

## FORREST BIRD CHARTER SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS 6/15/13

### Crutcher's Ten Commandments aka Suggestions

Good afternoon Mr. Millard, the Doctors Bird, families of graduates and especially to you, the first graduating class of Forrest Bird Charter School, for granting me the honor of addressing you. I'm fortunate to make scores of presentations every year, but commencement exercises are my favorite because I know no one is listening. So it doesn't matter so much that you have invited as your speaker an often banned author who has written thirteen more books than he read in high school.

In that spirit, I've decided to go completely over the top this afternoon and give you Crutcher's Ten Commandments.

One: Don't take unsolicited advice from me. Or anyone like me. I'm an old guy. I'll tell you my vast experience is the reason you should do what I say. I'll tell you I don't want you to make the mistakes I made; that I can smooth your way if only you'll listen. But I can't. I graduated from high school in 1964 - near the end of the rule of reptiles - and my memory of that time is clouded by wishful and convenient thinking, which is to say I remember being a lot smarter than I was. So celebrate your own screw-ups. Welcome embarrassment. For whatever reason, being wrong is accompanied by embarrassment. Embrace it. We are a trial and error species that refuses to embrace our errors. We call them mistakes. Worse, we call them sins. We refuse to celebrate that very thing that teaches us. Your elders, those of us surrounding and rooting for you today, cannot make those errors for you. We have our hands full making them for ourselves.

Two: Stay Alive. Be amazed at your existence. Life gets scary sometimes. It gets ugly; can make you consider an early exit, or take risks that promise to end badly. But you won the lottery times 50 just getting here. One misfired sperm or rotten egg going all the way back past salamanders and you don't even make this scene. As much as there is a difference in our ages, you and I and everyone here have an important thing in common. We're all as old as we've ever been. We have a history we know and a future we don't. My history is longer and hopefully my future shorter than yours, but we both have the capacity - even the duty - to influence the quality of our futures through our knowledge of our histories. So stretch it out. Make it last. Make it worth it.

Three: Do not root for the Washington Redskins. RG3 or no RG3. We live in a country where the mascot for the professional football team in the nation's capital is a racial slur. Though some of us pretend there is a national debate over whether or not the word is a slur, nearly every American Indian will tell you he or she has never been called that name as a term of endearment by any person of another race. I saw and heard that term in cowboy movies and among ignoramuses surrounding me in my youth and it's as clear today as it was then. The arguments to keep the mascot name are the same as those many Southern states used to continue to fly the Confederate flag. Unless we're willing to have a team called the Washington Niggers or the Washington Wetbacks, or the Washington

Faggots, this one has to go. There are few grey areas when it comes to bigotry and this isn't one of them.

Four: Do not hit your kids. And no fair calling it spanking and doing it anyway. They'll learn one thing: to hit. It doesn't really hurt you more than it hurts them. They won't learn not to do what you are hitting them for, they'll learn the person responsible to love and protect them, is willing and able to hurt them. Once you hit them for one thing then the possibility exists for anything. This is one of those undebatable things we love to debate. Under any civil circumstance when a very big person hits a very little person, the big person is a bully. Hopefully your circumstances with your children will be civil. When I worked as a child and family therapist the two most popular excuses for hitting little people were, "The world is tough. I'm raising my kid to be tough, so he can survive," and, "I only hit her when she does something really dangerous, like run out into the street." One, the world does not need you to make it tougher, it does a great job on its own. Help your child respond to that toughness in a way that empowers him. Two, if you don't have the language and emotive skills and the natural powers of connection to let your child know how scared you are for her when she does something dangerous, like run into the street, and how by God determined you are to keep her safe, go get those skills. You can find them on the Internet. The third most popular excuse for hitting little people I heard in my child abuse parents' group: "My old man kicked my butt, and I guess I turned out all right." "Uh, look around, you're in a child abuse group." When big people hit little people it says nothing about little people. It says everything about big people.

Five: Do not use the word "perfect." Don't even entertain the concept. Perfect is a word inserted into the English language only to make us feel bad. It is the only word I know defined by what cannot be. "Nobody's perfect." We hear it all the time. Well, if nobody's perfect, there's no point in talking about it. A perfectionist is someone who spends his life feeling bad because he can't live up to standards no one else lives up to either. A perfectionist spends an inordinate amount of time scolding herself for every mistake and scolding the rest of us for not trying to be perfect. The perfect response to a perfectionist is "nah-nana-na-na (ears plugged, very loud.) Oops! I used the word.

Six: Do not confuse respect with fear. When I was a lad there was a TV cowboy named Wyatt Earp, who had also been a real cowboy. On television, Wyatt was played by Hugh O'Brien who brandished a sidearm he called a "Buntline Special." It looked like a pistol, but the barrel was nearly rifle length. Wyatt Earp was a maestro with that weapon. If my memory serves, and there's no reason to believe it does, he had a special fast-draw holster that released the gun forward as he drew; otherwise he'd have torn his shoulder out of its socket trying to clear the holster. An oft-used Wyatt Earp line that caused great consternation within me was, "Respect comes out of the end of a Buntline Special." Uh excuse me, Wyatt. That's not respect. That's a bullet. Wyatt Earp and a whole bunch of flawed cowboys and business-folks and teachers and housewives and househusbands coming after him believe that if you scare someone – if you threaten them with something they believe you can and will do, they will show you respect. And they might. Show it I mean. They will show respect because they think you will hurt them. They

will not feel respect. They will show you respect...right up until they don't have to. Then they will show you contempt. Respect and fear. One's good, the other, not so much.

Seven: Never let beliefs handed down to you before you had the capacity to develop your own, stand in the way of seeking truth. As you develop your own, remember this: if it elevates one group of people over another, if it presents itself in blacks and whites rather than greys, if it disregards tolerance, if it rejects celebration of differences, if it doesn't include taking care of your oh-so-finite planet, it probably needs work.

Eight: Celebrate relativity. Nothing exists without its opposite. Things are what they are in relation to other things, and that is a hugely important piece of information for living in this universe. There is no joy without despair, no courage without cowardice, no loyalty without betrayal. Back in my days at the Spokane Community Mental Health Center, I worked with a teenage girl whose history was as rugged as anyone I know. Her name is Brenda and I have her permission – her blessing – to tell her story. She was a spectacular athlete and a spectacular drug abuser. Adopted at birth solely as a playmate for her older brother, she was marginalized and dismissed and ridiculed daily. Her responses to that treatment landed her in foster home after foster home, each of which she reduced, in very short order, to emotional rubble. For lack of facilities social services would send her back home to re-start the cycle. When she would fall into that dark suicidal hole, the one strategy I could always count on was physical challenge. Physical triumph brought her out of the depths like Thor's hammer. Through nearly unimaginable tenacity - and a smattering of rage - Brenda made it. She got herself soccer and softball and cross country scholarships into college, connected with a young man - also an athlete - with the patience to withstand the mood swings dictated by her history. She married and started a family, determined to halt the toxic generational flow of maltreatment. She brought the healing magic of physical exertion and athletic competition into her adulthood, playing soccer, running, riding BMX and mountain biking to wage war against the ghosts of abuse. Then, in her early thirties, she contracted a rare case of Progressive Multiple Sclerosis. Over the period of a weekend, she was functionally quadriplegic. I don't curse the universe much, but that day I silently told all the people who ever said the Creator never gives us more than we can handle, to go to hell. What I didn't know was that Brenda knew relativity, though she likely wouldn't have called it that. Like the athlete she was, she looked at her starting point, her current condition, relative to where she wanted to be, and turned the challenge into her personal Olympics. The richness of being alive requires that we recognize relativity. Do you appreciate joy more than you reject despair? Do you embrace courage more than you fear cowardice? Do you love loyalty more than you abhor betrayal?

Nine: Move. You may have heard the saying "Your body is your temple" in order to get you to take care of it. Well it may be your temple, but it's also your car. It's your bike. It's your skateboard. It's what gets you around. When our species came down out of the trees and the frontal lobe – the rational brain - was developing, we moved up to seventeen miles a day; staying ahead of what was trying to eat us and chasing down what we needed to eat. Our rational brain – our thinking brain - developed on the move. It only

makes sense to keep the whole package in top condition. Movement helps us focus. It clarifies purpose; helps us breathe. Movement lessens depression and anxiety. There is no mind/body dichotomy. The two are inseparable. Keep them both moving.

Ten: Allow no time for fear. Most of what you're afraid of will never hurt you. And you can't imagine some of the things that will. Either way, you won't be prepared, so time being afraid is time wasted.

Eleven: Rejoice in your time at Forrest Bird high school. I don't care if you're headed from here straight to Harvard Law without passing through undergrad courses, you studied at a high school named for an inventor, a creator. As much fun as we all know it is being tested on state capitols or Presidents of the United States in reverse order or long division, real education is impossible, and pretty useless, when it doesn't excite our creativity. Our creativity empowers us; it is who we are. Our stamp, our footprint.

Twelve: The American Dream was never meant to be accumulation of great riches or great power. Your forefathers did not care if you got rich. They did not proclaim for you, "Life, liberty and the pursuit of 'stuff'." All the clichés you hear about what money cannot buy – love, happiness, respect, dignity, grace – are clichés for a reason.

Thirteen. Be kind to old people. I added that for obvious selfish reasons.

You may have noticed that my ten commandments are thirteen, that not only did I read just one book in high school, but possibly cracked just one math text. Nay, I say unto you. I put three in for extra credit. You're allowed to use any combination to make your ten...with one exception. You're not allowed to hit your kids.

Thank you for your time and, hopefully, your inattention today. It is my pleasure to be included in your celebration.