

Haley Kirmaier

Valedictorian Speech

Good afternoon, Mr. Karsten, Dr. Penikas, administration, faculty, family, friends, and my fellow classmates.

Since we were born, we have all felt the weight of expectations. Parents expect us to be just like them, teachers expect us to understand every lesson, society expects us to maintain the status quo. The worst thing about some expectations is that they breed feelings of unworthiness and disappointment. When the bar is set too high, we can't help but fall short. Often, we don't even come close.

As much as we try to plan our lives in intricate detail, life is unpredictable. I want you to think back to September of 2016. You were thirteen or fourteen, probably a foot shorter than you are now. You were anxious. Fifty percent nerves, fifty percent excitement, a hundred percent unsure. You took a breath and walked through the cafeteria doors. What were your plans then? Some of us wanted a fresh start. Others clung to the blissful nostalgia of elementary school. Some dreamt of acing all their classes, while others were terrified of falling behind. Some of you knew exactly what career you wanted. Others didn't even want to think about it.

Looking back now, most of us can laugh at our naivety. While some of our goals have been fulfilled, the vast majority of them have changed. We've kept old friends and gained new ones, but we've also lost a few. We've made the team and passed the class, but we've also flunked the test. We've stuck to a plan of action for months or even years just to end up changing our minds anyway. No matter how hard we work, we are people and people fail sometimes.

At these low points, we are our most vulnerable, our most impressionable, our most human. When we've hit rock bottom, what we crave is companionship. We find compassion in encouragement from a teacher, a smile from a parent, a hug from a friend. People change people. After overcoming their own suffering, our loved ones lift us up, inspiring us to keep going. Life does not bend to anyone's will; only God is in control. When it becomes too much to bear, all we can do is lean on Him and on those who understand our feelings; they will give us the warmth and wisdom to persevere. Take this moment to thank those who have pushed you to continue, silently or verbally: those who raised us, encouraged us, helped us along. Thank you, to our families, friends, and faculty for sacrificing so much, for giving and not taking, for never ceasing to cheer us on. It is when we're at the bottom of the mountain that we learn who we are and who loves us for being who we are; and once we learn that, we begin to rise up again, climbing faster than before.

And yet, sometimes, these beautiful turning points in our lives are deemed "failures": embarrassing scars from our past. But those times in our lives where we stepped off the carefully-crafted path actually helped us find ourselves. It is heartbreaking to try your best and still not accomplish what you expected of yourself, simply because of things you cannot control: time, lack of understanding, or maybe even a worldwide pandemic. Despite our best efforts, life doesn't always go according to plan.

And so, this pressure to be perfect that others have placed on us—that we have placed on ourselves—doesn't really make any sense. When we miss the target of perfection, and instead fall far from it, it actually ends pretty well. Those of us with new friends: haven't we found our people? Those of us who didn't make the play or the team and instead tried a new club: didn't

we have fun? Those of us who were rejected by our dream university: aren't we still excited for college?

Yes, life is unexpected, but from this mystery, beauty blooms. The freshmen I spoke of earlier—the ones who were scared and wished to go back to middle school—I was one of them. In ninth grade, I joined maybe one club. I made a couple of friends but mostly clung to those from middle school. I expected just to tolerate my high school, and predicted that all I would get out of it was a good education. I never envisioned a shortened senior year, a missed class trip, a virtual graduation. However, it was also not within my expectations to meet some of my best friends, to give a speech at this podium with one of my closest friends, or to make euphoric memories that will last me a lifetime.

That path we've paved for ourselves? It's more like a series of tangled tightropes. Sometimes we fall, but our net is woven by those closest to us. And when we get back up, we get to change direction. We charge, or sometimes stumble, forward, trying our best to stay balanced, risking a system of trial and error. It is only through this—through trying and failing and restarting—that we carve a future for ourselves.

2020 has been a tough year. Here we are at the bottom of the mountain. We can't control what is thrown at us, the good or the bad. But, we can strive to accept life for what it is: messy and imperfect and wonderful. It isn't always what we or others might expect, but that's okay. The future has a way of being more beautiful, amazing and joyful than we ever could have planned. It's time to let go of the expectations, embrace the failures, and look ahead to the next path we will travel upon. We will stumble and question and change direction—that's living. Congratulations to the class of 2020. Now, it's time to rise up and continue to climb.

