

I bring to you, class of 2019, greetings from the faculty and many congratulations for your many wonderful accomplishments! On this, your graduation day, I'm going to ask you to think about your high school community, how that community has evolved and changed over your four years at Park Tudor, and how you will intentionally (or unintentionally, as we shall see...) hold those memories in the future.

We've heard time and again that our memory, especially our short-term memory, is like a muscle. If we exercise it properly and regularly, carry out the right number of reps, pump some iron, do some sit-ups, we can transform our amygdalas and hippocampuses from pre-experimental, puny Steve Rogerses to strapping, burly Captain Americas. (That was both a shout-out to you Marvel Universe fans, and a way for me to show that I am still current and hip...) In truth, there are all kinds of techniques that we can employ to get better at recalling facts and content and get really good at remembering huge swaths of information, Explorations into brain science are uncovering more of these methods all the time, and are in fact challenging what we once thought was the best way to study. For example, it turns out that we learn better when we abandon our traditional learning rituals and environments (your desk in your bedroom) and consciously integrate learning into the other more random demands of life. Reciting the quadratic formula in the check-out line at the grocery might be more effective than trying to accomplish that feat at the kitchen table at home. Granted, it will make you seem more than a little odd, but you will ace that test. And napping – napping is great – if we want to be memory ninjas we should do way more of that. Just don't do it in the next five to ten minutes, because you'll hurt my feelings.

This new understanding of memory seems to me to have both pros and cons. On the one hand, it is great to know that I have much more power and agency, full control in fact over my ability to remember than I previously thought. On the other hand, if I have power and agency, full control over my ability to remember, then there are no excuses. I suppose it is my responsibility to exercise and develop my memory in the right way. Because of this, I have come to view these various retrieval strategies and practices the same way I view going to the gym. I have good intentions, but you know, it doesn't always happen... in fact, it rarely happens, and parts of my brain may always be, well... flabby.

So, imagine my delight when I recently read that while it is true that we can train our brains to recall chunks of content (a process known as developing one's semantic memory), when it comes to other experiences, such as accurately recalling how we spent the long afternoons of summer break during our elementary school years, our memory is less trainable, less predictable than we thought. Our episodic or autobiographical memory is much harder to control. In fact, even after being exposed to the right kind of rigid training our memory can be a bit stubborn – dare I say, at times belligerent. It's better, argues Benedict Carey in his book *How We Learn*, to think of the memory part of the brain as a rather capricious, eccentric family member rather than someone who just graduated from West Point at the top of their class. This family member can be loving and well intentioned, but is often unreliable and let's face it – a bit embarrassing. This is because memories of our past selves are also governed by emotion and time, and emotion and time can play all kinds of tricks on us and create all kinds of chaos.

I actually like this memory metaphor much better, because it is so ... self-serving. It conveniently lets me embrace all my imperfections and tendency to be absent minded. So, I have named this bumbling, foolish, forgetful, part of my memory as crazy uncle Boris, and let me describe him to you. He's a bit of an unkempt buffoon with a permanent expression of surprise on his face. He has no rhythm, but it doesn't deter him from dancing. I'm fond of him, but he can usually be counted on to disappoint me. Feel free at this time, to take a few seconds to consider your own personal Boris.

Boris has become a lingering presence in my mind of late because this year – in fact only a few weeks from now, I will celebrate what those of us who have entered middle age affectionally and euphemistically like to call a “milestone” birthday! This means I am now more than 30 years removed from my own high school student days! I'll give you a second or two to do the math... and then I trust that we shall all agree never to mention this again and not let it anywhere near our neocortex (that's where the memories we have determined as “keepers” are stored in the brain).

Anyway, when I think back to what I can actually recall from that pivotal time in my life, I'm a little bemused and confused by what Uncle Boris has deemed “long-term memory essentials.”

Thanks uncle Boris, I say (giving him a friendly nuggie and a wink) as I effortlessly and perfectly recall and sing every lyric from every song I listened to in the 80s and 90s (obviously in my car- alone...). These were mostly maudlin songs by Joy Division, The Smiths, The Cure, R.E.M and The Pixies. Yeah - I was a glass half-empty kind of person. The point is - you are most likely going to gain this talent of recall too – the music you listen to in high school will eventually become your personal soundtrack.

Geez, Boris I say, shaking my head slowly in disgust when I remember the more than a couple of the times I misplaced my front door key and had to wait for my mom to get home from work before I could get inside the house. On such occasions she liked to say, “It’s a good job your head is fixed to your shoulders, Lady Jane! Or you’d lose that too... (she thought she was being funny with her little, lame, English history joke...)” Of course, I’m still doing it – On Thursday I achieved the trifactor and lost my phone, keys, and door pass in three different spaces. I have Mr. Mark Dewart, Mr. Christian Jacobs, and an anonymous kindly Upper School student to thank for returning them.

Why? Why? Uncle Boris? I ask (rolling my eyes) when I lament my lack of French fluency despite five full years of classes, but can somehow perfectly recall complex, largely useless, essay phrases I had to memorize for exams. Such as... *J’ll se precipite vers le train, en agitant ca chemise pour attirer l’attention du conducteur!* This translates to: He ran towards the train, waving his handkerchief to attract the attention of the driver. “You’ll be able to thank me” said Boris, “When you’re in France, and you witness a train accident! You’re welcome!”

I can remember all these details from my high school years, but for whatever reason Uncle Boris has decided that I will not remember my own graduation. That’s right. At this point in my life I seriously question whether anything actually occurred to mark my transition from a high school senior to a bonafide college student. It’s true that my rather conservative, all-girls, school was in England and that the general consensus around social, celebratory events was that they should be modest and understated. In fact, academic celebrations were largely frowned upon as unnecessary and indulgent. “Remember gals – you’re supposed work hard, you’re supposed to pass exams, and you’re supposed to matriculate. It is

what is expected” Headmistress Miss Batty (that was her real name) lectured us on more than one occasion.

I facetimed my mother and asked her for some conformation or photographic evidence that there was a graduation event – but she just shrugged. It was an “un-iphone” age – no one was snapping and posting portraits of their kids when the animals departed the ark. Finally, an old school friend, still living in England, had a vague recollection that we had had an assembly and a group photograph taken in the library. She dug through her stuff and found a copy of it and there I was on the second row to the left. Who Knew! But having a copy of the image didn’t jog my memory one bit. Seriously, Boris! Why can I not recall one moment from that day?

So, this experience makes me a little sad and a little concerned for all of you. I hope your memory is better than mine and that 30 years from now this day will be fresh in your mind, but I wouldn’t count on it. Brain scientists would say that life’s big events aren’t necessarily committed to memory if the right ingredients aren’t in place, if the right emotions aren’t felt. If the event occurs in an unfamiliar setting, for instance, our recollection of it can be impeded. If the event is stressful, we tend to shut it out. Clearly the right ingredients weren’t there on my graduation day. But the thing is – I want them to be there for you. I want you to remember. I would like it if 30 years from now you would be able to think fond thoughts about this moment. I would like you to remember the names of the people sat next to you. I would like you remember the way you felt in your tuxedo or dress. I’d like you to recall your walk down the center aisle, the expressions on the faces of your teachers - of your family and friends, the tempo and cadence of their voices. The weather outside ( ), the temperature inside ( ). All of it in fact...Because this is one of the last times we’ll be together as a community.

And our community is important – it is precious. It is true that it is living and growing and breathing. Every year, Park Tudor expands, fills its lungs, to receive and welcome new faculty, new families, and new students. But it also contracts and exhales a little when we lose members, especially around this time of year as you graduate and get ready to move and join another community. We know you are still panthers, but we feel the loss of you nonetheless, and we have to adjust to a new atmosphere and a way of engaging with each other. Your going, your

leaving, even changes the buildings slightly. So, it would be nice, would it not, to take a breath and remember us just as we are now.

How do we do this? I started to think about ways we might ensure that the events of the day stick and implant some strategies, maybe use a little of that brain and memory science to that we all recall something from today. And that it came to me. Some of you know my fascination with a growing area of anthropology called “foodways.” At the college level, foodways is the philosophical study of what we eat, when we eat, where we eat it, why we eat it, and who we eat it with. Sharing food and breaking bread is central to the human condition. The stories we tell about food permeate our historical and cultural narratives and lie at the heart of community identity. Think about archetypal tales where characters are tempted and corrupted with food, where everlasting bonds are formed and pacts are made over a table. On a national scale, deals are struck, treaties are made over meals. On a personal scale, religious rituals, celebrations, births, marriages, almost every occasion in life can be marked by eating special food. Food is how we show love and care for one another, how we console one another, how we honor one another. Just ask any teacher who has an advisory how those Wednesday morning snacks bind and bond the group. Most importantly, food helps us to document experience and curate the past. So maybe here, right now, we can spend a sweet moment together, breaking bread, maybe we can share something sweet. You (students, teachers, administrators) were left a little treat on your chair – open it now, if you are so inclined and take a bite. Never fear - It is completely nut free, dairy free, gluten free, really hypoallergenic!

It’s a simple mint – but mint (the plant, and the flavor, and the smell) is symbolic – ancient societies associated it with ideals such as virtue, warmth, and protection. And these qualities seem perfectly appropriate of those any alma mater or beloved mother would want for her children. To promote a life of moral goodness and offer warmth and protection is exactly the job of a good school. Mint also has a practical application, as your faces will no doubt be in close proximity with the noses of other people as you hug your hellos and goodbyes during the forthcoming social events.

American poet Richard Hovey said, “Pleasant memories must be arranged in advance,” and now with your brains thoroughly primed and coaxed into recollecting this event, on behalf of your teachers I wish you a lifetime of such

pleasant memories. The kind where, like now, you are on the cusp of everything that is new, exciting, and extraordinary. Congratulations once again and good speed.