Mr. Conard, Ms. Brooks, Ms. Halivopoulos, fellow alumni, parents, family, and members of the Class of 2007:

In dreams begins responsibility.

I thank you for this award, which means more to me that I can say, and for the chance to speak to you. In a world of ever more specialization, I want to speak in praise of being generalists, Pingry generalists.

We in our human species, compared to chimpanzees, poodles, lions, wolves, worms, and flies, are evolutionary generalists, able to move across ecological niches and adapt to change.

Pingry made me, and has made you, open up to endeavors outside our inclinations or aptitudes. I was no great athlete, but Miller Bugliari ’52 kept me on the soccer team, among those state championship players from my class, and I huffed and puffed around the field with the athletes, hearing Miller say, “I’ll tell you when you’re tired.”

Years later I found myself serving as a mathematical expert witness on a large court case about the Census which went to the Supreme Court. Other academics were nervous, out of their element. But it came to me—this is a soccer game. I know this. Instincts of teamwork, stamina, and gamesmanship picked up from Coach Bugliari were stored in me to draw on and carried me confidently onto the witness stand.

As you go on to college and careers, you will feel pressure to concentrate on what you already do best. The buzzwords are “comparative advantage.” You will be tempted to specialize, specialize in skills, specialize even in play. In 1964, David Riesman, author of The Lonely Crowd, at a party at the White House, gave some of us seniors advice,

“Wealth is worth doing is worth doing badly.”

We said, “You mean, worth doing well.” No, worth doing, well or badly. There are things we do because we can excel at them, win with them. There are other things that are done for their own sake, ends in themselves, not means to ends.

Pingry taught me and has taught you that
• You don’t have to be an athlete to love sport,
• a musician to love music,
• a poet to love poems,
• a scientist to love science.

Many of you will go on to work in service, business, government, and professions, but all of you have been empowered by your years at Pingry to take joy in the scientific discoveries you will live to see and, more broadly, in the life of the mind and the life of the heart and the life of the soul.

Despite the scruples of Count DuBourg and my other Pingry masters, I find myself working as a scientist, so I want to say something about science. Einstein is quoted as saying,

“Equations are more important to me than politics, because politics is for the present, but an equation is something for eternity.”

In one sense, science is constantly changing, irrepressibly new, but in another sense, the base of science, especially its mathematical base, is remarkably stable and durable. Pingry’s buildings have changed more in 43 years than the scientific principles I learned at this school. Einstein’s contrast between science and politics appeals to me for another reason, brought out by my friend Steve Newhouse ’65. When Steve received the Letter in Life, he said,
“Today, whether in politics or religion ... there seems to be no dialogue without rancor, no discussion without invective. ... however passionate your convictions may be, you should strive to keep the debate with others who disagree a civil one.”

Not always, but often, science rises above politics, promoting civility, and as you find your ways of service, science can be your ally in the relief of suffering, the sustaining of our habitable planet, and the furtherance of justice.

One scientific subject I study is the mathematics of survival, how chances of death change with age. Chances of death are happily low for you folks. I have to tell you, they go up. They go up, remarkably, following the same mathematical shapes for you as for flies and worms. And they don’t go up forever. After 100, years for you, days for flies, they level out. Here are two puzzles:

- Why are the shapes similar? After all, the lifestyles of Pingry graduates differ in observable ways from the lifestyles of worms.
- Why does evolution allow late-age survival, more and more of it for humans? After all, natural selection only favors making and raising offspring to carry on the genes.

You can share in the excitement as deep puzzles like these are solved. You can take in the beauty of it now, the sense of kinship with other creatures, even flies, that science is enhancing, the potential for longer lifespans that, if the world allows it, you may enjoy.

Some many of you may live in health beyond your hundredth birthdays. If you do, recall this talk as you blow out your candles. You have the opportunity, as you plan and grasp your futures, for what my mentor Peter Laslett called “A Fresh Map of Life.”

As your years unfold, it will not be your specialities that will enrich your capacities for love, friendship, and nurturing, so much as your openness to the breadth of human experience that Pingry has fostered. My grandson said to me,

“...I guess there’s no qualifying exam for being a grandpa.”

It’s true.

I’ve been talking about science, but I’ve never seen much of a boundary between science and the humanities. I don’t mean humanities lost in denigration and polemic as they sometimes are now, but humanities as I met them at Pingry, in Roy Riddick’s class in Middle School, George Moffat’s classes in Upper School—for me, Shakespeare, Eliot, and the Yeats my wife Bernadette and I read to each other; for you, the same or different works on which to build your impulses of praise.

The life of the mind. The life of the heart. The life of the soul.

The Pingry Honor Code is about the person each of you can be. “Moral” is not a word in vogue. In college, in professions, in communities you will find yourself different from others, coming from a school which for 146 years has put integrity and moral action above everything else. Morality is not a specialty. It is a way of being.

Pingry is a face-to-face society, a rarity in the world you will know. 121 of you, like 76 of us, go out into that world having shared a morning time together, ready for exploring.

Afternoons and evenings of life seem remote to you, but it is a custom, a fitting custom, at commencement to speak across generations with evening in view. The young of every species are generalists. Humans are unusual in staying young much longer. We Pingry graduates can be unusual in staying young forever. Some of you may see the Twenty-second Century. The world will have changed, and things you do for their own sake, and not for advantage, will be your springboard, 30, 50, 70, 90 years out there, as you hear Miller Bugliari’s voice, “I’ll tell you when you’re tired.”

T. S. Eliot wrote

“The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.”

Good evening.
Good morning.

Kenneth W Wachter 2007-06-03