

We're in the season of graduations. In our Fairfield family, there are ten high school graduates this year, if we've counted correctly. If we haven't, if we've made a mistake, we'll be horribly embarrassed and will need your forgiveness. But that's the number we came up with. Ten high school graduation ceremonies, actually nine, since two of the graduates are twins. Nine hot, stuffy graduation ceremonies in high school gymnasiums. The last graduation I attended, a few years ago, was just awful, because of the speaker. Just dreadful. Thirty minutes of tired clichés and old, stale jokes and lots of stream of consciousness, as if the speaker hadn't known in advance he would be giving a speech. But then I sat down, and they got on with things and it got a whole lot better. Even a bad speech can't ruin a graduation.

Joan's mother, Ruby, was the first person in her family to graduate from high school. She left home at the age of 14 to work and go to school, before graduating at the age of 21 in 1939. I think of her this time every year, and this week looked in the Bible to find a story about high-school graduations and came up empty, so can't give you the Biblical take on graduations, which has never kept me from having an opinion about something. On occasion, I have even invented books of the Bible out of whole cloth to lend authority to my opinion. Just this week I quoted from Second Hesitations, Paul's second letter to the Quaker meeting in the region of Hesitation. Fascinating book.

I'm talking to our graduates today, but the rest of you are more than welcome to listen in. I want to talk about knowledge and spirituality, and will begin by observing that in some Christian circles, those two qualities have been at odds, the belief being that education and knowledge are somehow hostile to faith, somehow the enemy of faith. The Amish people who live down near our farm are so skeptical of education they don't school their children past the eighth grade. They believe higher education and worldliness pose a threat to their children's simple faith. And they're right. There was a song in World War I with the lyrics, "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree" This same mindset causes some Christians to ask, "How can we keep our children in the church, how can they trust the Bible, if they learn about evolution and natural history and genetics and biology?"

The great danger of fundamentalist religion, whether it is Christian fundamentalism, or Jewish fundamentalism, or Islamic fundamentalism, is its tendency to demonize any source of knowledge outside of their religious tradition. I have no doubt that if fundamentalist religion had become the dominant religious perspective in our world, that nearly all our scientific advances would never have happened. I'm not sure who will invent a cure for cancer, or a perpetual motion machine, but they probably won't be Amish, or a Salafi Muslim, or a Hindu fundamentalist. Any religion that depends upon our remaining in a state of perpetual ignorance is not worth our commitment.

So today we celebrate your graduation, but more than that, we celebrate education itself, we celebrate the attainment of knowledge, and we cast our lot with the world's informed, with those who seek to understand, learn, and grow. The pursuit of knowledge is a sacred pursuit. It leads us to a proper reverence, a deep respect and enthusiasm for the complexities of life and creation. Knowledge helps us marvel. Knowledge, not ignorance, is the parent of awe, wonder, and appreciation.

Graduations are significant moments. They acknowledge an important event in our lives, the attainment of a certain and specific amount of knowledge. This time of year we focus on graduations, but graduations aren't the goal. The goal is knowledge and its use for good. A big problem in our country right now is that too many folks finish school and have nothing more to do with knowledge. They stop reading, they stop thinking, they stop learning, they stop engaging, they stop growing. A principal or president hands them a diploma and they think their education is done.

What we study, what we learn, and even where and how we study and learn, isn't nearly as important as our commitment to always be studying, always be learning. I have higher hopes for the graduate of a trade school whose curiosity is boundless, than I do for a Harvard graduate who hasn't had a fresh thought since commencement.

So I say, “Blessed are the curious.” Blessed are those who do not rely upon blind faith, who do not settle for half-truths. Blessed are those who pry and poke and snoop and explore. Blessed are those who question doctrine, who doubt, who love truth more than conformity.

The thirst to learn is not a contradiction of spirituality, it is the real beginning of spirituality. Blessed are the curious. I wish that were in the Bible. Let’s put it in there, right in Second Hesitations. Blessed are the curious.

Last of all, when you’ve dedicated yourself to knowledge, don’t forget the goal of knowledge, which is wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge thoughtfully applied. You will all be learning a great deal these next several years. Make sure that knowledge is thoughtfully applied. Our world doesn’t need smarter bombs. Direct your knowledge toward higher things, toward what George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, called “that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.”

Wisdom is knowledge thoughtfully applied. You’ve probably been told that as you gain knowledge, you will earn more money. That’s generally true. But don’t let that be the driving force of your life, the altar upon which your deepest values are sacrificed. Don’t learn just to earn. Learn so that you are better equipped to improve the world. If you make a good living doing that, that’s fine. But don’t learn just to earn. Learn so you can help.

I want you to know one more thing. I want you to never forget when you move forward in life, you will always have a home here. No matter how the world treats you, you will be loved in this place, by these people. So don't be a stranger. We want to know how you're doing. We care about you. So don't forget to write. And be sure to enjoy Paree!

One belief we Quakers cherish is our conviction that God has many spokespersons. I've told you today what was on my heart. But others are here, with experiences and insights I haven't had, so we're going to give them the opportunity to advise and encourage you. As we continue in our worship, I invite Friends to stand and share the things you know now, that you wished you had known when you were 18.