

CHARGE TO THE GRADUATING CLASSES
STEVE PILKINGTON
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Good Morning, Rockstars:

OMG: one more graduation!

I'm so deeply grateful and honored to be here if even a little trepidatious. This year, of all years! Although, I must admit that a hundred students, cellphones silenced, standing at attention while I speak is actually the fulfillment of a lifelong fantasy. So thank you; life is good.

Today I want to charge you with one big word and one little poem. You know, what we're actually doing this morning is quite like is a wedding. You and us, forever betrothed by the magic of making music together, our spirits, our memories, knit together as one in a holy, mystical union. As is often the case with dating, it's been an exciting courtship with an unexpectedly turbulent engagement. And like most weddings, the whole Westminster experience has been an expensive one; I salute you parents, one and all! So here we are, standing together in a sacred space ready to affirm the things that matter most to us and to seal our commitments with a diploma.

I begin with one gigantic word, a word suited to giants, meaning people like you. The term is "magnanimity." I've had to practice pronouncing it for nearly six weeks. Magnanimity is the quality of being magnanimous which means, in part, showing or suggesting a lofty and courageous spirit.

A magnanimous person displays a noble generosity, disdaining meanness and pettiness. Powerful words for us who live in the dramatic world of the arts where sardonic and egomaniacal temperaments thrive. When I think of magnanimity, I immediately think of Nelson Mandela. An emblem of dignity and forbearance, he was 44 when he was manacled and put on a ferry to the Robben Island prison in South Africa. He would be 71 when released. Yet, at his inauguration as president, he invited one of his eight jailers to the ceremony. . . . Would you ever invite the professor who spoiled your GPA with a less than generous grade to your wedding or engagement party? Jeff Bezos, the billionaire founder of Amazon simply says: "One day you will understand that it is harder to be kind than to be clever."

One of life's hardest lessons is to learn that always, always, the biggest person in the room is the one who knows how to forgive. I would tell you that a barricaded heart is no place for the making of music. Openness, honesty, authenticity, vulnerability, and, above all, reconciliation with one's own self, these are all the qualities that allow human truths as expressed and revealed in art to flourish.

Another way of reaching round the quality of magnanimity is to speak of a nobility of feeling

and generosity of mind. Isn't that what performing and creating art is all about? A nobility of feeling and generosity of mind? Hopefully, one of the profound lessons you've learned at Westminster is that art is essentially a caravan of love. I use the word "caravan" because we are all pilgrims traveling the road of music. I like the image of music as a magic carpet, a means whereby we are carried beyond ourselves, where we can soar above and beyond. I guess I can't resist singing, "It's a whole new world." Sometimes this great carpet makes a perpendicular landing, right in front of our face, and, as if by magic, it becomes a great doorway into liminal space, a threshold that reveals to us the deepest of human truths with intimations of things yet to come.

I used the word "love" for our caravan because, well, it is the greatest of all human attributes even if it is born by the most cliched of words. I think of the tragedy and triumph of Beethoven, a musical genius and composer of astonishing capacities, gradually deprived of his hearing. How could a musician who trades in sound suffer such a fate? Depressed and isolated from society, he once wrote: "My poor hearing haunted me everywhere like a ghost; and I have avoided all human society. I seem a misanthrope and yet am far from being one." Indeed, his love for humanity was so profound, he chose an ode to brotherhood as the climax of his great and joyous last symphony. You know it well from many run-outs:

*Joy, beauteous, godly spark, Daughter of Elysium,
Drunk with fire, O Heavenly One,
We come unto your sacred shrine.
Your magic once again unites
That which Fashion sternly parted.
All men are made brothers, [all women, sisters]
Where your gentle wings abide.*

*He who has won in that great gamble
Of being friend unto a friend,
He who has found a goodly woman,
Let him add his jubilation too!*

(—Sounds like another wedding)

*All creatures drink of Joy
At Nature's breasts.*

(—Sounds like after the wedding to me. . . .)

*All good, all evil souls
Follow in her rose-strewn wake. She gave us kisses and vines,
A friend who has proved faithful even in death.*

Perhaps, instead of a 63-minute symphony, a simpler way to say it might be with words from an ancient psalmist of Israel:

Hine ma tov u'ma-nayim
Shevet ach-im gam ya-chad

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133)

I've thrown the word "noble" around a lot. One can't be magnanimous without being noble. Increasingly rare in our common parlance, it's a word that characterizes a person of fine personal qualities or high moral principles and ideals. Today, I charge you to be the voice and the conscious of your generation. Every piece of repertoire you select, every note you rehearse, sing, conduct, play or write, these are all moral choices. Our world—the moral world—is not structured like the market world. The moral world has an inverse logic. You have to give in order to receive, for example. You will shortly *receive* a degree in music, but actually you have been majoring in *self-giving*. I'm guessing you've learned by now that you have to surrender to something outside of yourself to gain strength within yourself. In order to fulfill yourself, you have to empty yourself. And in order to find yourself, you have to lose yourself. How many paradoxes can one person bear?

So I charge you to be a truth seeker and a light bearer. It is the highest calling to be a musician, an artist. We are the bearers, the keepers of emotional truths that have marked and elevated humankind since the first homo-sapiens—literally meaning "men of wisdom"—began marking on the walls of sacred caves in an artistic manner. It is the holiest of things to give children, teenagers, questing adults, confused parents, hurting lovers, joyous couples, lonely hearts, all conditions of the human family, the gift of song.

I charge you to leave this sacred space and go out as agents of change, musicians from the ministry of magic as it were, for you can be the heralds of a new dawn for our tattered and torn world.

As the great American poet, Bob Dylan, said "Anything worth thinking about is worth singing about." So go out and make the Song of Magnanimity. The world needs you to sing out loud, sing out strong. With a little "ming" for added resonance. And as my beloved friend Lindsey would say, "Sing it from three inches below the zipper!"

I'll close with a miniature poem by Emily Dickenson. It's like an American haiku, a little sweet and a lot sentimental, but then those are some of the lovely qualities that mark a day like this one, our wedding day. She writes:

If I can stop one heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

*Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again,
I shall not live in Vain.*

So like any efficacious wedding, there must be some vows. Will you please raise your right or left hand, depending on your body's predilection, and repeat after me:

I vow /as a graduate of the historic Westminster Choir College,
to be magnanimous;/ and I do solemnly promise/ before Dr. Miller and these witnesses,/ that I
shall not live in Vain.

Good job! What music has joined together, let no one, no thing put asunder.

On behalf of my colleagues before and beside me, I say with the greatest of tenderness, OMG, O my God, we sure love you all a lot.

Hallelujah!