

Alexa Marsh
Valedictory Address
Mercersburg Academy
June 5, 2021

September 2, 2019. The first day of junior year—or, as we call it at Mercersburg, upper-middler year. It was a day marked by a mishmash of emotions—an appreciation for the familiarity of a place and its people that I had yearned for as a tenth grade transfer student, eagerness for the challenge of classes and intellectual investigation, and unease about the notoriety of an academic year filled with standardized tests, heavy course loads, and a looming college process.

As I shuffled into my United States History classroom that first day, my back already aching from the weight of my infamously overstuffed backpack bursting with binders and an equally packed pencil case, I claimed a corner seat that would be my home for the next few months. Gazing around the room, I noticed a piece of paper pasted above the doorway. Enclosed in quotes, it read: *laugh, think, cry*. Mr. Caretti soon stepped in, greeting us with his classic “party people” address and infusing the room with a palpable energy. As he introduced the course, preparing us for its rigor and challenge in a way that was in equal parts exhilarating and intimidating, he turned to the words taped above the door and recited the quote in its entirety: *if you laugh, you think, and you cry, that’s a full day*. These were the words that would guide our evolution of learning, our navigation through the dark depths of United States history.

And they did. They manifested in the gushes of giddy glee that accompanied the relief of turning in a tricky DBQ; the tears that threatened to spring from the corners of my eyes when, after our first graded discussion, I feared that my nerves had jumbled my thoughts and my words and I wondered why I couldn’t just speak; in the questions that itched my brain as we poured over the momentous moments of American history and witnessed both the parallel and unprecedented problems plaguing our contemporary country—a presidential impeachment, deepening party polarization, and the politicization of a pernicious pandemic.

These words, I found, did not just describe the enriching experience I had in my history classroom, but embodied my Mercersburg journey—the ups and downs and in-betweens, the moments and memories that molded my three years into something to be cherished, a treasure chest of hopes and hurts, ambitions and bruises, triumphs and failures. They celebrate the simple wonders; the hazy glow of the Writing Center on a rainy fall night; beginnings of a two-person Latin class spent discussing the superiority of arugula; the sweet scent of coffee cake muffins melded with the measured rhythms of spoken poetry; and they also honor the struggles; the trials that tested me, taught me, and toughened me. Encompassing all of these experiences is a fantastic fullness, an enveloping patchwork of Mercersburg moments.

Class of 2021, from four-year seniors to postgraduates, our Mercersburg story has been defined by this fullness; the fullness of laughter and loud swelling cheers, of difficult days and saddened spirits, of stimulating seminars, astounding creativity, and compassionate thought. And, confronted with unparalleled obstacles, our final year has been defined by an incredible

resilience. From the bubbling tensions of a bitter 2020 presidential election, perpetual fear of a fatal pandemic, and national reckoning with the insidious inequalities of systemic injustice to the complications of virtual learning and the mourning of lost high school memories, we have faced these wild storm waves with grit and with grace.

Three years ago, I sat in the audience steeped in sweat and stared up at my sister's graduating class—the Class of 2018. Elevated on the esteemed platform, as the yellow sun poured across the stage in yolk beams, the graduates seemed to swim in a pool of golden light. I watched as each senior rose, shuffled past pairs of knees, and embarked on the arduous trek to receive their diplomas, and I listened to the jubilant cheers from the freshmen—my future classmates—on the bleachers behind me. I felt content, basking in the beauty of the lush campus that I would soon step foot on, not as a visiting little sister, but as a student. I itched to be a part of this place; this sliver of a state where community and camaraderie seemed baked into its being, where teachers were trusted friends and learning meant more than a grade and its people appeared bound by a shared purpose and pride.

And in a few short months, I would be immersed into this Mercersburg I had imagined; but my transition would not be without its tests. At times I would feel trapped; trapped by a timidity that turned myself inward and morphed my mouth into a gate that obstructed my words from plummeting out; that filled me with fear as I struggled to speak up in seminars and envied the eloquence of my peers who spoke with courageous confidence. And although this will always be a part of me—this ingrained strain of shyness and preference for expression in the language of written words—and I cannot claim to be completely composed as I stand here speaking in front of a sea of sun-soaked faces, I have learned to see the value in using my voice; to savor the sense of words tumbling off my tongue, to soak up the smooth sounds of syllables, to embrace the vibration of my voice and forgive the flushes that flower on my face as I open my lips to speak.

To all those who have carried me to this place, I am eternally grateful. To my teachers, who have pushed me, challenged me, inspired me with their passion and encouraged my curiosities. To Mrs. Titus, for her unrelenting optimism, her fierce faith in our community, and for always reminding us what is important—the people around us. To my entire family, for their constant love and support, and my parents, my backbone, for the many sacrifices you have made for me and for always believing in me, even when I myself do not.

And to the great Class of 2021—our crazy, eclectic, colorful class—a class of comics and composers, swimmers and singers, poets and painters and passionate people—thank you for the timeless memories and the invaluable lessons you all have taught me. As you leave behind Mercersburg and embark on your next journey, in your next four years and beyond, may you laugh, may you think and may you cry. And may you always carry with you a piece of this place—of this big, blue family we will forever call home.

Thank you.