The 24th of May has always held special significance for me. As a boy growing up in the Province of Ontario in Canada, this day was honored as a national holiday because it was celebrated as the official birthday for the Queen, and – as school kids are wont to do – we had a little ditty which went:

“*The 24th of May is the Queen’s Birthday;*
If we don’t get a holiday, we’ll all run away.”

Fat chance, that!

If there was ever an idle threat, trying to play hooky from a Canadian public school fifty years ago was about as likely as a Wilbraham & Monson student taking an unauthorized day trip to New York City. But you will have to ask Brett and Rosalyn about that.

For all of you in the Class of 2008 here at the Academy, May 24th takes on a particular significance which I think we all agree is as close to “life-changing” as anything you have done in the past 17 or 18 years.

Earlier this morning, each of you partook in a wonderful Wilbraham & Monson tradition that goes back well into the last century – you all symbolically presented your commemorative stones for placement in the Alumni Wall, joining similar tributes by over four thousand graduates before you.

And like your forebears, you have all now assembled in this tent having passed over the small creek that crosses the Academy campus – a creek called the Rubicon.

For any of you lucky enough to have been taught Latin by Christopher Ayers, you might recall the history of the original Rubicon. It is famous because there was an ancient
Roman law which forbade any Roman general from crossing the River Rubicon and entering Italy proper with a standing army. To do so was treason.

But Julius Caesar did venture to cross the Rubicon. And by doing so, he crossed the proverbial “point of no return” and changed history in the process. Branded a traitor by the Roman Senate, he confronted and defeated Pompey’s army and conquered Rome, thereby establishing the much vaunted Roman Empire.

Now, I don’t expect any member of the Class of 2008 to establish any new empires, although I am sure that at least a few of you have been enticed to do so when playing as part of the Alliance or the Horde on “World of War Craft”. But with the likes of Marc Bourgeois, Jacky Yang, Andrew Shea or Brigid Jurgens among your classmates, who knows? Maybe you will establish new empires. For this is your commencement, your new beginning, and everything is possible.

But once you have your diplomas in hand, you will not be able to return to the world of Wilbraham & Monson as a student ever again – although I can assure you that you will not be forgotten. Head of School, Rodney LaBreque, and several members of faculty and staff will monitor your every move as you progress through life.

This is one reason why contributing your brownstone bricks to the alumni wall is so important: In this manner, you have solidified your presence here in perpetuity. Started on Prize Day by the Class of 1947, each succeeding graduating senior has captured something of his or her personality in the engravings on each of these bricks. You can view the first, impressive stone, hand-chiseled by the 1947 class president, Keith Martin, at the start of the wall. Sadly, Keith passed away in February, although his fine contribution lives on.

With the addition of your handiwork, the wall now totals some 4292 stones – a count certified just last week by two student volunteers working at the behest of two of your administrative stalwarts, Caroline Smith and Sandi Scott.

By placing these stones in this wall, each of you, our honored graduates, are symbolically laying a cornerstone for your lives. For I think that looking back from today, you will agree that the learning and the experiences you have had here at the Academy – the ‘Global School’ – have given you the foundation for moving on into higher education and eventually finding careers, raising families, and following your dreams.

To say the least, I am honored to have been asked by the Head of School, Rodney LaBreque, to talk to you for a few minutes this morning. In 1988, twenty years ago almost to the day (and I guess before most, if not all of you, were born!), I gave the commencement address to the members of the graduating class of the Schutz International School in Alexandria, Egypt. Like Wilbraham & Monson, Schutz was a boarding school, although it is much smaller and was founded in the 20th Century.
I thought at the time that I was invited to speak because I happened to be the senior U.S. representative in this part of Egypt in my capacity as the Consul General. However, a well-meaning matron, Mme. Boustany who was the wife of the aging classics teacher at the school confided:

“No sir, it wasn’t your rank we were interested in. It was your wonderful garden. One of the largest and finest in the city of Alexandria – perfect for a graduation ceremony, don’t you think?”

Well, I had to agree with Mme. Boustany. Our garden was a wonderfully colorful and verdant oasis, thanks to the efforts of my wife, Patricia, who even managed to grow roses in the deserts of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

But I wasn’t put off by Mme. Boustany’s comeuppance. Indeed, I gave a short ten-minute going onto forty-minute address on the great prospects which electro-magnets held for the development of transportation systems in the world of the future. To say that this address created a huge yawn among all of the graduating students is a quintessential understatement. As I recall, only one student, a Bulgarian by the name of Vlad, expressed even the remotest interest in my carefully chosen topic.

However, at the time, I was entranced with my subject. And, anyways, during my talk, the eyes of each of the 64 graduates appeared literally to be transfixed on me. Only later did I learn that they weren’t focused on me per se, as much as they were on the two rather gigantic Nile river rats that were racing back and forth somewhat precariously on the roof gutter some eight feet above my head. All the time I was speaking, the graduating students were quietly wagering among themselves whether and when these two rodents would lose their balance and drop down onto the podium from which I spoke!

So today I promise you two things, Academy graduates:

Firstly, there are no rats running anywhere in close proximity to this tent. Your legendary coach and retired history and renowned “school master”, Phil Cardone, who oversees the gardens and campus-beautification projects each spring and summer, and Don Sliwa and his hardworking plant and maintenance staff, have seen to that.

And secondly, I will not pretend to give you advice about matters about which I know nothing, aside from a passing curiosity.

But as is the nature of these occasions, I do have a responsibility to offer a bit of advice to you, the Class of 2008, based on “lessons learned”, I suppose, from my life’s own experiences. Now, to say the least, I am undoubtedly more adept at explaining the origins of “al-Qa’ida” or the dynamics of Syrian-Hizballah relations than I am in offering pearls of wisdom to a group of intelligent young adults.
But, if you will indulge me, let me provide you with five points or guideposts which, if followed, might help all of you who have just symbolically passed over the Rubicon from the innocence of youth to the responsibilities of adulthood.

- **First, don’t let the opinions and actions of others stifle you.**

There must have been occasions when each of you either did something, or failed to do something, because of peer pressure or on instructions from a beloved parent. But I’m sure that Brian Easler counseled any number of you in his calm and understanding style and eased you back onto the path of righteousness.

In any case, it’s a new ball game now. Always try to have a goal – call it a dream if you want to – and then find a way to make it happen.

Joseph Salomone, if you want to work on a manned spaceship for the trip to Mars, then get the education you need, and go for it, guy! Don’t let anyone dissuade you otherwise.

Your dream may be to own a Harley by the time you’re 21, or to join the Bangkok Stock Exchange by the time you’re 30, or to become an ambassador by the time you’re 40. Now is the time to set your plans in motion. Don’t let anyone stifle your dreams. For the first time in your life, you’re free to set your own agenda – seize the moment!

- **Second, a related guidepost is to become committed to something.**

This may be politics – the Lord knows that the politics in each of the nine political entities represented by the members of the Class of 2008 offers something for everyone. But a commitment to a church, a local school, or to the Academy’s alumni association can also bring forth numerous, positive dividends. Delight and Bud Rothery, who are here with us this morning, are living testaments that this can be the case.

Maybe it’s to try to emulate, or even surpass, John Johnson’s remarkable feat of bicycling some 3400 miles across the North American continent in 1985. But don’t wait too long. Time has a way of getting away from you. One minute you’re 18 or 19 and the world is your proverbial oyster; the next minute you’re 60 and being advised to limit your intake of oysters because of a liver condition.

Lauren Brodeur has certainly shown a commitment to soccer over the past few years, and I should think that her commitment to this sport will continue to strengthen her character and her contributions to society both at the University of Hartford and in the years to beyond. Who knows? Maybe the Olympics are in your future, Lauren. There is, after all, an Academy precedent for that auspicious accomplishment

- **Third, don’t travel your path alone.**

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, before she started running for president, was fond of saying that “….it takes a village to raise a child.” I’m not really sure I agree with this
What I would argue is that it takes a spouse, a mate or a life partner – plus a few, carefully cultivated, genuine friendships to realize your dreams.

I speak with personal experience in this regard. As my mother used to remind me regularly and with prescient accuracy, my spouse, Patricia, has been my strength and my guidepost during much of the 34 years we have been together. And two or three other great friends have always stood by me with loyalty and love in good times and, most particularly, in bad and painful times, too.

I thought when I left for university way back in 1965, and for several years there after, that I would be able to make my way through life alone. I was wrong. Don’t make this mistake.

➤ **Fourth, always look at the glass of life as ‘half full’ and not as ‘half empty’**.

My grandmother, who lived to be 97 years of age, was a wonderful lady, who always kept her sense of humor and her bright outlook on life despite losing her gentle and loving husband at the relatively young age of 56 and having to work very hard to parlay her inheritance of four burial plots into a substantial property fortune in the city of Seattle, Washington.

Even in her last months of life, there was always a sparkle in her eye and laughter in her voice. I asked her once what her secret was for a long and happy life. She responded by saying that when one gets up in the morning, you really only have two choices.

You can get up in a good mood, put your aches and pains aside, marvel at the patterns of the raindrops, and enjoy the trees, flowers, birds and other wonders of nature’s fauna and flora. You can seek out the day’s mysteries to be solved, chores to be finessed, new things to be discovered, and old things to be enjoyed. Despite one’s age or infirmity, life is full of riches which can continue to be embraced. In short, you can view the glass of life as half-full.

Or, alternatively, you can get up every morning in a lackadaisical or bad mood or not even get up out of bed at all. You can moan about your aches and pains, and complain about the rotten weather. And you can snap at the postal carrier, kick the dog, worry about something over which you have no control, blame the president, or harp at the housekeeper, if that is your disposition. For you, the glass of life is half-empty.

“It’s your choice,” she advised me, “but I’ve always thought that sniffing the roses was a much better alternative in the garden of life than grasping the roses by their thorns.”

➤ **And my fifth and final guidepost for you is: “Have fun!”**

When you look back on your years here at Wilbraham & Monson, what will you remember? Will it be the “A’s” you scored in math or science? Will it be the race you won or the award you were given or the fact that you graduated *cum laude*?
Or will it be the fun you had at the Senior Banquet last Thursday, or some shenanigans alluded to in Dennis Conway’s remarks to you in his address a few moments ago, or the fun that you and your buddies had up at the Hillside Café that will bring a future smile to your face?

With a diploma in hand from this prestigious Academy, you now have what it takes to have a successful college education and a follow-on career. But to guarantee happiness, you need to find ways not to take yourselves too seriously and to engender a sense of humility and gratitude. Let me share with you a few examples.

Entering the stodgy State Department at a young age – I was 22 at the time – should be enough to stifle any sense of humor or quirk of personality. It certainly did for many – I would even say too many – of my colleagues. For the State Department, despite its reputation as a fulcrum of refined language and nuanced tones – in a word, “diplomatic” – is also the epitome of a bureaucratic snake pit.

But I joined the Foreign Service for the excitement and the adventure that that career offered, and I played it for all it was worth. And yes, I did have fun. Lots of it. I took to heart President Harry Truman’s adage that “….if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog!” To say the least, I avoided Washington like a plague, but for most of my working life, Patricia and I have had a dog – we still do, in fact.

And I always tried to find levers that would make people smile, despite the seriousness of the occasion:

-- **On the visa line** in Egypt, where on a given day we would reject 78 out of every 100 applicants, in an often emotional and life-altering setting, I always tried to ease the pain by giving every rejected candidate a Hershey chocolate kiss, along with a passing word of comfort. As silly as this might seem, this small action worked wonders, created a much more hospitable working environment in the Consulate General, and continues to be remarked upon years later.

-- **At Christmas time** in Saudi Arabia, the Air Attaché at the Embassy, Dick Ryer, and I used to drive around the streets of Jeddah, stopping at malls, and greeting families with their small kids and fully-veiled wives by ringing a loud bell and passing out candy. The only difference was that I was dressed in a full-fledged Santa Claus outfit. Yet, we were received in this most Islamic of countries with a warmth and a delight which was intoxicating.

“**Baba Noel**” – as Santa Claus is known in Arabic – is a universal, secular figure of good will. Great fun was had by all until the dreaded religious wardens, the *mutawas*, would brandish their sticks and dispel the gathered crowd – but not before the kids and their parents all bade us a genuinely felt, fond farewell.
-- Or during the annual visit by the diplomatic corps to express holiday greetings to His Highness the Emir of Qatar on the occasion of the end of the annual month of fasting, all of my 70 ambassadorial colleagues were in their dark, pin-stripe suits. The Emir and his entourage were all more attractively and comfortably attired in their flowing white robes.

I wore pink – not shocking pink, mind you, but a definitely pink linen jacket with black trousers which inevitably caught the attention of the state television news crew, as it did the eye of the ruler. A nominally stern figure known for his curtness rather than his sense of humor, I was always stopped by him and given several extra minutes of conversation. Invariably, the television news of the day routinely captured the glint in the ruler’s eye and the smile on his face which the rather unorthodox attire of the Ambassador of the United States of America inspired.

So, the bottom line is “do not let success go to your head.” Remember that as far as you go up the ladder of life, at one point, you will eventually have to come down again – if only because age and arthritis will require this of you. Your reputation and your deeds will either soften your landing or make you wish you had Alzheimer’s.

Keep in mind leadership commandment number one, as my best friend, a former leading US Air Force combat fighter pilot, sometimes reminds the younger heirs apparent of his company:

“Even if you are in a position of strength, whether at work or in relationships, play fair. Just because you’re in the driver’s seat, doesn’t mean you have to run people over.”

To be sure, your generation is faced with numerous challenges, including those posed by terrorism, global warming, environmental degradation, threats of deadly pandemics, resource shortages, overpopulation, and economic distress – to name but a few.

Can you cope with these challenges? Of course you can, and you will – and hopefully with an improved record of success than has been realized by my generation and the ones that have preceded us.

Remember, with a bit of humility, that while 100 percent of your graduating class is going off to college or university at institutions ranging from the University of Chicago to our own Westfield State, AIC, Springfield, and Elms Colleges, fully 57 percent of the high school students in the neighboring City of Springfield not only have no chance of a higher education, but that they have, in fact, dropped out of high school, thereby depriving themselves of a high school diploma. As all of you surely recognize, their future prospects are bleak. If you’re feeling lucky about now, you should!

Follow the guidelines and precepts I have mentioned to you this morning, and I think that you will find, as I have, that the mystery that is tomorrow will grant you continuing adventure, personal satisfaction and an inner tranquility – in short, a “life fulfilled.”
And maybe, one day, they might even help you return to this school or to another institution to deliver the commencement address.

Thank you for honoring me by your attention this morning. Best wishes and good luck to each and every one of you with your future dreams and challenges!