

Floyd Robinson
Commencement Speech
Mercersburg Academy
June 5, 2021

Reading of the poem "[Mother to Son](#)" by Langston Hughes

I think all of us today can relate to the poem by Langston Hughes titled "Mother to Son." It is a commencement address in and of itself. It speaks honestly of the past and it encourages one to strive for better in the future. This past year has NOT been a crystal stair for the world at large. It has been full of tacks and splinters in the form of a global health disaster, deaths, insurrection, racial reckoning, political division and discourse, and the occasional problematic Zoom meeting.

You as students and the school showed ingenuity. You have experimented and created new ways to educate and learn, new ways to work and have taken deep dives into technology. During the global health disaster, you found ways to meet the needs of others in turning your eyes to your neighbors and the wider world. Many of you have worked to meet the needs of your communities by keeping them safe with mask-making and distribution; feeding the hungry, hosting food giveaways and food drives; caring for the sick; doing what could be done from afar, given social-distancing restraints. We found ways to mourn and to celebrate.

COVID was not the only trial we faced. We witnessed in 2020 more division and discourse surrounding politics than ever before—from the highest offices in government to the walls within some of our own homes. Arguments about science related to medicine and climate change along with political debates became a norm. 2020 became a year of going back to basics... reading books and not just on our Kindles, writing, Netflix, puzzles, working out, baking banana bread, calling on the phone, sending greeting cards, taking long drives, and even extended studying.

As students, your lives were challenged. No more family dinners in Ford Hall, disrupted PGA, athletes were not competing with other schools, those students in the arts were given limited exposure in performances, limited to no in-person classes therefore isolation from your fellow students and teachers. Lives were challenged and frustrated.

I commend you for your perseverance because it brought you to today, June 5, 2021, your graduation day. This is YOUR day. You made it.

You achieved this goal under duress and deserve to be recognized. I know that some of you learned about yourself during this trying year. One student learned to commit more and mean it and I know of one student who learned to be true to himself. These are both good attributes to learn at any time in life. I think it only fair to commend your families, school administrators, faculty, and staff. I can promise you, that during this chaotic time, life for them "AIN'T BEEN NO

CRYSTAL STAIR" either. Like you, they too persevered and made it here to this day of recognition.

So how did you come to Mercersburg? I know that some of you are what we once called legacy students. Grandparents, parents, siblings came to Mercersburg. I know of one student whose grandfather and her two sisters attended Mercersburg. Some live as close as Greencastle and decided that Mercersburg was the school of choice for them. All of you came here for reasons which made sense and still made sense despite the trying year. Your decision will serve you well I promise.

You may be wondering how I came to be at Mercersburg? I began my affiliation with the Academy some 50 years ago. During the summer of 1968, I was hired by a federal program called Upward Bound to serve as a senior counselor. I had just finished my junior year of undergraduate school as an English major and was looking forward to student teaching in the fall.

Two days before our Upward Bound program was to begin, one of the English teachers decided that she was not able to keep her commitment for the summer and I was asked to teach in her stead. Not knowing the curriculum but being eager for the challenge, of course, I said yes and began teaching two days later. It was an illuminating and satisfying experience. It was during that first summer, however, when my class had an unannounced visitor. He arrived mid-class and left before I finished teaching, so we did not have an opportunity to meet. I assumed he was from the federal government doing an on-site visitation. Turns out that the visitor was the then head of the school, William Fowle.

I was invited to his office a few days later where he told me that the Academy was planning to hire its first teacher of color and asked if I would be interested in applying. I explained that I had not yet finished my senior year but of course he knew that. He asked that I send him my midterm grades as well as my final grades and I agreed to do so. Truth is, I hand-delivered both sets of grades to him in his office. I was hired to teach English in the fall of 1969; the first teacher of color at Mercersburg. I truly qualified as a man of color, as I am 49.6% sub-Saharan African and 47.4% northwestern European, according to the science of 23AndMe.

I was not at all prepared for what I encountered in my first year of teaching. I really don't think even the head of the school could have adequately prepared me. Three new teachers joined the English department that same year. We teamed up naturally. Both stayed for only two years, I remained for seven years. How or why you may be wondering?

Today, YOU, the graduating Class of 2021 give me the long-overdue opportunity to thank students for their mentoring, guidance, friendship, loyalty, and kindness. I could never have lasted here as long as I did without students. I remember going into Ford Hall the first evening for dinner and looking for my assigned table. Turns out it was just inside the doors and the first table to the left. I chose to sit at the opposite end of the table of where I was supposed to sit but a kind student directed me to my seat. We had a blue and white coat for each table then

and I quickly learned their responsibilities. The proctor at my table just happened to also be the proctor on my floor in 'Eighty-eight Dormitory where I lived, so I had one face I recognized. I learned after talking with my two new colleagues that being new to the system, I was to have had a tenured faculty member at my table, but that person never showed up. Not once during my first year did I learn the identity of that colleague. I was under the care of students at meals three times a day. They taught me well. They even apprised me as to where to find peanut butter and jelly at those rare times when meals were served that students called "mystery meat."

My floor proctors were great advisors. Scott and Clarence taught me well. Students in my classes were eager to give me advice on matters which made my life as a teacher so much easier. Some of these very students were even caretakers of my classroom which was on the third floor of Irvine Hall, the first door on the left. On occasion, they would retrieve notes which had been left for me, and these were not always notes of welcome. Students protected me.

Students were sensitive and insightful. During my first Parents Weekend, a set of parents walked into my classroom for their scheduled meeting. The mother sat and the father not only refused my handshake but also refused to sit. I introduced myself and sat when the father announced that his son had not told them that I was... he paused, so I interjected:

"His English teacher?"

"No, he did not tell us that you were a n----r."

I responded that I am sure his son saw me as being only his English teacher and that my race had nothing to do with his perception. The family left my classroom and I was left waiting for the next scheduled family to arrive. It was not an easy Parents Weekend, to say the least.

There is a happy ending to this ugly interaction. I was called to the Headmaster's office Sunday afternoon of Parents Weekend to find the student and his parents. With some trepidation, I waited to be invited into Mr. Fowle's office where I learned that the student would no longer be in my English class. I walked back to my apartment feeling that I had no recourse in the decision announced, and it made me sad. I wanted to fight to have the student remain in my class but felt it would be inappropriate to do so.

The next day, Monday, this very student in question appeared in my class as scheduled. He continued to attend class, and one evening stopped at my dining table after dinner and explained that he wanted to stay in my class if I had no objection. He had already told Mr. Fowle and his parents of his decision to stay on. It is this display of fortitude and resolve that makes me forever grateful for students.

Some students learned that I loved to sing, and they suggested that I attend glee club rehearsals. I eagerly took them up on their offer but not without checking with their director first. He okayed it and even invited me to sing one or two songs in their concerts. I even got to

travel with the glee club as a chaperone to other schools for performances. After one such performance, we were invited to a candlelit dinner. This was to proceed the dance for the students of both schools. Shortly after I entered the room for dinner, I was approached by an administrator of that school and invited to chat with her outside. She told me that if I wanted to eat that I would be invited to dine in another room by myself. I declined and returned to the bus. Unbeknown to me, glee club members observed my situation. Shortly after getting on the bus, two students visited and expressed their concern. I played it down, but they did not buy it. Shortly after they left the bus, others arrived and some even brought food for me. This kindness meant so very much to me. I declined future invitations to travel with the glee club, but I still attended rehearsals. All out of loyalty to students.

So why is this such an auspicious moment for me to deliver your commencement address? It gives me the privilege to thank Mercersburg Academy students for establishing a lifelong commitment to supporting students. I retired from a 25-year career in Student Affairs at the University of Houston. Mercersburg students taught me that students deserve all that we as educators can and should offer. In congratulating you today, I am also thanking the students who supported me during my tenure here. Students, you have the strength, power and wisdom to make a difference. Your abilities to make life more humane is an inherent part of who you are and will become. Do not fail to reach out to others to make a difference. The world needs you. You can make a difference and I know you will do so.

Graduates of 2021, in your future, when you encounter those stairs with tacks in them, splinters, boards torn up and even places with no carpet, DO NOT sit down on the steps because you are disillusioned or are challenged. Forge ahead. Climb on to the next landing. Do not tum back. Who knows? You may be lucky enough to find a fellow Mercersburg graduate to help you navigate.

My best and my congratulations to the Class of 2021. My thanks to your families, faculty, staff, administrators, and regents.

I close with a quote from a more contemporary poet, one whom you may know actually. Amanda Gorman is the 22-year-old youth poet laureate of Los Angeles who appeared on the horizon January 20, 2021 in Washington, DC, at the inauguration. In her poem, "The Hill We Climb," she writes:

*And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us, but what stands before us.
We close the divide because we know to put our future first, we must first put our differences
aside.*

We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.

We seek harm to none and harmony for all.