

## 2019 Commencement Remarks

By Jess Hill, Head of School

Congratulations to the Class of 2019! It is my distinct honor to be with you on this special evening – one of beginnings and endings as we hold a sincere optimism for your tomorrow. Thank you, parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends, mentors, faculty, and trustees, for being here as we celebrate this incredible group of young women, their accomplishments, their questions, their ideas, their shining moments, their excellent mistakes, and most of all, as we celebrate at once their individuality and their solidarity. Seniors, you have lifted this community by being exactly who you are and for aspiring to be even more. Thank you.

This is a brilliant moment to at least pause and take in. It is the moment when you are on the cusp of possibility. You have been under adult rule for the last 18 years, and you are about to have a little more agency in your decisions and in your lives. You will begin to listen to yourselves. I am excited to watch your futures unfold, and I think our future looks brighter with you in it.

Seniors, your teachers have described you as defying teenage stereotypes of apathy or nonchalance. You have allowed yourself to be open and even moved by what you have studied and read – many of you, and you know who you are, were teary and felt genuine empathy for the flawed tragic heroes you met, such as the *Crucible*'s John Proctor, or the ever-tortured Hamlet or the desperate Jay Gatsby. You gave your teachers the pleasure of seeing your sentimentality and feelings revealed. You felt equally excited by what a classmate planted in the school garden as by a National Swimming Championship or by a solo in a performance. You cheered as your friends gave moving senior speeches and more than any class I have seen in recent years, you were generous with your attention and mentorship of our younger girls.

Kind yes, but not without a strength that will carry you in the years to come. You are not afraid to speak your mind and have a friend across the room respectfully disagree in full force. You are willing to listen and understand. Above all, you support and connect with each other and this community without hesitation. You experienced and observed sadness here at Harpeth Hall and in our country over the last four years, and you have shown resolve in your optimism, resilience, and strength through it all. You inspired us to “stand in strength.”

You are also incredibly curious and adventurous. You traveled during Winterim to Australia, Britain, France, Chile, Northern Ireland, Taiwan, Uganda, Germany, Guatemala, New Zealand, and South Africa. Not surprisingly, you are ready to take on the world with your college choices. Ninety-Nine girls in the class of 2019 matriculating to 57 different colleges and universities all over the United States, Ireland and Australia. You seized the day with your thirst for learning and exploration.

As you begin to turn your attention from this year to next year, I would like to give you three bits of unsolicited advice.

First, when you are looking over your ever-present to-do lists throughout your life, try to tackle the hardest thing first. Often, it involves having a difficult conversation that you dread having with a friend, a professor, a colleague, or family member – go ahead and do it. These relationships matter. It is amazing how we can rationalize an avoidance of the most important

and hardest things on our mental lists. Go ahead and face the challenge, and the rest will be a piece of cake. If you miss the opportunity to have a crucial or uncomfortable conversation, it may eclipse a learning opportunity or worse, you may lose a bit of yourself.

Secondly, in repeating what I said in assembly recently, remember to enjoy the ordinary things. Sometimes we wish away our days, waiting for the big moments like this one. On a smaller scale, we may wish away Monday or Tuesday to make it to the fun things on Friday or Saturday. When you are in college, it can be a “work hard – play hard” atmosphere. Try to carve out some moments that are real and ordinary. Coffee with a friend, a long walk, preferably not on a treadmill – those moments comprise our lives too. It is not just the peak experiences that matter.

My last piece of advice is one that you already know how to do so well. I promise to make it my last assignment, and there is no deadline or time limit on this one.

A poet once published his blanket advice to all students, and he wrote, *“Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know, you’re a lot of other people: but the moment you feel, you’re nobody-but-yourself.”*

Seniors, I began my remarks with a description of how you allowed yourself to be open to feelings in the classroom, open to being moved by a character in a novel or open to connecting with a friend’s joy or sadness. You have been moved by this community on this day and many other days this year. As you begin to live beyond the teenage angst of being cool or covering or trying to prove something, you can more easily be “nobody but yourself.”

Class of 2019, you are ready to dance your way into the future. If you forget the rest, simply take the time to listen to what is already there inside you. Embrace the challenge, savor the ordinary, and remember that “the moment you feel, you are nobody but yourself.”

Thank you.