

Commencement Address

Delivered on June 07, 2014, to the graduating seniors of

Mount Sophia Academy

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Dearly Beloved,

We are gathered here today to celebrate the completion of twelve years of education. Twelve tedious, annoying, insufferable years of books and tests and fieldtrips and math problems are over. And if you're like I was, when I was sitting where you are, you're now halfway done with school, with only twelve years of college left to go.

Your job today is to remind your old, jaded, pessimistic relatives that achievement really is possible and things aren't as bleak and hopeless for humanity as they always claim. Even if it takes a dozen years, projects can be completed, selves can be improved, and people can learn. *My* job today is to say something both wise and inspiring, since your achievement doesn't mean you get to relax so much as you get to level up, and face a whole new slew of people, challenges, and opportunities.

You will be MegaMan, and I will be Dr. Light. You will be Harry, Hermione, and Ron, and I will be Dumbledore. You will be Link, and I will be the old guy in the cave who gives you a sword because it's dangerous to go alone. You will be Katniss and Peeta, and I will be a much less drunk Haymitch.

Today is like a save point. Except if you fall in the lava, you don't get to come back here and start over. You've only got one life left to complete your mission, and you can't be sure what enemies and puzzles you'll be facing next.

That makes things kind of tense. One might even say, “frightening.” But that’s why heroes need courage. So my wise words of advice today are going to be about fear and courage.

(This will have three parts and a conclusion, just so you can keep track of how close we are to the end.)

Part 1.

There is a debate about which emotion is the most powerful. Some people say it’s greed. Greed not only keeps the economy going, and thus keeps us from starving, but also leads to all the big recessions and bankruptcies that periodically push the world to the brink of starvation.

Other people say greed isn’t the most powerful emotion; anger is. After all, you wouldn’t have all the murders and blood feuds and arguments if it weren’t for anger. The biggest events in history are the wars, as you all know from having been forced to study history for twelve years straight. And without anger, there would be no war.

And then there are the adorable people who say love is the most powerful emotion. Love conquers all, they say. All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love, love. Love is all you need. What, after all, can melt a frozen heart and bring a smile to your most jaded and pessimistic relative’s face? Love.

They’re all wrong, I say. Love is the best emotion, but it isn’t just an emotion, and it’s not the most powerful.

If it were, the world would be a much more loving place and so many songs about love wouldn't have lines in them like, "to the left," as in: "to the left, to the left." Nor would they have words in them like "to'pologize," as in: "it's too late to'pologize." ("Topologizing is what topologists do, if you were wondering.)

And greed isn't as pervasive as people say. Most of us are not Scrooge McDuck.

Anger has the best claim to being the most powerful emotion, since everyone is always throwing blue turtle shells at each other and generally being unpleasant. But even anger isn't the most powerful.

No, my friends, anger is just a reaction. Anger is not fundamental. Anger is always secondary. The reason everyone is angry and annoyed and rude all the time is: they are afraid. As you head out into the world, therefore, you have to remember this: Anger is a response to fear. People get angry at things that make them feel threatened. People get annoyed by things they're afraid will keep happening. People criticize things they feel endangered by. Anger is just a front for fear. Fear is the real thing; anger is a side effect.

So, if I had to give you one piece of advice as you leave this save point and head out onto your next mission, it would be to look for fear wherever you see anger, just like you look for fire wherever you see smoke, or look for flashing lights wherever you hear sirens, or look for Ryan Gosling whenever a sudden feeling of happiness, warmth, and safety comes over you, and you know it must be because he has returned to you at long last. Even if the anger has nothing to do with you, if you notice anger in any form (from outright rage to critical internet comments) get into the habit of trying to figure out what the angry person is really afraid of. Whenever you see anger, in yourself or others, switch into Sherlock mode and try to figure out the fear behind it.

Imagine, for example, that you're walking through the mall. A girl and her boyfriend are arguing with each other in front of the FYE or the Auntie Anne's, or whatever. It's pretty clear that they are not happy with each other. One might even say they are angry. Perhaps even "hangry," which is my favorite new word. So, you walk over to them and say, "Look, guys, the Auntie Anne's is right there.

You're not yourself when you're hungry." You pat them reassuringly on the shoulders and leave knowing you have saved their relationship.

But why do people get grumpy when they're hungry? It's because their bodies go into panic mode. They're afraid they're going to starve, and everything that happens that isn't food is just one more nail in their coffin. Also, without proper nourishment, our brains can't handle normal challenges. They just can't even. Everything becomes an impossibly imposing insurmountable task. So we get scared. And when people get scared, they get angry.

But why? you ask. Why do humans respond to fear with anger? That's easy. Have you ever seen a wild animal trapped in a corner? It's what psychologists call the "fight or flight response." The human body is designed to respond to threats by releasing adrenaline and doing other things that prepare us either to fight off whatever is threatening us, or to run away as fast as we can. Getting "amped up" in response to a threat helps us to defend ourselves more forcefully or get out of danger more quickly. The fight-or-flight response is a very helpful thing. The problem is that we have a tendency to do the fight-or-flight thing not only in response to charging grizzly bears but also in response to Sarah Jessica Parker movies.

You see, it turns out that the girl and her boyfriend in the mall are not arguing because they're hungry. They're arguing because they're trying to decide what movie to see. She wants to pay like 40 bucks to see a boring and embarrassing chick flick called *Twilight of the Titanic*

Sisterhood of the Traveling Divine Ya-Ya Pants Love Actually Notebook, while he wants to pay like 40 bucks to see some boring and embarrassing dude-bro flick called *The Fast and the Hungover Expendable Transforming Transporter Boondock Austin Saw Trek Powers White Castle Cop*. He's scared to death of Drew Barrymore and Hugh Grant. She's scared to death of Seth Rogen and Chris Hemsworth.

Well, okay, she's not actually scared to death of Chris Hemsworth. She's in love with Chris Hemsworth, and if her boyfriend realized this, maybe he wouldn't be so anxious to take her to see the muscle-gun-explosion-joke movie after all.

But he sure isn't going to pay good money to let her ogle One Direction while sighing over how far short of Colin Firth her real boyfriend falls. Both the girl and her boyfriend are terrified not only of having to sit through the movie the other wants to see, but of all the implications of the fact that *that's* the kind of movie the other wants to see, and they might be stuck watching those kinds of movies for the rest of their lives if they stay together. It's just an hour and a half. In the grand scheme of things, one movie is not a big deal. And yet, in the moment, that movie plus all its implications feels like a big enough deal to make them scared enough to make them angry enough to not notice they're making fools of themselves in front of the entire mall.

Part 2.

Heroes have to have courage, and if I'm going to give you proper hero advice, we need to all look really serious for a minute and do some philosophy.

I told you to switch into Sherlock mode whenever you see anger of any kind; whenever you see anger, you should look for clues that will help you figure out what the angry person is actually afraid of. And I want to give you a three-part clue ahead of time.

In general, people are afraid of losing something they need, and in general, people need three things. First, people need thneeds. A thneed's a fine something that all people need.

Actually, people don't need thneeds. They need companionship. They need control. And they need meaning. Or, they need friendship, they need freedom, and they need value. Or they need to not feel alone, they need to not feel powerless, and they need to not feel worthless. You can use whatever three terms you want, but whenever and wherever you find anger, you will find someone who is afraid of being alone (without companions or friends), or someone who is afraid of being out of control (being trapped or powerless), or someone who is afraid of being insignificant, worthless, or wrong.

So, whenever you see people being angry or hateful or annoyed or critical, you know they feel threatened by something, and you should ask yourself if they are afraid of being alone, being powerless, or being worthless. The boyfriend, for instance, is afraid his girlfriend is going to be making him sit through boring and embarrassing movies for the rest of their lives, but if he tells her he finds them embarrassing and boring, she won't like him anymore, and he will lose her. He is afraid of her embarrassing and boring him, which is a fear of being powerless or out of control, and he's scared of losing her, which is a fear of being alone. He responds to both these fears with anger, because he automatically wants to defend himself against things that feel threatening.

The girl, on the other hand, is afraid that if her boyfriend doesn't want to see the kinds of movies she likes then they won't really be able to have a close relationship. After all, if two people don't like the same things, that means they see things differently. And it's scary to think of having to spend the rest of your life with someone who sees the world differently than you. When the people you're with don't agree with you, it makes you feel alone, and what could be more terrifying than the thought that you might have to spend your life with someone who makes you feel alone? She is afraid, furthermore, that he wants to see the movie with the hot bikini space ninjas fighting with magic swords because he thinks Megan Johansson Jolie Fox is hotter than she is, and she'll never be as attractive to him. So, she is both afraid of being alone, and afraid of feeling worthless. And so she responds to both these fears with anger, because she automatically wants to defend *herself* against things that feel threatening.

But it's not just couples who get angry at each other because they're afraid of being alone, powerless, or wrong. It's parents and children. It's terrorists and victims. It's liberals and conservatives. It's graduation ceremony audience members and graduation ceremony speakers. Who knows how long I'll talk? I could just keep going and going and going, and you'd just have to sit there. And sit there. Waiting for me to shut up so you can finally eat some food because you are getting hungry.

Really, really hungry. And you have to go to the bathroom so bad. But I won't shut up. This is never going to end. You pretty much hate me by now, because you are afraid of being trapped and powerless.

In other situations, you find yourself arguing with people over a song or a band or a book, because you don't want to be alone and you don't want to be wrong. If you're the only one who likes it or hates it, you feel alone, and if you lose the argument, that means the other person

might be right, not you. Other times, you find yourself arguing with people not because you're afraid they're right, but because you're afraid other people will think they're right, and that will make you all the more alone and vulnerable. You're afraid the people who are persuaded by them will become zombies and try to eat your brains. That's a fear of being alone and a fear of being powerless.

And these same fears of being alone, of being powerless, and of being worthless or wrong give rise to the anger we feel when we have idiot drivers in front of us, or when we have idiot clerks or customers in front of us, or when we have idiot doctors or dentists in front of us. And the same fears of being alone, of being powerless, and of being worthless or wrong give rise to the anger that people feel about foreigners, or members of other ethnicities, or members of other religions, or people who have red hair.

But you are the heroes today, and heroes have courage. Heroes know how to handle fear and overcome it. So, once you've noticed some anger or annoyance or sarcasm or criticism, and figured out whether it comes from a fear of being alone, of being powerless, or being worthless, what should you do about it?

Part 3.

First, be honest with people about what you're really afraid of when you get angry with them, and what you think they're afraid of when they get angry with you.

If you and your friends and family and girlfriends and boyfriends (because you have several) . . . if you all decide to stop trying to defeat each other in arguments, and instead get into the habit of figuring out what everyone is afraid of and why, a lot of your arguments will simply disappear, and the rest will become much easier to deal with.

Some of the time you will discover that what you are afraid of, or the other person is afraid of, really isn't worthy of fear. It's a mouse and you're an elephant. Other times, you will discover that what you felt threatened by is something the other person has every right to do, or the other person will discover the same thing about you. And that means one of the two of you will just have to let it go. Let it go. . . . Let it go. Let it go. Speaking words of wisdom. Let it go. The cold never bothered you anyway. And then sometimes you'll discover that there really is something one or the other of you needs to change, if, for no other reason than you want to make the other person's life easier, because you love the other person.

The point is: don't let your relationships fall apart because you and your loved ones don't know how to handle your fears.

A person who can't handle fear is a coward. And there's no point in soldiers being courageous if the people they're fighting for back home are cowards about things as silly as whether they really have to take out the trash again, or whether they really have to wear a tie to this stupid graduation.

So, be honest with each other about your fears; reframe your arguments in terms of what you're afraid of, or what you feel threatened by. And then, look for ways to neutralize the three types of fear we've been talking about.

If the person is angry because he's afraid of being alone, look for a way to show him that he's not. Tell him how you lurk in the shadows behind him, wherever he goes. Point out that you

actually agree on far more things than you disagree on. Or do what I *try* to do in class. As a teacher, I'm the authority figure, which can be intimidating for students. So, when they disagree with me, I try to point out to them that it's not just them against me; it's them and all the great philosophers who agree with them, against me.

That completely changes the feel of the situation. It makes me feel alone instead of them. But I'm a big boy. I can handle it.

As a teacher, I also try to neutralize the second type of fear. If someone is angry because she or he feels powerless, try to find a way to give the person a choice, or a range of options, or the authority to make some decision. For example, I tell my students that they can argue their grades with me, and that I'm on their side when they do. Since I have the power to grade them, and this is intimidating, I try to give them some power to challenge my power. I try to even things out between us. In many situations, you may have no power to give, but you can still help the person find new options or opportunities or powers that she or he already has, but simply hadn't noticed.

Finally, if people are angry because they're afraid of being worthless, focus for a moment on why it is understandable or reasonable to believe what they believe, even though you're criticizing that belief. And if you really think the other person is just an idiot to believe whatever it is, don't say so. Just change the topic and talk about how they have beautiful eyes, or fantastic shoes, or something.

Conclusion.

So, look for fear, wherever you see anger, remember that fear will probably be a fear of being alone or rejected, a fear of being powerless or trapped, or a fear of being worthless or

wrong, and then see if you can neutralize that fear. And remember: the techniques that can help you neutralize the fears of others can also help you neutralize your own fears.

Furthermore, when you get into the habit of seeing the world not as a place full of angry, critical, and hateful people, but as a place full of fraidy-cats, cowards, and people who are just too scared for their own good, things stop seeming so threatening. It's much harder to be afraid of a person when you realize he's afraid of you, or is just afraid in general. This is one of those things where simply seeing what is really going on makes everything easier to handle.

Being able to handle fear appropriately is the core of courage. The courageous person is not the one who feels no fear, however.

You shouldn't be afraid of Sarah Jessica Parker movies; maybe you shouldn't waste your time on them, but if they scare you, you have a problem. However, if Sarah Jessica Parker comes riding a grizzly bear at you with a chainsaw, you should be afraid. The key is to first identify your fears, then to evaluate your fears, and then to respond to them appropriately.

Courage, my young adventurers. Constant vigilance and courage! Constant vigilance that is not duped by the appearance of anger, but sees through it to the reality of fear. May you go forth from here and show the world what it means to live a life that is not only full of insightful courage, but gives this insight and courage to others.

You survived twelve years of school. You've leveled up. You've unlocked the high school achievement. You earned the diploma badge. Now your new mission awaits, and I am confident you have everything you need to win. Congratulations.