

Commencement Address

by New York Times Bestselling Author Josh Swiller

Hello, I'm Josh Swiller. I'd like to thank the Board of Trustees and President Bill Corwin for inviting me to address the graduates today.

Graduates of the 2008 class, I offer you my congratulations. Nothing you do during these years of your life is as important as the education you get and the habits you learn and this occasion, this ceremony is to celebrate how far you have come in getting such things. Well done! You should be proud! You should look yourself in the mirror when you get home, reach behind your shoulder and pat yourself on the back and say, "Good job. Good job Victor, Naomie, Kelly, Emily and Kimberly." Your lives are just beginning, your greatest days are ahead of you, but one very important piece of all this will be learning to stop, take stock and appreciate what you've done so far. So make sure to do that.

Graduates, I would also like to offer another, perhaps more unusual kind of congratulations. One you might not hear in too many other places. What I would like to do is congratulate you on your deafness. I, like you, have a profound hearing loss. I, like you, have had to struggle with my disability every day to get the most out of life that I can.

One thing I never had when I was your age, that I wish I did, was an understanding of and an appreciation for all the amazing things that deafness has given

me. Deafness makes some things harder but it also makes everything much richer. It does. Really.

So I want to congratulate you on your deafness and tell you a little bit about how it will make your life a little more wonderful.

First, your deafness will be a great filter. You will find again and again that while not hearing can make it harder to meet new people, the kind of people deafness does attract are of the highest class – thoughtful, intelligent, kind. Throughout your life, if you keep your eyes open and your heart brave, you will meet sensitive, warm, understanding people. If you look around you – you already are surrounded by such people. That is a rare thing – congratulations on that.

Second, your deafness will be a great comfort. The world you are going off to is a beautiful and exciting one, but it can also be stressful, tiring, scary, or just plain confusing. For hearing people too! But with deafness you will always have the wonderful option of turning the world off and stepping back into a quiet, private place where you can relax, breathe deep, think clearly, and recharge your batteries. Anywhere you go, you can do this – most people can't. Just make sure you don't do it when your mother is telling you to clean your room.

Third, and most important, your deafness will be a great, great teacher. It is already teaching you at every moment. Is being deaf easy? Is it a walk in the park? No, it's hard. But hard things give you character. Difficult situations and events teach you to be brave and compassionate – that means learning to care for others. Challenges force you to grow up. Trust me, an easy life with no worries is not good for the soul. You know all those young Hollywood celebrities like Lindsey and Britney and Paris who are

now having all these troubles with drugs and relationships and jail and other things? That is because they lost the ability to self-reflect and be true to themselves. Somehow despite the fact that they seemed to have everything – money, fame, hearing – they lost sight of the fact that life is a precious gift and could not make the right decisions for their lives. But you have deafness and it will never allow you to behave so childishly. Deafness will force you to ask yourself again and again – how can I keep going? How can I remember to be thankful? How can I give to others who need help? – these are important questions to ask yourself and it is wonderful to have something that will make you ask them everyday. Everyone should be so lucky as to have something that forces them to ask such questions. Do you understand? This is deafness teaching us how to better love ourselves and others. Otherwise, what is life about? Getting the high score of Super Mario Brothers?

So my friends, mi amigos, congratulations.

Learning from deafness in these ways I have been blessed to live a life more wonderful than I could have ever imagined. I trust you will go and do the same. I have traveled the world many times, lived and worked in cities, in forests, in tiny African villages so small they don't even have names. I have met incredible, inspiring people – all this is possible for you too. And I expect you to do it, or at the very least, to never ever use deafness as an excuse for why you can't. Understand? That excuse is off the table. If you feel that deafness is being unfair – and believe me, there are many times it looks that way – you have to ask what deeper lesson is it trying to teach me? Because there always is one.

So let it be your teacher, your filter, your friend. Are you ready to let it be all those things? Good.

But first, congratulate yourself! Well done!