

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS St. John's College, Annapolis
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Thank you so much to the class of 2026 for inviting me to speak with you today.

Many of you know that, come springtime, I have a question I regularly ask seniors. I do not ask where you will head after graduation or what work or school you have planned for the future. Instead, the question I like to ask seniors is "what will you read next?"

There is an assumption behind this question, an assumption I largely stand by as an assertion. That assertion is this: to be a Johnnie, you have to be a reader. Being a reader takes myriad forms, but a rough sketch will suffice: to be a reader, you have to choose books, books of any sort, as companions. You see books as real beings, beings with whom you are willing to spend quite a bit of time. You, as then-future and now-forever Johnnies, likely chose your compatriots early in life, finding some book, some series, or some author who, through words put to page, constructed a place you wanted to be. Whether the books were fiction, fantasy, romance, philosophy, science, plays or poetry matters not. What matters is that magical combination of physical object and internal content. Something you held in your hands, carried around with you, and entered whenever the opportunity presented itself. Therein, you found a new world.

Here, at the college, we readers have found each other. We are a community, a gathering of readers. If I had to come up with a collective noun for us, I would call it "a companionship of readers". This is what we have found, or, better, what we have made and what we continue to make persist here. The worlds of our books live on in our conversations, both in and out of the classroom. Those worlds are nourished and enriched by the ongoing discussions of what we read and also by the friendships we build around them.

It may be there are a handful of you who do not consider yourselves readers. You perhaps came here for the discussions, or for some sense of 'great ideas'. My guess, however, is we have made of you something of a reader. It is possible, for some of you, that you find yourselves, in this moment, so exhausted by the onslaught of reading that is our program that you think you need a break from reading for a bit. But I am willing to bet that you will all find your way back to books, sooner rather than later.

Reading, however, is not a mere habit for us. Nor is it a quaint pastime, the quirky- perhaps even trendy- hobby of those who long for simpler times with fewer distractions and devices. Reading, for us, is pleasurable, but it is also quite serious. Reading is central to our mission of liberal arts education and to our dedication to community. Reading is a matter of freedom and reading is a matter of friendship.

What do I mean when I say that reading is a matter of freedom? I mean this: reading is an imaginative activity that repositions us, that takes us beyond our own thoughts, perspectives and beliefs. To be a free person one must be capable of seeing what is not immediately present to you, of

positing choices beyond the obvious, of surveying alternatives that arise from a sense of the past and a vision for the future. This vision is the work of imagination, so let's think about the ways in which reading supports the imagination, our faculty for freedom.

Seniors recently read Frederick Douglass, though not his *Narrative of the Life of a Slave*. In that work, as Douglass recounts his journey from slavery to freedom, a central moment concerns learning to read. His master's wife has decided to teach him to read; his master disapproves, remarking that learning to read would "forever unfit him to be a slave."ⁱ Hearing this, Douglass understood that reading was "the pathway from slavery to freedom".ⁱⁱ It was not an easy path for Douglass, either to learn to read in stolen moments, or "to find that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read...As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing."ⁱⁱⁱ

The discontentment Douglass notes, the same discontentment that led him to flee slavery and ultimately to write the very works we read in seminar, is the discontent of seeing a world better than the one you exist in. Of seeing the potential for revolt, for education and a life beyond slavery. Of being able to place oneself beyond the path that seems inevitable.

Reading, in fact, demands this un-settling of us. Reading tears us away from the present and launches us into the world offered to us by an author. Thus to read is to find oneself at home, ever so briefly, in the mind of someone else. It is to enmesh oneself in someone else's words and thoughts. A striking example: Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* ends most extraordinarily. In the final lines of the book, our unknown narrator speaks directly to us, and this is what she says:

"I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able, I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now."^{iv}

Our hands, of course, are on the book. Why does Morrison, at the end of the story, draw our attention to the fact that we have been reading? Why create such intimacy, such awareness, between the reader and the narrator of our book? She reminds us of our freedom, and of hers. Free recognition of one another, grounded in our choice to enter the world she has created, to linger there, to feel there, to experience there- all of this demonstrates a belief that in the reading we become active participants in bringing that world to life through our own imagination. Because reading is a way of being-at-work, reading requires activity. Reading does not merely passively show us a world, it requires of us the real work of contributing to the existence of that world. We, too, are artists. We make the book into something real just as the book brings about changes in us. "Narrative," Morrison has said, "is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created."^v

Jean-Paul Sartre recognizes a similar reciprocation between reader and author when he writes : "the author... requires that (the readers) recognize his creative freedom, and that they, in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. Here there appears the [other] dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more he

demands of us, the more we demand of him.”^{vi} The dialectical paradox of reading is that the more we are changed- freed, discontented- through the work of reading, the more we want that others likewise change, grow, and experience their own freedom. Reading does not just free us, it incites us to work for the freedom of others, to wish for them the radical uncovering of potential that we experience when we read.

It is not only literature, of course, that can ask and demand this of us. When the seniors or GIs read Lobachevski, they again find this act of reciprocal creation and freedom. With no real guide other than his words, we must imagine the non-Euclidean world with Lobachevski which defies our visual experience. We must assent to his propositions in order to bring this world to life, and we must be flexible and bold enough to, even temporarily, find ourselves at home in a world where infinitely converging lines can be parallel. We read ourselves into the being of plants, the movements of the heavens, the desire of tones to find their tonic, lines of force, imaginary numbers and special relativity. In doing so, we train the muscle of the imagination to offer us more, we resist the temptation to become inflexible and atrophied. We dwell in the discomfort produced by the hard work of being open to possibility.

You may recall, dear readers, that I have also said that reading is a matter of friendship. It is of course the case that reading gives us some of the most beautiful images of friendship a life could ever know: Achilles and Patroclus; Socrates, Aristophanes and Agathon; Augustine and Monica; Dante and Virgil; Rocinante and the Grey donkey; Dorothea and Lydgate, Elizabeth and Jane; Pierre and Andrei, Ilyushka and his schoolmates, to name but a few. But I also mean that the virtues of a good reader mirror those of the good friend: patience, playfulness, courage, honesty in questioning.

We exercise these virtues when we extend to authors the openness we aspire to grant to friends. Sartre, again, tells us that “reading is a pact of generosity between author and reader. Each trusts the other; each one counts on the other, demands of the other as much as he demands of himself.”^{vii} Reading requires that we exercise discretion about what to accept and what to reject, but we learn that we must spend time with the author before making those choices; we must carefully evaluate what we are offered before we leap to judgement. We treat the authors as friends when we show ourselves willing to explore with them, laugh with them, and respectfully challenge them. The authors treat us as friends insofar as they expect this of us. The imaginative act of free world-building is a joint activity, one that works best among those who trust one another. Reading, as Morrison reminds us at the end of *Jazz*, is a deeply personal relation.

And here, at the college, we apply these virtues not only to authors but to our friends: the classmates, tutors and peers we find in this community. In our conversations about the books, we strive to offer to one another the same generosity, the same trust, the same thoughtful and patient judgement. Perhaps in our weakest moments we fall short, but the books we share and the activity of bringing them to life together offer firm and common ground on which to jointly discover and create. Through reading, we learn to explore and inhabit the thoughts of others; when we put down our books, we turn to encounter those around us with this gift of openness.

I would be remiss if I did not address the elephant in the room: the potential problem that Don Quixote presents, the man who entered the world of his books and struggled to leave, the character his own loving author described as “mad”. And, yet, who better than Quixote as the hero for the day: a man who saw a world in disarray and sought to remake that world in the imaginative vision of his books. Quixote did not remain passive, he found liberation through reading and sallied forth. And in his quest to make the world in the image of his books, he found the priest, the barber, the bachelor and his most faithful of companions, Sancho Panza- the friends who gather at his deathbed. After having been a lonely, isolated man, Quixote populated his ideal world with real people, true friends, those who are with him as his story comes to an end. Who better to teach us that reading is a matter of freedom and a matter of friendship?

As we approach the moment when you will receive your diplomas, you- the undergraduate and graduate students of 2026- already have before you a rather delectable form of freedom: the freedom to choose the very next book you will read. And on this topic, too, I have thoughts.

It took me a long time in life to begin to discover who I am as a reader. To learn to love what I loved and not what I ought to love, to see beauty where I found it, not where others told me it would be, to realize that learning who you are as a reader is a matter of learning your own character. Choosing what to read then becomes an enactment of the Socratic quest to know thyself. It is not an easy task; indeed it is, as Kierkegaard tells us of faith, a task for a lifetime.

But, in a world which threatens us with scrolling through life, passively digesting what algorithms feed us, I feel confident that you, our graduates, will continue to choose the stunning discontent of being readers. You are now lifelong members of the companionship of readers. Give us our books, overflowing into the world we imagine and create with them. Set out with images drawn from the greatest minds and read into your own souls. Sally forth into that world with friends who want to create and recreate it alongside you.

Be, in short, quixotic.

ⁱ Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Chapter VI. Yale University Press: Connecticut, 2016. Page 32.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. Chapter VII. Page 37.

^{iv} Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. Vintage International. New York: 2004. Page 229.

^v Morrison, Toni. “The Nobel Lecture in Literature” (in *The Source of Self-Regard*, Vintage International. New York, 2020). Page 108.

^{vi} Sartre, Jean-Paul. *What is Literature and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass, 1988. Page 58.

^{vii} Ibid. Page 61.