

Good morning, everyone, and thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this induction ceremony for Hopwood Junior High School's National Junior Honor Society.

This invitation to speak here came, coincidentally, around the same time that my mother was clearing out my old room. Last week she gave me a bunch of old papers, photographs, and journals from junior high and high school that I had kept in storage at my parents' house. This whole week I have been slowly going through these things, and let me tell you, it has been a funny and humbling experience to relive the person I used to be more than 10 years ago.

It was helpful to go through these old personal items because it helped me to prepare for meeting all of you today. I remember a little more clearly now the personal challenges and questions I had when I was 12, 13, and 14 years old, and I can at least tell you a little bit of what I learned about myself and the world around me in the years that followed. And maybe you will find it useful, or maybe not. Take it all with a grain of salt. I might be a little bit older than you students, but at 25 years of age, I am still pretty young in the grand scheme of things, and I don't pretend to have all the answers. I can only make suggestions.

So, your advisor, Ms. Nepaial, gave me a nice little brochure that details the five qualities of National Junior Honor Society students— scholarship, service, leadership, citizenship, and character. If I had to choose three habits of thinking and acting that I think would exemplify these outstanding qualities, they would be:

- The habit of getting involved in the world around us;
- The habit of questioning;
- And the habit of being true to ourselves and our values.

Let's begin with the habit of getting involved. Getting involved begins with paying attention – what is happening at home, at your school, and in your community? How many of you read the papers? How many of you participate in school clubs and activities? How many of you volunteer for causes you care about – beach cleanups, for example, or tutoring younger students? You are now members of the National Junior Honor Society. What does this mean to you? One requirement of membership is that you

must perform a service-oriented project. What will you choose to do, and will it be something that you truly care about?

Whatever you get involved in, I urge you to do it for the right reasons. Do it because you sincerely care about it and would truly enjoy it. One of the things that I struggled with for a while when I was right around your age was the balance between doing something because I believed in it and wanted to do it, and doing something simply because it was expected of me – my parents and teachers wanted me to do it, or maybe all my friends were involved, or maybe it would have looked good on a college application. To some degree, I think we all will struggle with that no matter how old we are, but it's something that I think I first became conscious of right around my junior high years. It's perfectly fine to want to do the things that the people in your life also support, as long as you know in your heart that you sincerely want to do those things yourself.

Don't be afraid to try new things. One of my favorite teachers in high school, Ms. Patterson, used to say this to us all the time, "If you don't get out of your comfort zone, you will never grow." This is the time for you to begin to take initiative and go out into unfamiliar territory – to try activities you've never tried before, to take classes that truly challenge you and expand your mind, to get to know new people who can share with you their own unique cultures and experiences. Challenge yourself. And don't be afraid of failure, and don't be afraid to go out and do something totally on your own. So what if you might fail? So what if your friends might not follow? How will you ever know how good you can be at something, and what a difference it can make in your life and in the world around you, if you don't at least give it a shot?

And now I come to the second essential habit, questioning. You are all here because you have achieved a certain grade point average and meet the scholarship requirement for membership in the National Junior Honor Society. Congratulations. If you're not doing this already, start striving now to take scholarship to the next level. True learning is not simply about making the grade. Do you also ask critical questions, or do you simply accept everything you're told at face value and memorize what you have to memorize to pass the test? How do you *think*? How do you express your thoughts in writing and speech?

I remember that when I was in junior high, I was full of questions – of my parents, my teachers, my peers, everything I read in school or saw on TV, my religion, my government. Looking back, my biggest problem then was not that I had so many questions, but because I wasn't sure that it was ok to ask questions, especially if I was questioning authority. I often ended up exploring the issues privately, in my own mind, and in the journals I wrote, which was good and healthy for me personally, but it was such a struggle to come to terms with the fact that sometimes the things that I was told just didn't make sense to me, and sometimes things seemed very wrong, and sometimes I should have asked those questions outloud, rather than worried about offending other people. You know what would have helped me? If someone had told me then, "It's ok to ask questions." And not just ok, but necessary. You don't have to have all the answers, but ask good questions, do your own research and reflection, and come to the answers on your own. I would like to encourage you to get into the habit asking questions of the world around and within you.

And finally, the third habit, that of being true to yourself. Of course, this means that you must first know who you are. You can to a great extent choose the kind of person you want to be. You are not destined to be one thing or another. You always have choices, and with choice, comes responsibility – you are responsible for everything you do, for the way you treat other people, and for the values you uphold. But do you know what you stand for? Do you know what's important to you, and what you would be willing to fight for? Do you actually live by your values and treat people the way you yourself would want to be treated?

To a great degree, you get to know yourself much better through your relationships with other people and through your involvement in the world around you. But just as important is taking the time to look inward, and allowing yourself to be totally honest about the choices you have made and why. Doing this requires solitude.

So many people, especially young people, are afraid of being alone. They are afraid of loneliness, and that is understandable. Sometimes we don't want to think about our problems, our weaknesses, and our fears. It's hard to avoid doing so if you are sitting in a quiet place by yourself. But how else do you confront these things? How else do you become stronger and learn to move forward from the things that scare you or hold you back? How else

do you get to know yourself, and become comfortable with the person you are?

When I was about 12 or 13. I started to make time for solitude. I went for long walks, climbed up to the roof of my house at night, and hung out on the porch outside. This time alone gave me the opportunity to discover who I was, to sort through all the lonely, jumbled feelings of growing up, and to find the courage to be my own person. I needed solitude then, and still do.

If you cultivate the habits of getting involved in the world around you, of asking critical questions, and of knowing who you are and what you stand for, it becomes impossible to sit back and do nothing when you are faced with a crisis, when someone is being hurt or mistreated right in front of you, or when your community is in trouble. Your eyes open to the problems in front of you, and the reasons for them, and you begin to think and act in terms of solutions.

Pay attention. Get involved. Ask questions. Know what you stand for. And then you can begin to realize the changes that you want to see in yourself and in the world around you.

Thank you for having me here today, and congratulations to the National Junior Honor Society of Hopwood School once again. I wish you all the best of luck in the coming years.