

**Speech by Dr. Michael Hogan at the induction ceremony of the National Honors Society. American School Foundation of Guadalajara, A.C. June 4, 2008.**

I'd like to begin my talk this evening with a short prose piece by the Pulitzer Prize winner author, W.S. Merwin. It is called "Make this Simple Test."

"Some day when you have some free time, blindfold yourself with some suitable object and remain still for a moment. Wait until your senses swim backwards in the darkness. Now have a friend arrange a ground-up version of two packaged food products in front of you. Have the person feed you a portion of each of the processed foods. Guess what each one is and have the other person write down what you say. Now have the person tell you the ingredients of the products. Thus, Product #1 contains beef extract, wheat and soya derivatives, dry sweet whey, calcium carrageen, BHA, BHT, propylene glycol, pectin, niacinamide, artificial flavor, U.S. certified color. Product #2 contains dextrinized flour, non-fat dry milk solids, yeast nutrients, soya lecithin, agar, GUAR, sodium cyclamate, polysorbate 60, and diglycerides as emulsifiers.

"Guess again what you are eating. But this time do not stop there. Guess why you are eating it. Guess what it may do for you. Guess what it was meant to do for you. By whom? When? Where? Why? Guess when in the course of evolution you took your first step towards it. Guess which of your organs recognize it. Guess whether it is welcomed in their temples. Guess how completely you become what you eat. Guess how soon. Guess at the taste of wild honey. Guess at the taste of pure water. Guess why there is silence in heaven."

I read this piece to remind us all that the more we know, the better we will be able to protect ourselves and this planet on which we live. This is no minor matter, and school today is no trivial pursuit. The grades you receive at the American School are significant. But they are just a warm-up for the grades you will receive in the real classroom of life. Those grades are permanent and failure can mean death to the environment, unbreathable air, unlivable cities, and a wretched existence for millions.

Tonight you will light candles symbolizing scholarship, character, service and leadership. Being selected for NHS means that you are on the right path and this ceremony reminds the community just how important this path is to human civilization, and how vital it is that you remain on it and be true to the pledge you take here tonight. It is the path of service, of helping others less fortunate. It is the path of scholarship, critically assessing your environment, your government, and questioning those in power when they make decisions contrary to your common sense. It is the path of leadership, which does not mean being a little Napoleon, but rather looking around and seeing what needs to be done, and doing it. It means being self-reliant and self-motivating. It is also the path of citizenship which means you can no longer sit around and complain about society. You are part of society now and you share in the responsibility to make it a better one.

In the present globalized world, more than half of you will be working at jobs that don't even exist right now. There will be virtual realities which don't appear on the horizon right now; there will be methods of communication which have not even been imagined, travel velocities never before seen, organizational and governmental problems never before encountered. There will be music which has

never been thought of, and art never before dreamed. Many of you will have four or five different careers in your lifetimes and everything you learn will be useful. Everything.

I know a woman who worked as a fashion model from ages eighteen to twenty. Then she went back to school and studied biochemistry and worked as a university professor for a decade. Then at age thirty-five she went to medical school and now she is the chief researcher at Johns Hopkins, developing brain-specific RNA inhibitors—a career that didn't even exist when she was in high school. But she would not have had that opportunity if she had not studied AP biology, chemistry and physics in high school. She would not have had that option. Everything you learn will in some way be a preparation. You need to trust that. Everything you learn is prelude.

We hear a great deal these days about lifelong learning. But what does that mean exactly to young men and young women like yourself who have been in school for ten, eleven, or even twelve years, and after high school have four more years of university, and then maybe two or three more years of graduate school? It seems like your entire life all you've done is go to school. Wouldn't it be great to be finally finished with education, say at age 18 or 21? To be finally free? Well, actually, no. It would be like saying that you're finished with eating forever, or sleeping forever, or you're finished with sex forever.

From your science classes you may have learned a few ways of thinking that could be useful in the years ahead. I'd like to take a moment to review one of those and see how you could apply it in your daily life.

You are familiar with Heisenberg's principle that the observer changes the shape and/or motion of the thing observed. The principle was proven in reality through the study of subatomic particles such as quarks, when scientists saw that these particles behave differently as a result of the observation.

The application of that principle in daily life is simply this: If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change. How this pans out in human relationships is quiet simple. If you think you are going to fail, you will. Conversely, if you think you are going to succeed, you will. If you think people don't care about you, you will influence the indifference of others. If instead, you truly care about other people, you will influence their caring.

So, if we take this central idea from physics: that the way we look at things can change the way things behave, and apply it to our daily life—we can grow from ineffective, powerless people, to ones who have a positive influence in the world around us.

Lifelong learning really means paying attention, not trying to be perfect. Rubén Darío, the Nicaraguan poet, once wrote a short piece called "Little Poem for Jesus. It goes like this. "Todo lo que dijo, Jesús, se podría poner en dos palabras. Ponga atención." Everything you ever said, Jesus, can be summed up in two words: Pay attention.

Much of the planet has been screwed up by people who have never learned to pay attention. The sewer system blew up in downtown Guadalajara a few years ago because the inspector was not

paying attention to the volatile gasses escaping from the lines. Innumerable lives were lost. A Korean jet crashed in Guam because a pilot and navigator were not paying attention to the flight path indicator. Two hundred lives were lost. Think about it. You are the airplane pilots, the engineers, the heart surgeons of the next generation. It is not a skill that you develop after medical school, or after several years at a university. By then it is too late. Your character has already been formed. It is a skill that you must practice now, every day, so that when the time comes lives will be saved and not needlessly lost.

Pay attention means mostly self-forgetting. It means listening to others instead of always thinking of what you're going to say next. It means finding something good in something or someone, instead of criticizing. It means looking around to see how you can help instead of searching for excuses not so. It means thinking of others instead of yourself.

Dr. Victor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, was once asked :“What is the meaning of life?” Now, here was a man who saw his family murdered by the Nazis, his friends tossed into mass graves, the world he knew turned upside down during years and years of deprivation and torture when God seemed dead and life was without hope. “Asking me what the meaning of life is,” Dr. Frankl said, “is like asking a chess master what is the best chess move. There is no best move in chess; it depends on the circumstances of your game.

“Therefore, the question of the meaning of life, “Dr. Frankl says, “should be reversed. Ultimately we should not ask what the meaning of life is, but recognize that it is we who are being asked. Each of us is being questioned by life, and we can only answer to life by answered for our own actions. We respond to life by being responsible, and **we create meaning through our actions.**”

“Life sucks” is a popular saying these days. You hear it all the time. And it’s a cop out. It’s an old one as well. Way back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century people said that life was just an empty dream. It was considered cynical and decadent then. But some slackers today consider it cool to be aloof, uncommitted, believing the worst about everything and everybody. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem for those people back then, and it still echoes today. It goes like this:

Tell me not in mournful numbers  
Life is but an empty dream,  
For the soul is dead that slumbers  
And things are not what they seem.  
Life is real, life is earnest  
And the grave is not its goal.  
Dust thou art to dust returneth  
Was not spoken of the soul.

Lives of great men all remind us

We can make our lives sublime

And departing leave behind us

Footprints on the sands of time.

This is an important poem for me because it tells me that I as a person can make a difference, and that any individual can make an even bigger difference if he or she is thinking about how their actions affect others instead of just himself or herself. William Carlos Williams once said, "You can't get the news from poetry, but people are dying every day from lack of what is found there." People die a little every day, in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, in 10<sup>th</sup> grade in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, from lack of faith in themselves, from lack of belief that what they feel and what they think can make a difference, and from being so absorbed in their own lives that they don't look out and help others.

My high school English teacher, Brother Felix at De La Salle, once told me, that all good writing begins and ends *in medias res*, that is, in the middle of things. So that is where I'll end my talk this evening. But there is no ending to the story which is our lives and our histories on this planet. Some day you will be telling your stories and I look forward to hearing them because I know they will be interesting because they will be authentic and original.

In one of my favorite plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet says that anyone who can count their love is poor. She says, "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep. The more I give to you, the more I have, for both are infinite." That is my wish for you. That you keep giving your love, your concern, your attention and energy to others and that it all comes back to you a hundredfold. Congratulations to you all on being selected to the National Honors Society and to your parents for their love and support. God bless you all.