

But should you fail to keep your kingdom
And, like your father before you come
Where thought accuses and feeling mocks,
Believe your pain...

(W. H. Auden, "Alonso to Ferdinand")

A substantial part of what lies ahead of you is going to be claimed by boredom. The reason I'd like to talk to you about it today, on this lofty occasion, is that I believe no liberal arts college prepares you for that eventuality; Dartmouth is no exception. Neither humanities nor science offers courses in boredom. At best, they may acquaint you with the sensation by incurring it. But what is a casual contact to an incurable malaise? The worst monotonous drone coming from a lectern or the eye-splitting textbook in turgid English is nothing in comparison to the psychological Sahara that starts right in your bedroom and spurns the horizon.

Known under several aliases – anguish, ennui, tedium, doldrums, humdrum, the blahs, apathy, listlessness, stolidity, lethargy, languor, accidie, etc – boredom is a complex phenomenon and by large a product of repetition. It would seem, then, that the best remedy against it would be constant inventiveness and originality. That is what you, young and newflanged, would hope for. Alas, life won't supply you with that option, for life's main medium is precisely repetition.

One may argue, of course, that repeated attempts at originality and inventiveness are the vehicle of progress and – in the same breath – civilization. As benefits of hindsight go, however, this one is not the most valuable. For should we divide history of our species by scientific discoveries, not to mention ethical concepts, the result will not be in our favor. We'll get, technically speaking, centuries of boredom. The very notion of originality or innovation spells out of the monotony of standard reality, of life, whose main medium – nay, idiom – is tedium.

In that, it – life – differs from art, whose worst enemy, as you probably know, is cliché. Small wonder, then, that art, too, fails to instruct you as to how to handle boredom. There are few novels about this subject; paintings are still fewer; and as for music, it is largely nonsemantic. On the whole, art treats boredom in a self-defensive, satirical fashion. The only way art can become for you a solace from boredom, from the existential equivalent of cliché, is if you yourselves become artists. Given your number, though, this prospect is as unappetizing as it is unlikely.

But even should you march out of this commencement in full force to typewriters, easels, and Steinway grands, you won't shield yourselves from boredom entirely. If repetitiveness is boredom's mother, you, young and newflanged, will be quickly smothered by lack of recognition and low pay, both chronic in the world of art. In these respects, writing, painting, composing music are plain inferior to working for a law firm, a bank, or even a lab.

Herein, of course, lies art's saving grace. Not being lucrative, it falls victim to demography rather reluctantly. For if, as we've said, repetition is boredom's mother, demography (which is to play in your lives a far greater role than any discipline you've mastered here) is its other parent. This may sound misanthropic to you, but I am more than twice your age, and I have lived to see the population of our globe double. By the time you're my age, it will have quadrupled, and not exactly in the fashion you expect.

For instance, by the year 2000 there is going to be such cultural and ethnic rearrangement as to challenge your notion of your own humanity.

That alone will reduce the prospects of originality and inventiveness as antidotes to boredom. But even in a more monochromatic world, the other trouble with originality and inventiveness is precisely that they literally pay off. Provided that you are capable of either, you will become well off rather fast. Desirable as that may be, most of you know firsthand that nobody is as bored as the rich, for money buys time, and time is repetitive. Assuming that you are not heading for poverty - for otherwise you wouldn't have entered college - one expects you to be hit by boredom as soon as the first tools of self-gratification become available to you.

Thanks to modern technology, those tools are as numerous as boredom's synonyms. In light of their function - to render you oblivious to the redundancy of time - their abundance is revealing. Equally revealing is the function your purchasing power, toward whose increase you'll walk out of this commencement ground through the click and whirr of some of those instruments tightly held by your parents and relatives. It is a prophetic scene, ladies and gentlemen of the class of 1989, for you are entering the world where recording and event dwarfs the event itself - the world of video, stereo, remote control, jogging suit, and exercise machine to keep you fit for reliving your own or someone else's past: canned ecstasy claming raw flesh.

Everything that displays a pattern is pregnant with boredom. That applies to money in more ways than one, both to the banknotes as such and to possessing them. That is not to bill poverty, of course, as an escape from boredom - although St. Francis, it would seem, has managed exactly that. Yet for all the deprivation surrounding us, the idea of new monastic orders doesn't appear particularly catchy in this era of video-Christianity. Besides, young and newfangled, you are more eager to do good in some South Africa or other than next door, keener on giving up your favorite brand of soda than on venturing to the wrong side of the tracks. So nobody advises poverty for you. All one can suggest is to be a bit more apprehensive of money, for the zeros in your accounts may usher in their mental equivalents.

As for poverty, boredom is the most brutal part of its misery, and the departure from it takes more radical forms: of violent rebellion or drug addiction. Both are temporary, for the misery of poverty is infinite; both, because of that infinity, are costly. In general, a man shooting heroin into his vein does so largely for the same reason you buy a video: to dodge the redundancy of time. The difference, though, is that he spends more than he's got, and that his means of escape become as redundant as what he is escaping from faster than yours. On the whole, the difference in tactility between a syringe's needle and a stereo's push button roughly corresponds to that between the acuteness and dullness of time's impact upon the have-nots and the haves. In short, whether rich or poor, sooner or later you will be afflicted by this redundancy of time. Potential haves, you'll be bored with your work, your friends, your spouses, your lovers, the view from your window, the furniture or wallpaper in your room, your thoughts, yourselves. Accordingly, you'll try to devise ways of escape. Apart from the self-gratifying gadgets mentioned before, you may take up changing jobs, residence, company, country, climate; you may take up prosmicuity, alcohol, travel, cooking lessons, drugs, psychoanalysis.

In fact, you may lump all these together; and for a while that may work. Until the day, of course, when you wake up in your bedroom amid a new family and a different wallpaper, in a different state and climate, with a heap of bills from your travel agent and your shrink, yet with the same stale feeling toward the light of day pouring

through your window. You'll put on your loafers only to discover they're lacking bootstraps to lift yourself out of what you recognize. Depending on your temperament or the age you are at, you will either panic or resign yourself to the familiarity of the sensation; or else you'll go through the rigmarole of change once more.

Neurosis and depression will enter your lexicon; pills, your medical cabinet . Basically, there is nothing wrong about turning life into the constant quest for alternatives, into leap-frogging jobs, spouses, surroundings, etc., provided you can afford the alimony and jumbled memories. This predicament, after all, has been sufficiently glamorized on screen and in Romantic poetry. The rub, however, is that before long this quest turns into a full-time occupation, with your need for an alternative coming to match a drug addict's daily fix.

There is yet another way out of it, however. Not a better one, perhaps, from your point of view, and not necessarily secure, but straight and inexpensive. Those of you who have read Robert Frost's "Servant to Servants" may remember a line of his: "The best way out is always through." So what I am about to suggest is a variation on the theme.

When hit by boredom, go for it. Let yourself be crushed by it; submerge, hit bottom. In general, with things unpleasant, the rule is, the sooner you hit bottom, the faster you surface. The idea here, to paraphrase another great poet of the English language, is to exact full look at the worst. The reason boredom deserves such scrutiny is that it represents pure, undiluted time in all its repetitive, redundant, monotonous splendor.

In a manner of speaking, boredom is your window on time, on those properties of it one tends to ignore to the likely peril of one's mental equilibrium. In short, it is your window on time's infinity, which is to say, on your insignificance in it. That's what accounts, perhaps, for one's dread of lonely, torpid evenings, for the fascination with which one watches sometimes a fleck of dust aswirl in a sunbeam, and somewhere a clock tick-tocks, the day is hot, and your willpower is at zero.

Once this window opens, don't try to shut it; on the contrary, throw it wide open. For boredom speaks the language of time, and it is to teach you the most valuable lesson in your life - the one you didn't get here, on these green lawns - the lesson of your utter insignificance. It is valuable to you, as well as to those you are to rub shoulders with. "You are finite", time tells you in a voice of boredom, "and whatever you do is, from my point of view, futile." As music to your ears, this, of course, may not count; yet the sense of futility, of limited significance even of your best, most ardent actions is better than the illusion of their consequences and the attendant self-aggrandizement .

For boredom is an invasion of time into your set of values. It puts your existence into its perspective, the net result of which is precision and humility. The former, it must be noted, breeds the latter. The more you learn about your own size, the more humble and the more compassionate you become to your likes , to that dust aswirl in a sunbeam or already immobile atop your table. Ah, how much life went into those fleck! Not from your point of view but from theirs. You are to them what time is to you; that's why they look so small. And do you know what the dust says when it's being wiped off the table?

"Remember me", whispers the dust.

Nothing could be farther away from the mental agenda of any of you, young and newfangled, than the sentiment expressed in this two-liner of the German poet Peter Huchel, now dead.

I've quoted it not because I'd like to instill in you affinity for things small - seeds and plants, grains of sand or mosquitoes - small but numerous. I've quoted these lines because I like them, because I recognize in them myself, and, for that matter, any living organism to be wiped off from the available surface. "Remember me", whispers the dust". And one hears in this that if we learn about ourselves from time, perhaps time, in turn, may learn something from us. What would that be? That inferior in significance, we best it in sensitivity.

This is what it means - to be insignificant. If it takes will-paralyzing boredom to bring this home, then hail the boredom. You are insignificant because you are finite. Yet the more finite a thing is, the more it is charged with life, emotions, joy, fears, compassion. For infinity is not terribly lively, not terribly emotional. Your boredom, at least, tells you that much. Because your boredom is the boredom of infinity.

Respect it, then, for its origins - as much perhaps as for your own. Because it is the anticipation of that inanimate infinity that accounts for the intensity of human sentiments, often resulting in a conception of a new life. This is not to say that you have been conceived out of boredom, or that the finite breeds the finite (though both may ring true). It is to suggest, rather, that passion is the privilege of the insignificant.

So try to stay passionate, leave your cool to constellations. Passion, above all, is a remedy against boredom. Another one, of course, is pain - physical more than psychological, passion's frequent aftermath ; although I wish you neither. Still, when you hurt you know that at least you haven't been deceived (by your body or by your psyche). By the same token , what's good about boredom, about anguish and the sense of the meaninglessness of your own, of everything else's existence, is that it is not a deception.

You also might try detective novels or action movies - something that leaves you where you haven't been verbally/visually/mentally before - something sustained, if only for a couple of hours. Avoid TV, especially flipping the channels: that's redundancy incarnate. Yet should those remedies fail, let it on, "fling your soul upon the growing gloom ." Try to embrace, or let yourself be embraced by, boredom and anguish, which anyhow are larger than you. No doubt you'll find that bosom smothering , yet try to endure it as long as you can, and then some more. Above all, don't think you've goofed somewhere along the line, don't try to retrace your steps to correct the error. No, as the poet said, "Believe your pain". This awful bearhug is no mistake. Nothing that disturbs you is. Remember all along that there is no embrace in this world that won't finally unclasp.

If you find all this gloomy , you don't know what gloom is. If you find this irrelevant, I hope time will prove you right. Should you find this inappropriate for such a lofty occasion, I will disagree.

I would agree with you had this occasion been celebrating your staying here; but it marks your departure. By tomorrow you'll be out of here, since your parents paid only for four yearsm not a day longer. So you must go elsewhere, to make your careers, money, families, to meet your unique fates. And as for that elsewhere, neither among stars and in the tropics nor across the border in Vermont is there much awareness of this ceremony on the Dartmouth Green. One wouldn't even bet that the sound of your band reaches White River Junction .

You are exiting this place, members of the class of 1989. You are entering the world, which is going to be far more thickly settled than this neck of the woods and where you'll be paid far less attention than you have been used to for the last four years. You are on your own in a big way. Speaking of your significance, you can

quickly estimate it by pitting your 1,100 against the world's 4.9 billion. Prudence, then, is as appropriate on this occasion as is fanfare.

I wish you nothing but happiness. Still, there is going to be plenty of dark and, what's worse, dull hours, caused as much by the world outside as by your own minds. You ought to be fortified against that in some fashion; and that's what I've tried to do here in my feeble way, although that's obviously not enough.

For what lies ahead is a remarkable but wearisome journey; you are boarding today, as it were, a runaway train. No one can tell you what lies ahead, least of all those who remain behind. One thing, however, they can assure you of is that it's not a round trip. Try, therefore, to derive some comfort from the notion that no matter how unpalatable this or that station may turn out to be, the train doesn't stop there for good. Therefore, you are never stuck - not even when you feel you are; for this place today becomes your past. From now on, it will only be receding for you, for that train is in constant motion. It will be receding for you even when you feel that you are stuck... So take one last look at it, while it is still its normal size, while it is not yet a photograph. Look at it with all the tenderness you can muster, for you are looking at your past. Exact, as it were, the full look at the best. For I doubt you'll ever have it better than here.