

Commencement Address 2009

by Karl “Doc” Revells, Head of SGS Upper School

Standing here before this podium, a sense of déjà vu overcomes me. I was honored to be the guest speaker at commencement five years ago when I first took over the Upper School and here I am again as I get ready to leave it. Let me warn you, I am not Barack Obama so do not get too excited.

Once again, I feel greatly honored to be your guest speaker but humbled by the prospect of trying to make this a meaningful speech. You see yesterday was my 57th birthday and I am aware that at I am at least 3 times older than the graduating seniors. This gives me pause to wonder if anything that I say today will be relevant or truly meaningful to them. Yet, I am reassured by my memories of being their age once, growing up in Hawaii and spending many days in the company of a neighbor of mine, a man called Richard Nakahashi, or Kane Kane as affectionately called him. He was an independent fisherman who took me at a young age fishing with him, taught me how to dive, and how to mend his torn fishing nets. Indeed, we spent many good hours together speaking about the past and other subjects as we sat in the sun repairing the large ‘pukas’ in his net caused by jagged coral rocks or feisty sharks.

Looking back, I know that I have spent many years being educated or in the field of education, yet I still maintain that I learned more from my conversations with Kane Kane than from any other source. Above all else, he taught me the valuable art of listening and the most important advice he passed on to me was: “Kali, always dig your foxhole before you eat.” As a member of Hawaii’s 442nd Infantry (Nisei) Regiment, which fought in North Africa, Italy and France during WWII, he was especially qualified to pass that bit of wisdom on to me. The 442nd is the most highly decorated unit in the entire history of the United States military – suffering casualties upwards of 70% killed or wounded in several major battles and this, just to prove that as Japanese Americans, many with parents or family members in internment camps, they were loyal to this country and fully equal to those who refused to trust or serve with them because they happened to look different.

“Always dig your foxhole before you eat.” By this I took Kane Kane to mean that I should look beyond the obvious to what really mattered – life itself.

The last two years have been a challenge for all of us but they have given me time to reflect on what I have observed since coming here, about the future, and on what are truly important issues in life. From a personal perspective, this year has been a particularly difficult one for me as I tried to deal with the death, illness, and misfortunes of people who we all care about while being engaged in a job search, learning just what it means to be potentially unemployed and the problems that this would entail, spending every night and weekend working on job applications and endless hours on the telephone and before the webcam in interviews. And, alas, I learned what it is like to be considered 'old' in the eyes of younger interviewers. These were painful episodes to endure especially at three thirty each morning when the sheer weight of my situation descended upon me like a blanket of fog. My world was changing and it was hard to come to grips with that fact. Yet, for all this, I feel that that have I have come away from these experiences a wiser and better person. Certainly, I have acquired a great deal of empathy for those caught in a similar position and I will never turn my back on anyone in need again.

As I informed the student body at the beginning of the school year, the world is changing at a very rapid pace and much of the issues which mattered to my generation will mean less to yours, that is, if they impact your life at all. Unfortunately, my generation is still trying to dictate how you should proceed into the future when, as we have seen in the recent economic downturn, not one of us seems to have a clue about how to solve it. If our track record in the contemporary period is so demonstrably poor, why, I ask you, should we have the gall to believe that we know how to fix or even predict the future for those younger than ourselves? The reality is that we, as an older generation (parents and teachers among us), need to be prepared to stand back earlier and let those younger than us, take over the controls and steer the ship in new directions.

In saying this, I am not implying that my generation has nothing to contribute to those younger than themselves. We can still console them in their moments of anguish, provide them moral guidance and the benefit of wisdom, and teach you how to appreciate the fundamentals of knowledge and the value of learning. But there are realistic limits to what we can do for we have not become accustomed to seeing change occur at this pace and in spite of all our verbiage on the subject matter, the evidence suggests that we are not really sure what to do with it. What we have tried to do instead is to shield our children from this uncertain reality, to make their lives the most

predictable and comfortable ones that any American generation has experienced. We have tried to look after their every need without reflecting on the disadvantages of doing so. In short, we have enabled our children to become enabled without giving a thought to the wisdom of doing so or considering whether or not this will truly help them to thrive in a future that we cannot truly understand. Moreover, we are still trying to get them to see issues and the world in the rigid ways (be it Liberal or Conservative) that we do, as if our views are the only ones that matter. We do not seem able to let go of our own past.

For the sake of brevity, I will limit myself to a few relevant examples of this tendency. In trying to rid our society of its prejudices, we have become prisoners of our own rhetoric and, sadly, often deaf to the voices of those who simply do not agree with us. In trying to save them from themselves, we insist that they have to conform to our way of thinking or be placed safely in isolation. Why must we, Conservative or Liberal, always be so self-righteous about our beliefs? Instead of accentuating our differences, why can't we emphasize what we have in common – our humanity -- and respect and treat each other accordingly?

I grew up in an age when each ethnic group in this country was anxious to establish its own identity – Black Americans, Chicanos, Asian Americans, native Hawaiians, etc. Accordingly, I felt that to be hip I had to treat everyone in a way that proved that I knew more about their culture than they did. And, in doing so, I was assuming that this was the way it had to be – the right way to do things. It didn't matter that this was totally contrary to what I had experienced growing up in Hawaii. Ethnically speaking, my friends and I could have created our own rainbow if had we even bothered to worry about it. But we didn't – we were all friends, dated each other's sisters and brothers, ate each other's food, married into their families and went to their weddings and funerals irrespective of ethnic considerations. In short, what mattered to us was how we treated one another as friends and family rather than our differences as individuals.

This point was driven further home to me a quarter of a century later when, living in Montgomery, Alabama and speaking to a dear friend, a woman named Ann Thompson, we got onto the subject of race and culture and ultimately how she expected to be treated as an African-American woman. I can remember how she looked at me in that kindly and thoughtful way of hers and said: "Oh, I guess I just want to be treated as Ann – You know,

nothing special.” The point was that the difference in our skin color was obvious; what mattered most to her was to be treated and respected as an equal human being. What insight coming from someone who grew up in the midst of a harshly segregated Southern society.

I can remember, too, the Thompson and Revells kids, growing up together blissfully ignorant that there was any difference between them. And, I can remember too, sitting with Ann and Myron in that private room at the Children’s hospital in Birmingham, crying together when their daughter Lily, aged eleven, died from the traumatic symptoms of Sickle Cell disease following an operation to remove her tonsils. I cried not because Lily died from a disease normally associated with African-Americans but because she was a little girl, who though often sick smiled a lot, who was very bright and had tremendous potential, and whom I loved like my own daughter.

I relate these stories to you seniors and underclassmen because my generation seems to be fixated with emphasizing the differences between all things and it is squandering valuable time, energy, and resources that could be put to better use. If you think of it, it is intuitive to man and I believe most animals, to perceive that we are all different in terms of color, size, looks, gender, sexual preference, etc. Rather than continuing to emphasize these differences, it would be more productive to emphasize our commonality as human beings. We all need food to nourish ourselves, we all have ambitions no matter how great or little, we all laugh and cut, we all bleed when we are cut and alas, we all crave love and pay a heavy consequence when we do not receive it.

The point is that the needs of humanity demands more than a perpetual focus of difference or in modern verbiage - diversity. Hear me clearly, it is not that the separate issues touching on these types of subjects do not matter from a moral standpoint but that we spend far too much energy on them while time and change marches on. Why in this school and in our community should we be arguing about sexual preference, gender issues, etc. etc , when out there millions of people are dying for a lack of clean water to drink or a cup full of beans to eat? Why should we as parents worry about little Johnny being treated unfairly because his teacher or peers chastised him when there are millions of Johnnies out there who have no schools, or books or even a pencil for that matter? Have we become so preoccupied with the differences between ourselves that we can ignore the needs of common humanity so easily?

If this current economic crisis has taught us anything beyond scaring us half to death, it is that the world via its economy is highly and inextricably integrated – there is no turning around that train. Similarly, we cannot ignore climatic change in another part of the world because it will ultimately impact us all wherever we live. Nor is there any logical reason to hold other people in contempt or in indifference because they happen to be different or think or act differently from us. The computer, the internet, and the cell phone have not only reduced the geographical distances between the world's peoples but they have greatly reduced the potential differences between them as well. The world and the differences between its peoples are rapidly shrinking. Those who were considered backward thirty years ago have the same technical capabilities as we do and are rapidly catching up. Whether we wish to realize it or not, technology is the great democratic equalizer – it allows for progress but it will not allow us in the long term to draw distinctions between people because of their differences. Trying to stem this movement towards assimilation will only lead to further confusion. As a student of history, I can assure you that the great conflicts of modern times were caused by individuals, peoples or nations viewing others as somehow different to themselves and therefore worthy of domination or exploitation. And what brilliant spectacles these conflicts became.

Seniors and underclassmen you should embrace these changes because, while it may not be immediately apparent, your destiny is tied up in them. In the future, the differences between peoples and nations will be less relevant than the common qualities and experiences they share. It's in your interest, therefore, to use your minds, talents, and knowledge to help solve some of the problems which continue to plague the world's peoples because, ultimately, if left unattended, these will rebound on everyone. Look beyond my generation's preoccupation with difference and unwillingness to see other peoples in any other light. Don't get in the habit of throwing stones at those who do not agree with you philosophically or politically. Rather concern yourself with the welfare of those who do not have the physical strength to pick up a stone. For in the future, their problems left unresolved will become your own. Treat all as one.

I know that to think and act in this way is not easy – it's foreign to how we traditionally look at ourselves and this nation and its mission. It is a hard road to follow – let's face it, there are easier ways to live or make a living. But I do know you are capable of taking on this task and finding the

solutions to problems that have evaded my own generation. I know this because I have spent the last five years observing your growth in the courtyard, on stage, and on the playing fields. And Seniors, know that I observed you very carefully during the Senior trip and compared what I saw there to what I observed during the first Freshman Outback. You all have come a long way. Take up the challenge to think independently and run with it. Though, realistically speaking, I know that I may never see the world that you will create, I am hopeful that it will ultimately be a better place for you, my kids and your children to live in. And, it will become so because it emphasizes the common interests and humanity of the entire world's peoples rather than their proverbial differences and self or national interest. **Seniors, take up the challenge. Be a leader and not a follower. Be a rock and not just a stone rolling in a stream.**

Before I surrender this podium for the last time, I would like to thank the Upper School parents for the support you have given me over the past eight years. I would especially like to thank you, the students -- my Upper School dragons -- for doing all that I asked of you and then some -- I am really proud of you all, even those of you who have yet to show your best side. You have had a hard two years but you have stood the test well. Seniors I especially salute you on this, your special day. Remember always: "To dig your foxhole before you eat." I would like to thank my staff for sticking together and enduring all the challenges we have been forced to take on and earnestly hope that you will continue to march on in the direction we discussed in our last meeting. I would especially like to thank the four women who have made life easier for me over the years: Cathy McMeekan, Elizabeth Tender, Debbie Duvoisin who has been my sounding board and works harder than anyone I know, and finally Alanna Crouch who has been my cheerleader and friend through thick and thin.

I do not really know what the future holds for me but I know now in reflection that, though there have been many tough times, I have lived a good life. And I sincerely hope that you may all live good lives too. I have honestly tried to do what I have considered best for us all in the Upper School. If, along the way, I have unintentionally hurt any of you or treated you unfairly, I ask that you will forgive me.

Mahalo. Aloha 'Oe.