

Remarks to the Class of 2011
by Washington and Lee President Kenneth P. Ruscio
at the 224th Commencement Exercises
May 26, 2011

...In his novel *Nobody's Fool*, Richard Russo describes one of his characters this way: "Clive, Sr., was not a profoundly stupid man, but he missed his fair share of what Miss Beryl referred to as life's nuances." May you never be described that way. You should go through the rest of your life seeking what one of my predecessors, Francis Pendleton Gaines, called something "finer than competence, nobler than success." You should see things that others do not; you should exhibit reverence for the past while being mindful of the future. You should cultivate an appreciation for nuance.

When I was your age, I would run from the person who, burdened by years of experience, sees all kinds of trends in society that are cause for lament and who wants to tell others, especially young people, how things are going to hell in a hand basket. I would run from the person I am slowly becoming.

But I do worry about a society that takes seriously a potential presidential candidate with gravity-defying hair whose position on China is summed up in two words, "our enemies"; whose strategy for energy is "to seize Iraq's oil fields"; and who cannot understand why his simultaneous support for a constitutionally derived right to privacy and the right to life requires at least some explaining.

And I worry about how we mistake information for knowledge and wisdom. I cannot easily sum up what we do here at Washington and Lee, but one simple description is that we seek to move students up a ladder that begins with information, then up to knowledge and then, ultimately, wisdom. That's becoming quite a challenge in a society that pushes people down the ladder. It is easy these days to get very good data in quantities undreamed of only a few short years ago, at speeds equally unimagined. But making sense of that information seems so much harder. The whole becomes subservient to the bits and pieces, the forest to the trees. Wisdom is not the same as more and better information, but we seem to think so.

...And in this world of moral complexity, search for nuance rather than simplicity. There are days when I gaze with envy upon those who live huddled in a security blanket of their own certitude, who seem to have it all figured out, who can discern motives merely by looking at a person, and who therefore have no need to listen to or learn from others. But most days I realize how uninteresting a life that would be, even if it would be easier, and how sad it would be to look upon all who disagree with you as morally obtuse or stupid. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin puts it this way:

"Happy are those who...have, by their own methods, arrived at clear and unshakeable convictions about what to do and what to be that brook no possible doubt. I can only say that those who rest on such comfortable beds of dogma are victims of self-induced myopia, blinkers that may make for contentment, but not for understanding of what it is to be human."

I wish I could say our own community here at Washington and Lee is free of such certitude. And I wish I could say that when it does occur, we can chalk it up to youthful indiscretion. But it happens sometimes among those of us who have the experience and intellectual maturity to know better. Washington and Lee is less afflicted by this problem than any other place I have been, and I am grateful for that. But that only means that when it rears its head, it is all the more painful and harsh.

Out there you will see much more of it. It is, regrettably, the predominant mode of public discourse these days. But the volume of an argument is no measure of its quality, and certitude is a poor proxy for rational thinking. If a previous time marked the loss of innocence, ours might well be marked by the loss of nuance.

Unless, that is, you play a part in recovering it, at least in your own lives. I wish for you a life enriched by the insights found in literature, the perspective that comes from reading history and the wonder that comes from witnessing the creativity of art and music. I wish for you a life in which you have the courage of convictions, to be sure, but you also have the humility to know that you have so much still to learn. I wish for you, as Gaines said, "something finer than competence, something nobler than success."

... We, of course, wish you the very best. We are proud of you today, proud of what you have already accomplished, and even more proud in our anticipation of what is still to come.