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Valedictory Address

I often think of our time at St. John's as a photo album (or maybe in 2019 it's more of a camera roll): a collection of snapshots in time, each one illustrating a specific moment from our experience here. Undoubtedly, the most vivid images are the ones that involve true human interaction.

My most cherished picture from my Prep experience was actually taken more than 3,000 miles away in Durán, Ecuador with a group of students from the Prep. The trip was life-changing. Each day we spoke with neighbors from the area in which we were living. A moment I'll never forget from the trip occurred when we were playing soccer with a group of students from a nearby afterschool program. It was the rainy season, so inevitably a storm rolled in, and almost immediately the field we were playing on turned to mud. Our soccer game quickly devolved into a mud fight, and for a few glorious, fleeting minutes, we were all five years old again without a care in the world.

Another photo is from the PULSE trip—the Prep Urban Life Student Immersion program—that so many of us embarked on during junior year. After spending a cold February morning helping to clean up at Boston Rescue Mission, a homeless shelter in the heart of the city, our group settled down in the cafeteria to eat the lunches we had packed for the day. We initially sat at our own table, but then branched out and sat among people who came to the shelter in need of a meal. Conversation was difficult at first, but eventually we found common

ground in our zeal for the Patriots, fell into casual discussion, and a lively conversation about the recent Super Bowl is one of my fondest memories of the trip.

There's also a series of images from the Prep Leadership Institute—PLI—that took place this past summer and was another highlight for so many reasons. Many of us opened up for the first time, sharing personal stories, being honest with one another, trusting one another as we hadn't before. We became a community; our class came together, and we are now stronger as individuals, and in brotherhood, as a result.

Each of these snapshots are so profound because they involve us--humans--interacting with each other on a personal level. In every one of these moments, we were invested and listened to what others were saying.

These experiences, however, were all, to some degree, orchestrated for us. They were designed so that purpose, immersion, and depth were facilitated by the event itself. This fact takes nothing away from the power and importance of such moments; they showed us true human experience regardless of how we achieved it. We certainly have to recognize, though, that in our daily lives, when not required to engage with others around us, we often don't. I see another snapshot, of classmates immersed in their screens - phones, iPads, and the only sound is silence. I'm forced to wonder, are we becoming disconnected from each other?

Perhaps the most prominent reason for this disconnect is our relationship with technology. A stroll across campus, or even any major city could reveal most people walking with heads buried in devices. In my own home, at times, all four of my family members will be present in the same room staring at our smartphones.

Of course, technology does an incredible amount of good for society. It is safe to say that today, people are living an easier life than that of their ancestors, a simple fact that can be almost entirely attributed to advances in technology. As we have seen firsthand at St. John's, technology is essential to education. It puts virtually any school subject at our fingertips and streamlines collaboration between students and teachers. Technology can help the environment: it saves dwindling resources and harnesses a range of renewable energies. Technology is what separates us from generations of the past, and its importance, and our dependence on it, will only increase as time goes on. And yet, I'm fearful that if we're not careful in the way we use technology, it has the potential to strip us of what makes us human.

I'm sure that we've all heard at some point that we should spend less time on our devices. If you're like me, though, you've never actually done it, and have rarely considered why it should be done. There are purely scientific reasons for why our use of technology—particularly smartphones and social media—negatively impacts our wellbeing. Chronic cell phone use can manipulate the levels of chemicals like dopamine and cortisol in our brains, and the effects can vary from sleep deprivation and smartphone addiction to stroke and dementia.

Equally as alarming, however, is the effect that our phones can have on our behavior. We all know the frustration of talking to someone else who's staring at a screen or wearing earbuds, knowing that they're only hearing half of what we're saying. While a situation like this one may seem inconsequential, it's a perfect illustration of the focus that we've lost and our inability to connect personally with others in the midst of daily life. On social media, we're being bombarded with overwhelming amounts of information, and as a result we now have a tendency to simply skim headlines and never actually look into anything in an in-depth manner.

We like to craft our feeds so that we only see sources that correspond with our own viewpoints. Online, we interact with each other behind a screen and a username and fail to consider the lives—the humanity—of those we communicate with.

Now, especially as we leave the comfort zone that St. John's has become, it will be more important than ever that we lead lives of purpose and intention in order to connect with those around us. We all know how tempting it can be to dive into the world on our phones and remain within this bubble for hours on end—I often waste hours every day doing just that despite my best efforts to resist. I must admit, there's nothing instant about my Instagram usage. So, what could we do to stave off this temptation? here are a few pieces of advice.

First, be passionate. Get involved. and Stay involved. with others. Allow your passions to continue to be a large part of who you are.

Be thorough. When you follow the news, don't merely skim headlines, but read stories all the way through. Don't try to read or be involved with everything. You don't have to do everything; Choose a few areas where you can make real, genuine connections with others.

Next, continue to be curious. Don't forget to look up. Ask questions about the world around you When asking a question, and don't settle for the easiest answer or the first one that you find comes up on your Google search.

Finally, take initiative. In a world where isolation is becoming the norm, we must actively work to break free from this isolation and go out of our way to reach out to others. Be the first to ask someone about his or her story. I challenge you, and I challenge myself to remember this advice.

104 years ago, my great-grandmother was the valedictorian of her class, the class of 1915 at Pembroke Academy in New Hampshire. In her address to her classmates, she contended that “Boys and girls must receive an education that will prepare them to meet the demands of the new social and industrial conditions both in the home and business world. They must be prepared to earn a living and to live happily.” Because of technology, the demands of the world we will soon be entering are drastically different than that of 1915, but her message is just as valuable today. more important than ever. Our experiences and education have taught us that living happily will depend on our ability to stay genuinely connected with others.

Returning to our class of 2019 photo album, I hope that as we add pictures from our reunions—in 5 years, 10 years, 15 years, and beyond, we continue to see brotherhood, see compassion, and see humanity within ourselves, and within each other.

Thank you.