

The Roxbury Latin School
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
June 3, 2023
Commencement, Class of 2023

I want to thank Mr. Brennan for his invitation to speak with you on this glad occasion. Along with your boys, my son, Michael Allen, completes his course of study today, almost exactly four years after our family moved from Austin, Texas, to Boston. Upon our arrival, we were welcomed into this community with uncommon warmth, and then ... well, none of us could have imagined what the next years would bring.

Six months into this cohort's Class IV, freshman year, the pandemic arrived with a speed and force still hard to believe, even as we all lived through it together. The choral concert on Sunday evening, March 8, 2020 – this room teeming with song and Spring Break spirit – would remain suspended in a haunting happiness. For by that following Friday, Boston would become a ghost town, and these students would not return to campus until the next academic year.

We need not belabor the memories of those challenges, yet neither should we ignore them. Gentlemen, those days, their peculiar demands, and your perseverance through them, had their share in shaping you; along with the last three graduating classes and the two more to come, your paths through RL were beset with unusual difficulties. With appreciation, though, realize that you were not alone in any those struggles. Your teachers and this administration met those days with astonishing grace. Offer them your thanks.

Alright, Graduates, let's get going.

Today I bring **three ideas** for you to take into your new adventures, and the first is from Charles Baudelaire. A nineteenth-century Parisian, poet, critic, and essayist, the academy credits Baudelaire with coining the term “modernity” to describe his cultural epoch. Fond of fine clothes, prostitutes, and liquor, his writing often explores the paradoxes of progress and regress, in his city and in his soul. This morning we consider his 1864 essay, “The Generous Gambler,” and I invite everyone to listen closely and identify the antagonist before he reveals himself.

The poet begins:

Yesterday on the crowded boulevard, I felt myself jostled by a mysterious Being whom I have always longed to know, and although I had never seen him before, I recognized him at once. He must have felt a similar desire in regard to me, for as he passed he gave me a knowing wink, which I was quick to obey. I followed him closely and soon, still at his heels, [we] descended into a magnificent *subterranean* dwelling of a fabulous luxury beyond anything the upper habitations of Paris could boast ...

Here were strange faces ... marked with the sign of fatal beauty, and ... by the time my host and I were seated, we were already firm friends. We ate; we drank immoderately ... we smoked several cigars ... we talked of the universe, of its creation and of its final destruction; [and] of the big idea of the century, that is, the idea of progress and perfectability ...

[And, you know,] He did not complain of the bad reputation he [suffers] in every corner of the world[, admitting] that the only time he had ever trembled for his power was the day when a preacher had exclaimed from his pulpit: “My beloved ... never forget when you hear people boast of our [enlightenment], that one of the devil’s best ruses is to persuade you that he does not exist!”ⁱ

Graduates, there it is, the first takeaway: **Never forget that one of the devil’s best ruses is to persuade you that he does not exist.**

Now, be clear: I have neither interest nor belief in a cherry-tinted fellow with horns and a tail, who lurks in whiskey bottles and heavy-metal records, and I am confident that neither did Baudelaire. Rather, the poet introduces us to the seductions of *our own world*, personified in this character of refined taste. In his “subterranean” realm, guests need not await an *assignment* of punishment, for they elect their own: in a hell of their making, they (and we) choose *ease* before **integrity**, *judgment* before **generosity**, and *greed* before **the greater good**.

As in Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century Paris, so we twenty-first century denizens too often subscribe to the same “big idea” of our enlightenment as a foregone accomplishment, and we forgive ourselves responsibility for the world’s welfare. Too often we act as though we need not trouble ourselves with the world’s trifling inequities, for – in due time, in due season – all such complications shall be resolved. *Kind* souls (you know the sort), why, they are at work on that important project even now! Soon injustice will be recalled only as the burden of a different time, a different people, a different place ... yet, if we measure our integrity as the distance between what we believe and how we behave, we widen that gap when we set material enrichment as our only or operative telos. We injure ourselves and those we love when we labor for our advancement alone. Our integrity – personally and corporately – fractures when we overlook or dismiss those who differ from us.

The poet continues:

Even after several hours, it seemed to me that I was no more drunk than he, [however, *gambling*] had interrupted ... our frequent libations, and ... with nonchalance and heroic heedlessness, I had played and lost my soul in a binding pact. The soul is a thing so impalpable ... and sometimes so in the way, that I felt [little] emotion over its loss ...

And this famous character ... said to me: ‘As I want you to take away an *agreeable* remembrance of me, I – I, Satan himself – am going to prove to you ... that I can sometimes be a *good* devil ... [And so] To compensate you for the irremediable loss of your soul, I shall give you the same stake you would have won if chance had

been with you. [Therefore,] Never shall you formulate a wish that I will not help you to realize; you shall dominate your [fellow men]; flattery shall be yours, and even adoration; silver, gold, diamonds ...”ⁱⁱ

A brief recap: our narrator meets an amiable stranger who invites him back to his place for a drink. As it turns out (an unfortunate turn, admittedly), the stranger is Satan, and “his place” is hell. Then our friend, drunk on excesses, gambles with the devil and loses his soul in a bet.

[Graduates, a friendly word of warning for those of you who, in this BetMGM-on-our-phone age, have decided you enjoy Texas Hold’em: if you find yourself at a sharks’ card table, and you can’t figure out who the guppy is, *the guppy is you.*]

Related, because the devil is cunning and (regrettably) our friend is feeble, Baudelaire’s allegory reveals that the game has been rigged from the start; the devil had won the wager before it ever began! See, the stakes of either side assured The Beguiler of the narrator’s soul, for our friend’s desires and ambitions *were themselves his loss*: by wanting what the world wanted – *ease* before **integrity**, *judgment* before **generosity**, *greed* before **the greater good** – the narrator had conceded that truest and dearest mark of himself long before he shook to the devil’s deal.

And, Graduates, this leads to **the second takeaway**, which is a good news/bad news bit. I’ll start with the bad news, and the bad news is this: **the game is rigged** – *the game is rigged*. That is, the powerful and the powerless, the haves and the have-nots: thumbs are on the scale, boys, and the American Dream has been fixed like the 1919 World Series. Indeed, the world is making fools of most, charming us into believing we desire what shackles us to its vicious gears.

So that’s the bad news ... and it’s pretty bad! Yet, *for you*, there is good news that accompanies it, and the good news is this: **the game is rigged in your favor** – *the game is rigged in your favor*. Now, that does not mean you won’t have to work for your successes or put forth your highest and best effort to achieve the goals you set for yourself. Rather, understand that what you will have accomplished by graduating this institution will set you in a position of incredible privilege and precious few limitations.

While pandemic learning at other schools slowed and standards lowered, not so at RL. The tempo here remained brisk. The expectations here remained high. And while you may have gritted your teeth during those hard days (and maybe even your parents with you) the delta between your formation, your capacities, and the rest of the universe’s? Oh, brothers, be certain: *it broadened*.

See, not everyone could do what you have done, and far fewer have the opportunity to try. Can you lose it all? Of course. But understand that as you sit right now, the game is rigged, and it’s rigged in your favor.

The poet concludes:

If I had not been afraid of embarrassing [Satan] before [his] vast assembly [in Hell],
I would willingly have fallen on my knees at the feet of this generous gambler, to

thank him for his unheard-of munificence ... [However,] after I [finally left the devil], little by little, doubt crept back into my breast; I no longer dared to believe in such prodigious good fortune, and when I went to bed that night, idiotically saying my prayers out of habit and half asleep, I murmured: ‘Oh God! Lord, my God! Make the devil keep his promise!’ⁱⁱⁱ

Our companion now completes his failure to recognize his powers and to measure his losses. Though he consents to play a rigged game, its unfairness can only be achieved with his complicity. At any point, all our friend need do to overcome his danger – to reclaim his soul, to renew the world! – is to refuse the wager. If only he will leave the table, he will realize greater rewards for himself and for others, yet he has not the eyes to see either his peril or his possibilities. Failing to recognize so much as the contradiction of praying to God for the devil’s integrity, he condemns himself to suffer a life of *never quite there* – an emptiness not chosen in one fell swoop, of course, but an unending unfulfillment elected “little by little.”

So Graduates, the third and most important takeaway is this: **you can change the game** – *you can change the game*. You can decline the worldly table and its stakes. Recognizing your opportunities and influence, you can labor against the world’s most vulgar and dangerous momentums. You can live with integrity and labor generously for the greater good.

Soon you will arrive on a new campus and, having stacked yourselves against one another for four or five or six years, it will take a minute for you to reconcile that not everyone graduated Roxbury Latin. And in that moment, *a subterranean realm of a fabulous luxury will yawn before you*: silver and gold, adoration and domination. I urge you to meet that occasion with humility. Instead of only leaning into what RL has prepared you to *do*, summon all that Roxbury Latin – in its best moments and yours – has fashioned you to *be*:

Having been known and loved here, seek to know and to love your new peers – *see* them, as you want to be seen.

When the crowds –whether in your freshman dorm or, in time, your first office – begin to move in a direction that brings pause to your breast, call upon your integrity and do not give other people permission to determine how you are going to behave.

If you believe the world should be more honorable, then *you be more honorable*.

When others move with unthinking haste, take time; let their hurry be a warning, and have a second thought.

When you feel a flash of unkind judgment about someone, do not action or traffic it; extend the benefit of the doubt.

Make good decisions and be kind. Choose a life of service, rather than sensation.

When shadows creep close, remember that you are not alone – *never* alone – your community within these walls and well beyond them remain at the ready to support you.

And pick up the dadgum telephone when your parents call!

Rather than bit-by-bit accepting the world's brokenness – or, far worse, benefiting from it – day-by-day take your thumb off the scale and use your privilege for the world's good, rather than your own ease. Leverage your status and your position [which – oh, by the way – have absolute value only in that *subterranean* realm] and play your chips for truth and for justice; for reconciliation and for peace; for love and for mercy.

For *be clear*: the cost of your luxuries attained without grappling seriously with the cruelties of this world will not be the sacrifices of time and talent that your academic or professional successes will have required ... the cost will be *your very soul*.

In the words of my Trinity Church predecessor, Phillips Brooks: “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks!”^{iv}

Graduates, now that you have been blessed, go and become a blessing. Believe in yourselves, as we believe in you, for that stirring in your souls, and for the sake of the world.

Be good.

ⁱ Baudelaire, Charles. “The Generous Gambler.” *Paris Spleen*, translated by Louise Varèse, New Directions, 1970, pp. 60-61. I love this story, and I have used it as an illustration several times over the years, most recently during a lecture series on Stephen King. That lecture referenced Mick Jagger’s suggestion that Baudelaire’s essay inspired the Stones’ “Sympathy For The Devil.”

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 61-62. The italics in the several quotations are mine. With the bracketed words and phrases, I lightly adjusted the essay for understanding in the context of this speech.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 63.

^{iv} As quoted by President John F. Kennedy at the 1963 National Prayer Breakfast.