

As was mentioned, I am a Middlesex graduate, so I once sat where you are sitting now. And although it was 28 years ago, I still remember my graduation speaker that May morning, probably because she was a celebrity. What I do not remember is anything she told us that day. I think I spent the whole time ruminating on the party some classmates had planned soon after the graduation ceremony was over, and thinking that it would be nice if the ceremony were over pretty soon so I could get to that party. And I think many of my classmates felt the same way. In fact, I think one or two of them are still at that party today.

So, the lesson I learned is that prep school graduation speakers should keep it short, which I will. And that graduates shouldn't stay too long at the after party, which I'm sure you won't, because you are a different kind of Middlesex graduate than we were then.

I also don't expect you to remember my name in 28 years, or even necessarily 28 minutes. But I did some reflecting on what I might have benefitted from knowing when I left this Circle and began a different stage of my education and life. And I felt that some of the most useful lessons in my life were learned from my gradual and somewhat serendipitous process of becoming a journalist.

I never formally studied journalism. I just started doing it and learning as I went along -- including here, on the *Anvil*, and later in college and in a mostly lucky career at newspapers that began more than 20 years ago. Journalism has changed a great deal in that time and has not finished reinventing itself yet. But even so, there are three things I learned over time about journalism that are probably useful no matter what you end up doing. And they are three relatively timeless things that won't take long to tell you about.

The first relates to a parable that I first heard from the late writer, David Foster Wallace. It goes like this:

There are two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, "What the hell is water?"

Water for fish is a great metaphor for something vital to your life that you take for granted, like oxygen and fast Internet connections. It is also an example of a term you hear all the time in journalism: context. Context is the backdrop, or the history, or the common understanding that ties people together. It is what, in theory, makes the stories you tell – or whatever work you do -- relevant to other people.

Journalists are told not to take context for granted. The main reason is that you're trying to make what you write appealing to a broad number of people, so the more you assume in the course of writing it, the fewer people will take an interest in what you have to say. Think about the difference between a conversation you have with a close friend, who knows the same people, places, and gossip that you know, and one you have with a college admissions officer. The different basis of those conversations comes down to context.

The big issue in journalism -- and maybe also in life -- is that questioning and sometimes challenging the context of what's happening, especially people's assumptions about the way things work, is a key ingredient of breakthroughs and innovations. The stories that surprise and interest people the most tend to be those that upend their thinking about the way decisions get made, or the way people act.

The biggest foreign story this year at *The New York Times* is, in one sense, about context being radically upended. We've seen a complete transformation of the Middle East that very few people saw coming. Long-established governments in Tunisia and then Egypt were toppled by sustained and mostly peaceful protests that have spread around the region. Those protests were led mostly by young people who were widely assumed up until now to be docile. For decades the authoritarian leaders of many Arab countries -- and admittedly many of the journalists who wrote about them -- discounted the possibility of a sustained popular uprising. That was not thought to be in the genetic makeup, or in the water supply, of the Arab people.

But it turns out that some young people in Egypt and Tunisia were never told those rules, or at least didn't listen carefully in class. They did not take for granted that they had no hope of replacing their unelected leaders. And they found when they banded together they could have a profound impact on their societies.

I'm not necessarily urging you find a revolutionary cause of your own. Part of education and life is just figuring out how things work in the world and learning how to live in harmony with other people. But a significant part of succeeding in college and in the world at large, regardless of what you study or what you do, is being curious and being skeptical. That means not assuming that the way things are is the way they should be or will always be. It means you should reach your own conclusions about what is true.

And it means figuring out how to say something, or write something, or invent something, that's genuinely new.

The second thing that has helped me in journalism, and seems a great deal more important now than it did back when I got started, comes down to an aphorism that I'm kind of making up, but I think it works. It is that it's a good deal harder to really understand people than to decide whether or not you like them, and it's harder to understand issues than to decide which side you're on. Having opinions is easy. Developing biases is even easier. Figuring out why different people see the same problems differently is hard. This is the division is between perceiving things in black and white, and seeing shades of gray.

We all need moral clarity in our lives. But we live today in an age when moral clarity often turns into zealotry, and where facts are often subordinated to belief. You hear it more than ever on television, you read it on the Web, and you can't escape it in American politics. This country is full of evangelists who present the world as they think it should be in the name of a vision they feel we should all share. And it is harder today, even in what remains of the mainstream media, to ferret out facts from constructed fantasy.

I say this is more important for you to think about because the world is a very different place now than it was when I sat where you're sitting. The United States is a great place to live and get an education. But not long after many of you finish graduate school or start looking for a job, the U.S. may no longer be the largest economy in the world, which has the potential to shake up our perceptions of ourselves and other people. China, India, and Brazil are all catching up fast, and they have plenty of the entrepreneurial energy that drove this country to superpower status. Whether our politicians and our TV pundits like it or not – and they mostly do not -- the days when the United States can on its own decide what right or wrong and have a good part of the world follow along are numbered.

I spent more than half of my working years living in Asia, especially in China, and there is no inner conviction I had as an American that China did not end up challenging to some degree. People there have assumptions about the value personal freedom and about how to relate to authority that differ from the feelings of Americans on those issues. Chinese blur distinctions that we think of as defining, like the one between capitalism and socialism. They can be flexible and pragmatic on matters we consider sacred, like religion, and they can be fanatic about issues we think of as trivial. But you cannot live there for long and hold fast to the belief that our ways are always better.

If you are anything like I was at your age, you wake up every morning convinced that you have a pretty good handle on everything that matters, at least everything that matters to you. You know who your friends are. You know which teachers you can persuade to raise your grade on your essay. You know which sports you're good at and what you like to do when you have some free time. But your life is about to get more complicated. And you will have to choose whether to become more open minded about the world, or to close yourself off from things you don't – or don't want to – understand.

Trust me, you're going to stay a step ahead of the next guy if you're the one who is more open minded, if you're the better listener, and if you have the greater ability to see the world in shades of gray.

My third piece of advice from the world of journalism comes courtesy of the great Robert Capa, the father of photojournalism. He was always being asked to advise young, aspiring photographers how they could capture the pain and drama of combat the way he did in the Spanish Civil War and on Omaha Beach during the D-Day invasion. And he generally answered with two words: get closer.

The vast majority of photographs ever taken would have been more interesting if the photographer had done more to capture his or her subject up close. Try it when you take pictures and see if I'm right. I don't mean using a telephoto lens – an iPhone will do just fine. Capa wanted to interact with his subjects, and he used a standard 50 mm lens. He could not close the distance artificially.

Journalists, like most people, are busy and also a little lazy. They tend to want to figure things out without getting up from their chairs – by looking at documents, calling or e-mailing people, trolling around Facebook or getting feeds from Twitter. And those things are important tools of

communications and discovery. But the best stories, like the best photographs, tend to be human narratives that can only come from close personal observation and interaction. You can't do those remotely.

Your generation is far more technologically savvy than mine was. You will probably be able to attend all your college courses without ever setting foot in a lecture hall. You will be able to collaborate with other students in a study group without ever sitting at the same table with them. You'll be able to read rare books without every navigating the dank stacks of a university library. And you'll be able to break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend by posting a message on their wall. But because all these conveniences are available to you, you will have to try harder to form the more meaningful bonds that come from confiding in people, arguing with people, and dealing with the annoying eccentricities of people that you deal with face to face.

At the end of the day, getting an education and having a life mean taking some chances. Not virtual chances, like in a video game, but real chances, when you put yourself on the line for something even though you might fail. It means trying to forge real relationships with people who are different from you – older, younger, from another country or another economic class. It means learning another language, literally and metaphorically, so you can communicate with people outside your comfort zone. It means saying nice things to your rivals and telling your friends what's really on your mind. It means asking tough questions to people and being there to see how they react.

You're supposed to end these kinds of speeches with some kind of rousing exhortation. I don't think there's a better one than Capa's -- no matter what you do, get closer.