

## One '49er's Commencement Address

by Pete Simpson, June 11, '99

(As re-presented in the Class's *The ReNEWed Brook '09*)

Thank you, Dr. Siebert, trustees, distinguished faculty, honored guests, parents, and loved ones of the Class of '99, and the Class of '99, the last class to graduate from this School in this century. It's an honor to address you today!

"Jerusalem." I haven't heard that song -- the whole thing with both verses -- for 50 years. And it took me the whole year I was here to learn it. Just in time for Commencement. It has a great line -- "Chariots of Fire" -- and recently there's been a movie, a terrific flick called by that name, "Chariots of Fire." Have you seen it? Let me tell you a little bit about it. I mean, what would you rather do now, listen to nothing but advice? Or, talk about a movie?



So here's the first scene. It opens in a church in England, almost exactly like this one in Michigan. There are a bunch of old goats, kind of like me and my classmates sitting down there, the Class of '49. In the movie, it's a commencement ceremony just like this. While these old men watch the graduation proceedings, in the middle of it, they look at each other and the screen fades as they remember when they were younger. And there they are, young men running along a deserted beach, kind of like you and your classmates also sitting down here in front of me, the Class of '99. In that same spirit, let the camera fade now briefly from you and your classmates over to me and my classmates. Show yourselves, '49ers. Raise your hands... Look at 'em, not your hands... Look at the '49ers. Turn around. There you are in 50 years. Scary, isn't it? We're kind of like Obi-Wan Kenobi in the first Star Wars. But, he still had a light saber -- and so do we. Right, '49ers? (*flourish light saber*) There's life in the old boys yet! Say it! Right? I don't want these '99ers to think we're a bunch of "wooses."

Yet like the Star Wars epic, we meet the old Obé Wan first and we know beforehand what the young Obé Wan will turn into. So, what we saw in the first episode was Obé Wan's future. That's what these '49ers represent, gentlemen. They're not your past. They're your future.



Every classmate has, especially fellow-boarders, has a vivid memory for me. Let me introduce a few: "The Saint," a photogenic devil, now a judge; Rice, "The Prefect," a big heart is still one of the best of us; "Macomber," handsome, athletic, strong; admired then and now; Leister, "the Captain" whose gift was leading while being one of the rest of us; Murray, fun-loving possessor of the widest grin at school; Laverty, adroit on the wrestling mat; McGowan, piano man and actor; Schulvitz, an active New Yorker now, then the head of the Store Committee I was on; Biggers, also a keyboard man, but with church music; my old "roomie," the very good Dr. Matter; "Walt," the Big Game Hunter; Kelsey, "the Go-Getter"; Bob Beyers, "the Uncorruptible Reporter with Camera"; "Tommy Tomlinson, "The Boss on the Aircraft Carrier;" Tom Clark, "the Organizer;" Seeber, baseball captain for 2 years, a rare honor;

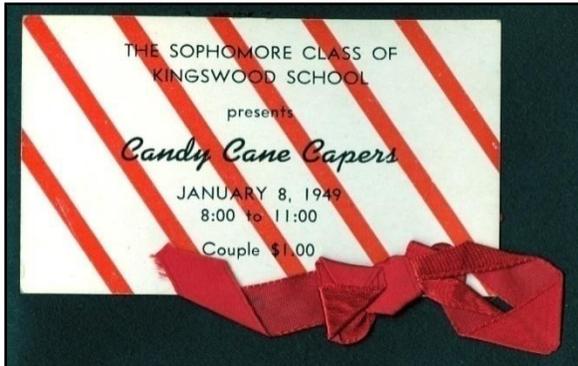
**1948 DAVID SEEBER**  
**1949 DAVID SEEBER**

Toby, then "The Runner," now the world's top oil analyst and in the '70s the coiner of the term 'energy crisis'; Val, even then the Teacher, skeptical when anyone pitches outright guff, but agreeable when someone demonstrates the life of the mind, qualities that facilitated his being named in 1971 as 1 of America's Outstanding Educators; Dave Osnos, "the Big Deal in Washington" -- we recognized he was smart then; we tried to steal his notes.

**The '49er As Obé Wan**

And on through the others and their real names and nicknames – they called me "Hosenose" and I'll never know why. (*turn full profile*)

Now, I know things have changed from '49, even though the grounds, this church, and



this ceremony are the same. Still, what I want to know is this: where was co-education when we so desperately needed it? Sure, the girls' school had dances, but otherwise Kingswood Lake wasn't a lake -- it was the great Wall of China and you'd cross the bridge on pain of death. I can remember Bob Hoffman standing on that same bridge, making sure the cross-county runners didn't break ranks and bolt for the girls at Kingswood.

Dave Koch, another one of us, tried it on his own more than once. I remember, in order to fortify himself, he had a bottle hidden at the old Greek Theater. Old Dave was a little ahead of us in the ways of the world. I remember he used to say, "Remember, you don't have to drink to have fun, but why take a chance?"



[Back briefly to the girls of Kingswood. After a dance in the Little Gym, we'd walk our Saturday-night dates over to Academy Road. There'd be a brief interval, and then Connie Teeter or another chaperone would blow a whistle, literally and figuratively. Obediently the girls would board their bus back to Kingswood, cutting short all romancing that may have been on our minds, bodies, very souls. Is that wretched cut-off routine still in play? -- *The Editors*]

And then there was Warren. He's not here today, so we can talk about him. I warned him I would. Back then, he would make us laugh just looking at him. He was very clever, and so he was always the center of attention. We never thought he'd get serious. But now he's a pediatric physician in Oklahoma City. Which one of you in the class of '99 is our beloved Warren Crosby?" Which one of you is "Scurvy" Bohon, the distinguished professor, with the level-headed perspective that historians seek? (*point*) You're sitting in his seat.



Ben, a big man on campus, now a big man in business. Which one then is going to be "The Bear," the businessman? That's his seat.

Which one of you is going to be like "Big Bill" Chisholm, one of the first academics of our class to have a book published, and thereafter an authority in his university domain.

In our year, we had 2 foreign students. I don't know what became of Vic, and Bill (Guillermo). But I do know that at least 1 American in our class became a citizen of another country. My friends in Canada tell me that up there he's supervised a record number of prize-winning dissertations. Which one here then is the quiet, brilliant, dual-national Dick?

And which one of you is me? And which one of us is you?

I had a wonderful experience at this School - coming from cowboy country and summer ranch work outside of the little town of Cody, Wyoming. But I'm still not sure I took enough advantage of this privilege. In the middle of my first semester here, my Dad asked the headmaster how many courses I was carrying and he said, "He's carrying 1 and he's dragging 5." I thought academics was medicine -- you had to hold your nose to swallow as fast as you could. So you did so you could get back out with the gang and play.

But as it turned out, I learned in spite of myself because, as I realized later, Cranbrook in our time, just like now in your time, had some remarkable teachers. Teachers like Bob Bates who not only taught us how to appreciate music, but how to make music. If he could teach me "Jerusalem" and "Chariots of Fire," he could teach anybody. He made us feel like adults and just took it for granted we could sing. Why not? Of course! He even gave me a little solo in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta we all sang in. I'd never sung a solo and I'll never forget the first rehearsal with the girls at Kingswood. I was so nervous. I sang the high part in falsetto – and the girls went crazy. Wow! I could see what Bob Bates meant when he said, "Music will enrich your life."

Now, there's Bob Hoffman, right there. He was a brand-new history teacher and I could tell in the first class, he was in a whole other



league from my old high-school basketball coach and part-time history teacher. That wry humor, those probing questions. He opened up new vistas. I asked Chaplain Robinson whether he's seen Bob recently. He replied that he'd had a cup of coffee with him and that Bob had told him his coffee was so strong it was doing "push-ups" in his cup. I said, "That sound like Bob." And Ben Snyder, there he is. I never had the good luck of having Ben as one of my teachers. My brother Al did and their friendship continues to this day. Classes were lively, provocative, and stimulating and Ben, too, is still here -- a beloved man. The Historian Laureate of this School and the founder of Upward Bound. These men have lived a life of special dedication and they believed in us as your young teachers believe in you. That makes all the difference!

If teaching is going to be a future for some of you, take a good look at these remarkable men. If you haven't talked to them about their work, ask them what made their life special and why they chose this profession. I'm glad they did, in my case, because as the

years went by, I came more and more to realize what a privilege it was to be here. Just as it is today. And, I can tell you it is a privilege the vast majority of your peers haven't had. Never take it for granted because the world out there won't let you take it for granted. Their expectations of you are higher than for others, because they think you're the best and brightest, and they're right. But today, who needs to think about that? I mean, it's Summer! Fifty years is nothing when it comes to that. I know what I was thinking: Girls, Summer, and how to cover up my pimples with a suntan. Because for all the things we may not have in common, School is still School. Romance is still Romance and Summer is still Summer. And Today. Man, today, for all the bittersweet leaving of friends and partners, today is a day full of love, full of joy – and full of parties! Remember, we alumni have been there but the difference is we're also here and, from our own experience, we can tell you that every decision you make from this day on, even what are you going to do this very Summer, will lead to what you eventually become.

There's no such thing as an unimportant decision. Just like there's no such thing as a "quick fix." Like I say, 50 years is nothing in the scheme of things. True! Life is getting longer for you and healthier. What we in the class of '49 want today, what all of us want, is for you to arrive here 50 years from now feeling good about your life and the decisions you've made. We're not talking about a perfect life. No generation can pass on a perfect world to the next. We're talking about a good life – a strong life, a courageous life, and a satisfying life with all its obstacles, frustrations, triumphs, failures, sadnesses, and pleasures that come in every life.

### **Welcome to Adulthood**

So now comes the advice. So, sit there and take it like men! Simpson's 8 Rules for a Good Life. I learned 'em and I earned 'em men. So listen.

- Keep a grateful heart and be wise enough to know what your privileges are and be thankful for them..

- Self-gratification never completely satisfies while self-sacrifice never fails to fulfill -- or as Indian spokesperson Corey Ten Boom put it, "If you get tired of your lot in life, put a service station on it."
- Peer pressure is always there; but you can choose the peers you want to be pressured by. So choose those with worthy goals, worthy ambitions and worthy values.
- Blaming someone else for your mistakes or failures gets you off the hook; but it also robs you of the power to avoid similar failures and mistakes in the future.
- Don't confuse making money, having an expensive home and a nice car, or being famous with success. Success comes from relationships with family and friends and making a difference in your community. The need to be a good citizen is a profound need. A life helping build your community in this day and age, that's a hero's life.
- Do the job you're handed, however menial or lowly, the very best you can -- and you may be astonished how far and how high you end up going in your career and in your life.
- Beware of hatred and envy. They corrode the container they come in.
- Keep a sense of humor. It is the key solvent for life's abrasiveness.

I hope you haven't been counting because I'm going to sneak in one more -- the advice I got right here at my commencement 50 years ago from one of my teachers, Boyce Rickets. He was sitting at the end of the platform as diplomas were handed out and he said, "Keep moving." Some of the best advice I ever got.

We believe in you '99ers. We have great hopes for you. Obé Wan could die in peace because he saw great hope in his protégé.

There's an inscription scrawled on the door of the Great Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Go see it someday if you get a chance. It says, "The World of Tomorrow will belong to those who bring it the greatest hope." You '99ers carry the light saber, bringing hope.

So go out and build a Jerusalem in your lifetime. Build it in your own special place with your own special life. Build the communities you live in, and in doing so, you can build a world where the Kosovos, the Columbines, Jonestowns and the scandals and corruptions will recede more and more from the scene. So that in 50 years, you can say you took on the charge in the song that asks you to:

*"Bring your bows of burning gold,  
Bring your arrows of desire,  
Bring your spears, O' clouds unfold!  
Bring your chariots of fire.  
And, do not cease from mental fight.  
Nor let your sword sleep in your hand  
'Til you have built Jerusalem  
In this green and pleasant land."*