

“Standing On The Sun”

By Mitch Anderson, Salutatorian

Belton High School Class of 2013

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Learning how to love and celebrate yourself is one of the most crucial and difficult aspects of life. To know who you truly are is the first step to enlightenment, to happiness. It sounds so facile, yet discovering and accepting who you are meant to be requires introspection and a willingness to submerge yourself into darkness. And that is what makes the task so daunting, so terrifying, if approached with complete authenticity. For the longest time, I was forced to live fractured, refusing to look at who I thought I was and then refusing to accept who I thought I might be. The journey into the soul is not for the faint of heart. Fear will naturally creep in, but those who use the fear to force themselves onward will succeed. After much dread and countless hours devoted to soul searching, for the first time, you will be able to love who you are.

But the task does not end there. If you know yourself, but incessantly crave an empty approval of others, you will be forever sorrowful. This is wherein the true challenge lies. As Madonna has said, “If your joy is derived from what society thinks of you, you’re always going to be disappointed.” You must be able to bare yourself to the world, and then let it be. You cannot be timid; you cannot be anxious. In a situation that seems so pyrrhic, you must evaluate what the costs and gains really are. You may think that hiding yourself is worth some superficial praise by society, or you can choose to learn that being who you are is vastly more important and rid yourself of those who cannot bring themselves to allow you to be you.

I myself am guilty of self-doubt, relying on others to give my life definition. But that time has passed, and I feel the moment has arrived for me to be publically true to my personal identity. So now, I can say, I'm gay. It is both a significant portion of who I am and an inconsequential aspect. It's as natural and effortless to me as breathing. I couldn't change myself even if I wanted, and believe me, I have.

I have been bullied a lot. I've been called unspeakable things and relegated to a place of lower class. I have been made to feel worthless, unneeded, a blight on the world. People have mocked me, said that I was virtually subhuman. So, for a while, I was in a very dark place. I had no concept of self-worth, and frequently pondered suicide. I became so dejected, that many times I thought of killing myself not just because I saw no point to life, but because I had been convinced that doing so would actually make the world better. And so, for many years, I continued the cyclical, destructive thought patterns. This happened both before and after I thought about my sexuality. And after I had realized I was gay, I hated myself. I wished and prayed endlessly that I could just go on with life normally, that I could be like everyone else. Being different felt like a curse, an unfair sentence to the life of an outcast.

There were moments when I believed I was next to nothing. But I learned that what others think of you is not nearly as meaningful as what you think of yourself. You cannot owe the quality of your existence to other people. You must evaluate your life and give it purpose. You must recognize that you are an expression of the divine, a being made perfect through celebration of your perceived imperfections.

Once you love yourself, you can be the best version of yourself. You will find success and happiness. You will find that being different is a wholly wonderful and joyous thing, because it will mark you for greatness. Wish not to be one of the million, but one in a million. Find your idiosyncrasies, find what will

make you unique, and run with it. You will make far fewer mistakes if you allow your inner and truer feelings to guide you.

And when you feel like you will be abandoned, alienated, and cast out, ignore the sources of such toxicity. I believe Zachary Quinto put it best by saying, “If people don’t want to work with me because of my sexual orientation, then I have no interest in working with them to begin with.” This statement can be applied to any situation you encounter where someone is put off by your expressing yourself. Surround yourself with those who will be supportive of you, and remind yourself that you are beautiful in your own way.

The people who tear you down, who spit vitriol and ire, pity them. They lash out because they have intrinsic flaws that they refuse to face. They have unresolved deficiencies within that cause them to inflict harm on others. They have no external peace because internally there is a want of harmony.

The world could use a little bit more love. Let us all not be so quick to judge. We ought to be a bit kinder to others. Be not afraid of what you do not know, because more often than not, it’s probably incredibly similar to what you know. And when you disagree with someone, hate is not a form of love. Think for a moment about what damage your words would do before speaking.

I invite everyone to be more reflective, more meditative. I ask everyone to give themselves a good hard look and define what they like about themselves. I ask all of you to learn what it means to love yourself, if you haven’t already.

Please, embrace self-empowerment. You gain confidence, an unswerving belief that you matter and the ability of your existence to make an indelible mark on the world. You gain compassion and empathy. You will love and be loved. Most importantly, you will finally start living the life that you were always meant to live.

I would be remiss, however, if I failed to incorporate a *Harry Potter* reference to the theme of my speech, so I will. Be a Luna Lovegood, not a Pansy Parkinson. Be a little bit strange and off-kilter, and not so desperate to be popular. Strive for legitimacy, and skirt what makes you vapid. Find fellowship with everyone, not those you have preordained.

I have a few final, closing thoughts, before I turn over the podium. First, I find Zachary Quinto's eyebrows very attractive. Second, I would like to be friends with Lady Gaga and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. And third, I would like everyone to remember that "Starships were meant to fly, Hands up and touch the sky, Can't stop 'cause we're so high, let's do this one more time."

At this time, please help me welcome to the stage our Class of 2013 Valedictorian,
Jacob DeKeratry