Godspeed. ■



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DID YOU KNOW?

The Hillsdale College women's track team finished in second place at the 2015 NCAA Division II indoor national championships. Junior Emily Oren's time of 9:16 in the 3,000 meter run broke a 30-year-old Division II record.