



TOM MANSOUR



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Good morning class of 2024, faculty, parents, and distinguished guests.

I am honored and humbled to be standing here today with you celebrating Washington Waldorf School's newest alumni. It feels like not so long ago I was standing in your shoes - albeit with too much gel in my hair and about 40 lbs lighter than I am now - with a feeling of enormous accomplishment, and nervous but excited energy for what was coming next in my life. I remember in my very brief remarks during graduation I said something along the lines of "and for the freshmen standing in the back, know this day will come much sooner than you expect." Well today also happens to be my 20 year high school reunion, and I can say with certainty to you seniors in the front: this day will come much sooner than you expect.

These past 20 years - much like the 12 years I spent here - have been filled with joy, love, heartbreak, adventure, learning, and so much more. But all of it was built on the foundation of authenticity and creativity developed at this school. As I walk the halls of this building, so much has changed, but so much, too, is the same. Namely the core of what makes this institution such a special place: the faculty. Barbara Bancroft was also my senior class sponsor, Taisto Saloma was my humanities teacher, baseball and basketball coach (although I was terrible at basketball Taisto, which really feels like a wasted opportunity in hindsight), and Bonnie McClelland who was the ever present high school czar and who graciously hosted me in her office when I got kicked out of class for talking too much, or helped me make last minute copies of overdue homework. The faculty here are pillars of my adolescence and foundational to who I am today. For that I am eternally grateful.

Waldorf is an experience like no other in many of the best ways, but also in some challenging ways. In the best ways it allowed me to explore my personality without fear of outsized judgment through art, music, experiential science, and sport. But the flip side of that also meant that my upbringing and social experience was very different from my non-Waldorf peers. I didn't see myself in pop culture, and while I thankfully avoided many of the trials and tribulations that come with the typical American high school experience, at the time I also felt like I was missing out on just "being normal" in the eyes of mainstream America - we didn't have prom, homecoming, or letterman jackets. In many ways our experience was so exceptionally unique it made communicating it to others challenging. Ironically in my early twenties this made me seek opportunities to just blend in. I remember on my first day of Coast Guard Officer Candidate School - which is a 5 month basic training environment - I looked down at the roster sheet sitting in the barracks room and read "Mansour - Officer Candidate 52." I was unironically so happy to just "be a number" and could fit right in with everyone else no matter their background, education, or life experience. But as I grew in my twenties I came to embrace the uniqueness that was my high school experience. I felt much closer connected to my authentic self than what I observed in others, I struggled less in socially understanding my peers, and most tangibly I was sought after as a writer by colleagues and superiors alike for speeches, letters, instructions, or notes that needed drafting. I never experienced myself as a gifted writer - and still don't - but the educational toolset I had as a junior officer in the Coast Guard enabled me to thrive in ways my more traditionally educated peers could not. I share this anecdote not to give you a sense of superiority, but more to perhaps help contextualize how your experience of your Waldorf education may change as you grow and evolve professionally and personally.

As you sit here today, having completed likely the most rewarding and challenging chapter of your life to date, I'd like to share with you some thoughts, perspective, and advice that may help as you step into your next journey.

I feel an enormous responsibility to you - the class of 2024 - not only because I've been given the honor of being your graduation speaker, but also because we're inextricably linked through our graduation years. And this feeling was only further reinforced yesterday morning when I had the privilege to sit and chat with you. I was struck by how grounded and thoughtful each of you are, and further reminded of what a special place this is that allows students to grow into such confident, mature individuals. I have no doubt each of you will thrive personally and professionally - even if you're not 100% sure in what field that may be yet. But as you begin to nurture the seeds of your professional life, allow me to share my first piece of advice: **build a network**. I know this can feel transactional and inauthentic for some - especially for feelings focused Waldorf graduates - but there is enormous value in fostering and developing a group of people invested in your success that you can rely on for mentorship, connection, advice, opportunity, and so much more. As children of DC parents, I know this concept isn't foreign to you, but embracing this - with authenticity and intentionality - can open so many doors for you. This room is filled with people that want to see you succeed - your

parents, your friends, your fellow alumni, even your parents' friends can provide connection and opportunity for you. I'm too young and hip to ever have had a rolodex, but I hope that after today, you consider me a founding member of each of your professional networks and add me to your virtual rolodex (or LinkedIn or whatever).

As we talked about yesterday, after graduating college I spent 10 years as an officer in the U.S. Coast Guard serving aboard various ships in leadership functions, and ending my time on active duty as a Fellow in the United States Senate. I've spent these last four years at Meta working with some of the smartest and most talented people I've ever met. I've been both a people manager and individual contributor in both of my aforementioned careers and through that experience have refined both what I strive to achieve as a colleague and what I look for as a leader in my team members. At the top of that list is **practicing proactive initiative**. Embracing the mindset that no problem or challenge is someone else's to solve. To that end, I'd like to share with you a story from the turn of the 19th Century called "A Message to Garcia." Written in 1899 by Elbert Hubbard, this essay outlines how a young lieutenant Andrew Rowan was tasked by President McKinley to deliver a critical message to a guerilla commander - Garcia - in the mountains of Cuba on the eve of the Spanish-American War. The premise of the essay is that lieutenant Rowan took his task direction and just went forth without needing micromanagement or intricate instruction. To quote from the essay: "Rowan took the letter, sealed it up in an oil-skin pouch, strapped it over his heart, in four days landed by night off the coast of Cuba from an open boat, disappeared into the jungle, and in three weeks came out on the other side of the island, having traversed a hostile country on foot, and having delivered his letter to Garcia. McKinley gave Rowan a letter to be delivered to Garcia; Rowan took the letter and did not ask, "Where is he at?"

Pretty impressive right? Hopefully you're inspired by this story of a self-starter who through sheer determination and force of will was able to steer history in his country's favor, the lesson being that initiative breeds success! And while in broad strokes I think there's truth in that, there's another, more historically accurate side that has more useful lessons. While lieutenant Rowan was a real historical figure, and did indeed go to Cuba in search of Garcia, the rest is largely

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revisionist history. It turns out, Rowan almost immediately got lost in the jungle, never delivered his message, and returned Stateside empty handed weeks later.

I share this story with you for three reasons. One, taking the initiative, being proactive, and working autonomously are skills that should rightly be valued and sought after no matter your profession. Two, practice discernment in the advice you receive, stories you're told, and facts that are presented to you. And three, reject duality. Paradoxically, two things can be true at once as is the case in this story: yes many of the core tenants and skills lauded in Hubbard's essay are worth lionizing, but also the litany of gripes and complaints the author goes on to outline in the rest of his story about the state of the working class and pervasive laziness are broadly misplaced. Over a hundred years later

much of the same discourse exists in today's society and it continues to be often highly classist, gendered, and racist. I encourage you to practice discernment in how you consume those narratives, the truth is rarely what it seems on the outset. Be judicious in the advice you receive and choose to internalize. Everyone brings with them their own biases and subjective experiences that generally have very little to do with you. As a young person entering professional life you will be inundated with feedback, suggestions, and unsolicited advice, right now being a prime example. In these moments I encourage you to stay true to yourself, and take onboard only what truly resonates with you.

I started this anecdote espousing the virtues of taking the initiative and being thoughtfully proactive - which to be clear are professional traits that are learned rather than endowed, a lesson that took me longer to internalize than I'd like to admit. What I think often hinders people from being proactive in their professional life is a condition many of you may already be familiar with: **imposter syndrome**. The thought or feeling that somehow you don't belong in the position or role you're in. The bad news is that this is not generally a condition that you outgrow, as it's something that has followed me for much of my 15 year professional life, through two very different careers. But the good news is that imposter syndrome is something that can be acknowledged and iteratively reduced by both naming it for what it is, and by **asking for help and asking lots of questions**. At the outset of both of my very distinct careers I found myself very much out of my depth. As a brand new Ensign in the Coast Guard my peers were mostly Coast Guard Academy graduates who'd spent four years preparing for leadership at sea. I, on the other hand, was just a recent liberal arts college grad who'd completed five months of Officer Candidate School and placed in charge of a 15 person department all while struggling to overcome seasickness. And again when I transitioned out of the military to Meta I was surrounded by a group of generally much younger, highly intellectual and technically capable colleagues with data science or software engineering degrees. But in both cases, I've found the antidote to imposter syndrome is to humble myself and ask my more tenured or experienced colleagues for help in understanding what I imagine are rudimentary topics. And interestingly I've learned that oftentimes by asking those questions either no one really knows the answer (and we have to collectively work to understand it), or there are many others in the group too shy to ask the same question. My aim here is to alleviate you of the awkwardness and fear that can be associated with starting a new job, or even beginning your undergraduate experience. Embrace the feeling of not belonging and work to overcome it by being upfront with what you don't fully understand and before you know it you'll be thriving as the subject matter expert in your field.

Ok, I know I've been up here for a few minutes now, and I'm standing in the way of you celebrating with your friends and family. Leveraging my Meta Program Manager skill set for a minute, let's recap the action items from this graduation:

- Be proactive and show initiative in all the work you do,
- Practice discernment in the life advice you receive,
- Reject duality, for there can be multiple truths,
- Embrace the discomfort of Imposter syndrome, and
- Asking for help is a sign of maturity not weakness.

I opened my remarks today touching on gratitude: for you, this institution, its faculty, and for my experience here. I'll close by extending that gratitude to the parents, family, and friends of the class of 2024. Its no small effort to send a child to Waldorf, both financially and logistically. My wife sitting here today is five months pregnant with what will be our first child - a boy. As I stand on the doorstep of parenthood, my experience here at Waldorf has come into sharper focus. I find myself more fully understanding the immense sacrifice my mother made to send me to this school - even if I didn't fully appreciate it at the time. As I think about raising a child I'm struck by how passionately I feel about his future education and the intention I want to bring to that. When the time comes I hope to be able to provide a similar educational and social experience for my son as my mom did for me over twenty years ago. In speaking with you yesterday, I think you're much more aware of the privilege and uniqueness of this experience than I was at your age. But allow me a moment to extend deep gratitude to your parents and family for making this education possible for you.

And with that, I offer you my sincerest congratulations, Washington Waldorf School class of 2024! Embrace your future with confidence, curiosity, and compassion, and never forget the lessons learned and the connections formed during your time here. Go forth and make a positive impact on the world.

Thank you.