

HAMPDEN-SYDNEY MEN

Remarks for the Opening Convocation
August 24, 2016

The inspiration for tonight's talk comes from the introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of Ayn Rand's novel, *The Fountainhead*, which I first read just after I graduated from college. In this introduction, Rand writes that her purpose "is the presentation of an ideal man." Later, she writes that she wishes to inspire the "view with which the best of mankind's youth start out in life. It is not even a view, for most of them, but a ... sense ... of enormous expectation, the sense that one's life is important, that great achievements are within one's capacity, and that great things lie ahead." I want my words tonight to inspire you to consider how you can use your time at Hampden-Sydney to prepare yourself for the great achievements that are within your capacity and the great things that lie ahead.

Our Presbyterian founders would have been uncomfortable with talk about the ideal man. They were all too aware of our human imperfection and the ways we fall short of the ideal. They nevertheless created here a college that would, as my predecessor wrote in 1775, "form good men and good citizens"—a noble task that this college has been pursuing for over 240 years. So, tonight, far from suggesting that I have definitive answers, I want to begin conversations I hope you have with your fellow students, other members of this college community, and me about what it means to be a good man and a good citizen—a "Hampden-Sydney Man."

For me, the good man is a complete or total man. In nearly all of my messages to this community, I have spoken about the importance of taking a holistic approach to higher education, an approach that this College has always embodied. As a college, we will always be focused, first and foremost on the development of your intellect, but here we also seek to educate your physical, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions as well.

When we hear the word "intellect," we almost reflexively think of knowledge content. But, intellect is not about what we know, it is about how we know and how we think. It is about our habits of mind—our curiosity, our openness to new ideas, and our ways of engaging in dialog with others. We want you to be able to think for yourself here, to think critically, to read and to listen, to distill from what you read and hear what is relevant and meaningful, and to synthesize that information and develop your own insights. We also want you to have intellectual humility—that for all the wisdom you acquire, you will always have much more that you can learn.

I can't give you a formula for intellectual development, but I am eager to offer a few suggestions: Participating in class offers you opportunities to hear from people who have different thoughts and understandings. It also offers you opportunities to hear yourself speak and to evaluate your own words even as you are speaking. The great writer, E. M. Forster has written, "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say;" and haven't all of us had that amazing experience of the lightbulb coming on just after we have uttered something less than profound? Far from being moments of embarrassment, these are moments to be treasured.

Nothing will sharpen your thinking as much as writing, and so we should celebrate our rhetoric program and its efforts to make you better writers. Read outside of class. Ask your professors, coaches, other staff members, and fellow students what they are reading. Or start with Hemingway. Get to know authors well by reading many of their books and they will become your lifelong friends. Make an effort to be learning something new all of the time and you will surely gain a greater appreciation for life as your reward. I firmly believe that you will enjoy music more if you understand how a musical composition is put together and you will enjoy the forest more if you can identify trees and marvel at their variety. All of us, faculty and staff members included, should measure our intellectual growth here by how much our worldview changes and expands over our time together.

Moving on to the physical, social, and emotional dimensions of your life, there's a great deal of wisdom in realizing that if you take care of your body it will take care of you. It is important not to defile your body. Excessive drinking and recreational drug use are totally inconsistent with our mission "to form good men and good citizens." Self-control is a key life skill and it is a first and an essential qualification for leading others. And, enjoy your body to the fullest while you are young. Every day that goes by makes me wish I'd run more in the years when it hurt less.

On the social dimension, I have always admired the man who is comfortable in his own skin, who carries himself with confidence; who has the ability to move across groups, fraternities, sports teams; who can talk with everyone and make them feel comfortable. There is no grace or special skill required to talk with people who are part of your group, but finding common ground with people who are not like you is a skill that will serve you well throughout your life.

Emotional maturity is another component of the good man. Emotional maturity is not the absence of emotions, but the capacity for feeling and the ability to understand the feelings of others. The personality trait called "self-monitoring," or your ability to understand how you are coming across to others, is absolutely fundamental to your success in life. Self-monitoring, like your other personality traits such as extroversion and conscientiousness, was more or less fixed before you started kindergarten. But, you can discover whether self-monitoring is one of your strengths or a weakness. If it is a weakness for you, you can overcome this weakness by learning to ask those around you for feedback about how you are coming across.

Finally, let me talk about the moral and spiritual dimensions together because I believe they go hand in hand. I don't want to minimize the study of moral behavior, but a practical guide is the "mother test:" whenever you find yourself doing something that you realize you wouldn't want your mother to know about then you probably shouldn't be doing it. As you know, we take morality very seriously here at Hampden-Sydney, and we ask every one of you to sign our Honor Code, pledging that you will not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate these behaviors in your fellow students. Our Code of Conduct also asks you to act as gentlemen. You know that these codes run counter to prevailing values in our society. For a long time now, many in our society have had the view that just about anything is okay if nobody gets hurt. Even more concerning is an increasingly common view that morality is what you can get away with. Such views are one of many reasons why our society needs Hampden-Sydney men more than anytime in this College's 240-year history.

At Hampden-Sydney, our morality has always been rooted in our spirituality. Our Honor Code and Code of Conduct are premised on the idea that there are higher laws that should guide our conduct and life together. But the spiritual dimension of life does more than provide us with a moral foundation. The spiritual dimension also offers the possibility of greater purpose and meaningfulness. Too often today, our spirituality is a very superficial one, what one scholar has called “moralistic, therapeutic, deism.” You must go deeper than this. Being nice to others is nice, but it is not spirituality. A beautiful sunset is pleasant, but it is not spirituality. Spirituality is a deep internal journey or quest for greater meaning in life. Part of why I am emphasizing this spiritual dimension is because it was during my own college years that I journeyed into my own Christian faith, and I want you to have that same sense of wholeness or completeness. Whatever your creed or persuasion, you will find many people on this campus who are eager to be mentors and guides for you on your own spiritual journey.

This brings me to my conclusion: It takes great courage to be the Hampden-Sydney Men I have outlined here. Our default is almost always the path of least resistance. We are always much more eager to focus on our strengths, and we’d rather not deal with our weaknesses. So, going the extra mile in our studies, and stretching ourselves along our physical, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions requires courage. Great achievements are within your capacity, and great things lie ahead for every one of you. One of the most important attributes of our Hampden-Sydney College community is that we are a community—a very special brotherhood, and we are a brotherhood dedicated to helping each and every one of you become the best man and the best citizen you can be and achieving all that life has in store for you. So, let us have the courage to challenge ourselves and one another to be one of the best things you can be—Hampden-Sydney Men.