

Commencement Address
June 26, 2007

Good morning everyone – students, parents, families, friends. A few weeks ago I was wondering about the comments that I would make this morning. I had thought numerous times over the days about what I would say, and I heard again and again in myself a voice saying – “What could you possibly say that is inspiring that someone has not already said? It is the end of the school year, everyone is rather tired by now – you will probably do an unsatisfactory job trying to write and give a speech for that fantastic Class of 2007.” Now it was time to write – and there I was in the chair in my office at home with a blank pad of paper looking at the book shelf – yes, for inspiration.

Here is the wonderful thing – the first book, the very first book I looked at – was exactly the right book to see. Here it is – It is called “Change the Way You See Everything” – with the title written in big black letters – backwards. Just a quick skim of the beginning of the book – with its rich collection of photos, stunning graphics and carefully placed pieces of text – showed me that inspiration, if you let it, can come from anywhere. Here it was in this book – a gift from the Superintendent a year ago, a book that had stayed on my book shelf all this time until now when it caught my attention.

While time today certainly does not allow me to do more than give a brief introduction to the ideas of this book, here is what is written on the opening pages. It is all about how we think – and it identifies two ways of thinking: Asset-Based Thinking (called ABT) – the good kind, and Deficit-Based Thinking (DBT) – the bad kind.

Most of us are not accomplished Asset-Based Thinkers. Instead, we rely heavily on deficit-based thinking. DBT concentrates on personal gaps and weaknesses, what is bothersome and irritating about others, and what is not working, problematic, and holding us back. In today’s post-9/11 world of economic uncertainty, threats of terrorism, and alarming media headlines, we are constantly reminded of the potential

negative side of virtually everything around us ... As anxiety levels rise, deficit-based thinking becomes our “steady diet”. But this steady diet of DBT leads to mental, emotional, and spiritual starvation. It zaps our energy and robs us of the enthusiasm and conviction we need to make the most of our own lives and positively impact the lives of others.

.... deficit-based thinking does not have to rule our minds, spirits, or actions. With concentration, well-guided effort, we can regain energy, harness our inherent optimism, and powerfully engage what life has to offer. All it takes is a shift (ever so slightly) in the way we see everything.

As you look over the structure of the book – a good thing to do whenever you begin to read a new book, be it a novel or a textbook – you see that it has 3 sections:

Change the Way You See Yourself
Change the Way You See Other People
Change the Way You See Situations

Right there in the beginning of the first section, Change the Way You See Yourself, was one of my favorite examples of how to see ourselves differently. The paragraph is entitled “Magnify What’s Best and Focus on What’s Next”. It reads:

Picture the moment when a toddler takes her first steps. Imagine her parents’ reactions – their fascination and excitement. Cheering is automatic. Criticism is nonexistent, wobbles and missteps are not even noticed. In your early years, it’s impossible to learn, grow, or develop a positive sense of yourself without someone letting you know just how amazing and talented you are.

I love that example – for babies learning to walk, falling down is part of the process. It is not failure, it is just how the baby learns, getting ready for the next try – and we all know that it is the way it should be. Surely as adolescents and adults we can see our own wobbles and missteps in just the same way. As the book says, “Magnify what is best and focus on what is next.”

In the section of the book called “Change the Way You See Situations” is a page that states in bold red letters, “Avoid the 80-20 Trap.”

Apply the 80-20 rule in reverse. Instead of focusing 80% of your attention on problems and 20% on opportunities, concentrate 80% on opportunities and 20% correcting what's wrong.

A little later the book says,

Learn to agree with what happens. See reality clearly, accept it, and problem solve from that vantage point. To agree with your reality does not imply that you must be thrilled with annoyance or setbacks. ... Each day, say to yourself that for today you are perfect the way you are. Always competent, yet always learning, always growing. ...Asset-based thinkers approach everyone they encounter with a spirit of acknowledgement and praise for what they have to offer. They see each individual as an asset and recognize that they are a work in progress, just like themselves. They're not afraid to compliment out loud and often. Not only do Asset-Based Thinkers notice others in acts of generosity, brilliance, and productivity, the value they discover in those people stays with them so that they can build on the relationship over time.

In these few minutes of time that I have to share with you this morning I have to make one additional point, and I have to make it clearly. I am enormously proud of each of you and grateful for how you, your families, your teachers have added to the Cardozo community during these years that you have been in high school. What I also have to say, though, has to do with an anger in me arising from some situations this year that it has been my job to deal with. The details of these situations are not important now but the common theme is. In each case an adult or a student chose to allow the end to justify the means. Actions were taken that were dishonorable, unfair, simply and sadly wrong in order to achieve a goal. In one case the goal was to divert attention from something the person had done wrong by falsely accusing others. In another case, it was getting access to a teacher's exam in advance in order to cheat. In another case – this was on the sports field – winning at all costs led individuals to display behavior that should never be part of playing a game. The common theme was that individuals justified their actions by looking only at what it would get them. This is wrong, and this is what I say to you today

– gently but urgently – the end never justifies the means. Where you get to is not near as important as how you get there. For, you see, how you get somewhere, that is, the journey that you take in life is who you are. Be vigilant about your intentions and your actions because it is through the way that you live that you become who you are.

I have been enormously grateful to watch you, the members of the Class of 2007, growing up during these years at Cardozo. It is our deep pleasure as the faculty and staff of Cardozo to have become part of your lives. We are enriched as we ponder the possibilities of your futures.

So here is my advice for today – be confident in yourselves, be confident in the possibilities of others, be confident in the situations around you. Good things will happen. Let them happen. Enjoy each moment. Be of good courage and remember to magnify what is best and focus on what's next.

Best wishes and be well.