

Youth Sunday
June 15, 2014
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I just recently finished four years of high school at Woodson. Four years is 35,063.3 hours, or 2.1038e6 minutes, or 1.26228e8 seconds. That's a long time, but at the same time, it's not. In four years, I've seen people achieve their dreams, but also crumble and fall. I've seen people blossom into their full selves, but also become what they said they'd never be. In four years, I've seen friendships end, promises shattered, hearts broken, and people questioning their mental stability. In four years, I've seen people bring others up through a combination of 26 letters, but also with a different combination destroying another person's confidence in themselves and the world. Isn't it strange how with a combination of 26 letters you can steal someone's heart and captivate their soul? Even stranger is how with a different combination of 26 letters you can make their eyes fill with tears and give them enough pain to last a lifetime. Words are more powerful than you would think. So I've learned that we must be kind. Be kind. Be kind.

In four years, I've seen six boys take their own lives. I've walked through hallways where you could hear a pin drop, I've seen even the toughest kids break down into tears. I've seen a school mourn for three days straight. I've felt the whole county breathing down our necks just asking "why Woodson?" as if the answer was that simple to find. However, in four years, I've never seen such a compassionate group of people come together on multiple occasions to support one another. I've never seen such a large group of individuals from all walks of the social hierarchy come together as one. Truly remarkable how much people can care. In four years, I couldn't really picture myself at this point in my life, but now, this moment has finally come and I don't really know how to respond. I'm excited and quite terrified for what the future has in store for me, but I'm willing to embrace it with as much enthusiasm as possible. I've learned that we need endings to start new beginnings.

When I first entered high school, I thought of myself as a number, but now that I'm leaving, I don't define myself as one anymore. I am simply a human being. When I first entered high school, I cared too much about what other people thought of me, but now that I'm leaving, I couldn't care less. If you like me, then you do and that's great, but if you don't, then that's ok too. When I first entered high school, I was terrified to fail, but now that I'm leaving, I've learned that it is inevitable. When I first entered high school, I felt that I had the pressure of the world on my shoulders, I felt that I had to be perfect, that I had to know what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, but now that I'm leaving, I've found peace within myself and am just genuinely ok with not knowing what I want to do with my life yet. I'm only 17... And when I first entered high school, I was broken and I put my academic performance before my mental stability, but now that I'm leaving, I've learned that it is ok to not be ok.

I've come to realize that I am truly in charge of my own life. Ever since I could remember, choices have been made for me beyond my power and so this is the first time where I've been handed the opportunity to do what I actually want to do and go where I want to go. If I don't like something, I have the power to change it. If I don't like someone, I know that they don't need to be a part of my life any longer. I've learned to focus more on the people who do lift me up instead of bring me down, and quite frankly, I've been such a happier person because of that mindset. Nothing in life is set in stone and I choose to believe that I have my entire life to mess up and figure things out.

This makes me think about Paul and his message to God's people in the second lesson. What I think he's saying is that God will always be with you wherever you go, even if you don't feel like he is. Much like the experiences that have made me who I am, God will always be there to guide me.

As I've mentioned before, these past four years have been difficult, especially this year. I'm not a strong believer in the idea that there is this one person sitting up in heaven controlling people's lives. I don't think that if there were a car crash to happen, some hands would come in and save me. Or if I were to do something that would put me in harm's way there would be a voice or an action that would deliberately stop me.

Instead, I see God through other people. I see his works and his blessings through the compassion in others. I see his intentions and his messages being carried out by people through how they respond to people who are in need, who are in need of healing, who are in need of support. Especially this year, I found God in so many different people. I found him in the person who gave me a hug who I barely knew at school, just because we all knew we were going through a hard time. I felt his presence when I was with a large portion of my classmates, just coming together to support one another because life is hard and it is unfair. I've developed a better understanding that God will always be there for you and the lessons that I've learned along the way through others, through God's spirit in others, will always be a part of who I am and will only help me in the future.

You can question his love, and it's perfectly fine if you do, because I can confidently say that I do at times, but like Max Ehrmann beautifully said in his poem, "Desiderata": "You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul."

So, with all the negativity, the pressure to do well, and the feeling of self doubt, what I honestly hope is that when people look at their lives, they realize how special and important they are. I'm not a strong believer in the saying that "everything happens for a reason", but I do believe that we all have a purpose and all of our lives are valid. What I hope people realize is that we are all perfectly imperfect and the biggest mistake one can make, is losing oneself in the process of valuing someone too much, and forgetting that they are special too. We spend so much time staring into the darkness that we forget that all that shines above us also shines within us. We are all fragile and broken people, so we must treat each other with the respect that we deserve and accept ourselves as who we are (which is one of the most difficult things I think a human can do.)

We are constantly exposed to stress and we often succumb to the pressures of always wanting to succeed. It's human nature to want to be the best, but sometimes, being the best isn't everything. Being surrounded by a lot of stress these past four years has taught me a lot of things. The most important thing that it's taught me is that life goes on. Things are so temporary and I've really realized what is important and what is not. I've also learned that God is everywhere, even if you don't realize it. We are all very blessed, and we are all so fortunate to be alive at this moment. So even when you feel as though the weight of the world is on your shoulders, just stop. Breathe. And know that God will always be there for you.

I really like this quote by Maya Angelou because I feel it embodies the lessons I've learned through the 17 years I've been here:

"I've learned that no matter what happens, or how bad it seems today, life does go on, and it will be better tomorrow. I've learned that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he/she handles these three things: a rainy day, lost luggage, and tangled Christmas tree lights. I've learned that regardless of your relationship with your parents, you'll miss them when they're gone from your life. I've learned that making a "living" is not the same thing as making a "life." I've learned that life sometimes gives you a second chance. I've learned that you shouldn't go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw something back. I've learned that whenever I decide something with an open heart, I usually make the right decision. I've learned that even when I have pains, I don't have to be one. I've learned that every day you should reach out and touch someone. People love a warm hug, or just a friendly pat on the back. I've learned that I still have a lot to learn. I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

So please, take this quote and think about it. Go forth into your life with a smile and know that everything will be ok in the end. Be at peace with God and be at peace with yourself and know that life is a beautiful thing.