Joseph—Jacob’s son, the dreamer of dreams, the one with the colorful coat, that one, Joseph—found himself wandering in field one day, alone. He had set off that morning on a mission from his father, one of life’s simpler tasks, it had seemed. “Go and seek your brothers who are shepherding the flocks near Shechem,” Jacob had said, and Joseph departed.

He was not lost. He had traveled skillfully along the road, and yet here he was, wandering in a field, alone. He was where he was meant to be, and yet alone and without direction as to where he would find his future.

And then a man appeared alongside him in the field. Not an angel, it would seem. Not by appearances in any rate. Just a man in the field. And he asked him, “What are you looking for?” Joseph replied, “I am looking for my brothers.” And the man in the field showed Joseph the way. [Genesis 37]

It seems a simple story on its surface. Nothing particularly astonishing transpires. As Bible stories go, this one seems hardly worthy of mention. Two people meet one day in a field and one helps the other on his way. Unless, of course, you know the rest of the story. Because were it not for this anonymous man in the field, Joseph would never have found his brothers at Dotham. They would not have quarreled and thrown him into a pit. He would have missed that particular caravan which just happens to pass by on its way to Egypt. Joseph would never have been sold to them as a slave. Joseph would never have gone down into Egypt. He would never have found his way from a slave in Potiphar’s house, to a prisoner in the Pharaoh dungeons, to a minister over all of Egypt. He would never have brought his family down into Egypt to escape the famine. The people of Israel might never have grown to be so numerous and then become enslaved by a new Pharaoh who knew not Joseph. There would have been no need for Moses to come with signs and wonders to bring us out of slavery. The Red Sea would never have parted, the mountain would not have roared and the Ten Commandments would never have been placed in our hands.

The entire history of the people of Israel would never have happened were it not that once Joseph, Jacob’s son, the dreamer of dreams, the one with the colorful coat, found himself wandering in a field, alone. And a man appeared beside him to point for him the way. The entire history of the Jewish people would have been irrevocably changed were it not for this one man, whose name we never know, who pointed the way for Joseph who was wandering in a field.

Who then is this “man” whom Joseph encounters upon his way? Who is this stranger in the field who sees Joseph wandering and inquires about his path? Who is this man in the field who happens to have seen his brothers and happens to have heard their plans? And who sends Joseph out upon the complex series of adventures which will occupy the rest of his life, and the rest of our story, and the largest collection of tales within the Genesis narratives? Who is this mysterious man in the field?

Clearly, the man in the field was more than a man. Clearly, he acts as a part of a grand plan, which God has established from the beginning for Israel to fulfill. But in another way, The Man in the Field is a purely human metaphor. He is just a man, standing in a field, who knowingly or unknowingly becomes a part of one of the greatest stories in human history.
For you see, this story of Joseph, Jacob’s son, the dreamer of dreams, it is not about Joseph at all. It is about you. It may have been written more than three thousand years ago, but it is about you. It is about the Centre College Class of 2012. You are Joseph; and we who set you forth upon this journey, we are Jacob; and Centre, this garden of learning, has been the field of your wandering, during which, it was our hope, you might find a man or a woman in this field who would help you to find your way along the path of your life’s journey. And while it is our fervent hope that your journey might be a bit less traumatic than Joseph’s would turn out to be, still it will likely be quite dramatic at times. You will face challenges along life’s journey and you will encounter others, perhaps many times, who will come to help you and to point the way. And perhaps in time, you will become such a guide for another traveler who might pass your way, as well.

I like to think that, in large and small ways, each of us can be such a Man in the Field. Because in large and small ways, we too can change the surface of our world. By helping someone to do something they could not have done alone. By inspiring someone to be all that they can be in life. By showing someone a simple human courtesy, which leads them down this particular path instead of that one.

Each of us, by our very existence changes the face of all history, by our simple acts of life and love. The world would be different were it not for any one of our lives. And it is up to each of us to decide whether the difference will be great or small, for richer or poorer, for blessing or curse.

We, all of us, are standing here today because somewhere along the way to this place and this time, we too have been greeted by a man or a woman in a field, who in grand or the simplest of ways, has pointed for us the way. Think about that for a moment. Who are the unknown angels of your life? And here is the more important question: for whom have we, in grand or simple ways, been such a man or woman in the field?

For the Centre College Class of 2012, finding at least one person who has made such a difference in your lives should not be that hard to do. Who did you hand that talent to last night, in front of Old Centre, while standing on the seal of the College, which had so conveniently reappeared just in time for Honor Walk? Who did you choose to honor, for the difference they have made in your life, during these years here at Centre, as you wandered in the field?

And now, how can you repay that debt with more than your thanks and a talent of silver? How might you make such a difference for someone else? And, as long as I am asking, Class of 2012, and since, in this particular telling of this ancient tale, you are Joseph, the dreamer of dreams, what exactly are your dreams, and how do you imagine they will come true?

For Joseph, his dreams were of power and glory. His brothers, like sheaves of wheat, would bow before him. The sun, the moon and all the stars would recognize him as their greatest light. But, as I mentioned, the story doesn’t actually work out so easily for Joseph. He dreams that these dreams of a great destiny will eventually become his, and yet these dreams take a long time and a long journey before they come true.

Joseph was a dreamer of dreams, but until setting off upon this journey his dreams were solely concerned with himself. Along the winding and sometimes difficult path of his life, he meets other dreamers and he helps them to interpret their dreams. Most famously, he is able to turn Pharaoh’s nightmare of famine and hunger into a plan for Egypt’s survival and greater strength. Joseph learns to
enter the dreams of others, to care about their lives and, eventually, to turn his talents toward goodness. Joseph’s dreams didn’t simply become a reality: he learns that though his destiny may be great, he will need to work hard in order to make his own destiny come true. He needs to build for himself the world his dreams. And, so too, Class of 2012—since you are our Joseph—so too must you make your dreams come true. For though you may not know it yet, in the carefully planned recesses of your mind, your destiny too is for greatness.

These years you have spent here at Centre, they were here for you as a time to wander in the field, to gain for yourselves that essential liberal arts experience which your parents, like Jacob have sent you forth to help find your way. To encounter the man or woman in the field who might lead you to find your dreams and to engage in the dreams of others. To travel to Holy Land together where this story of Joseph was first born. To journey to exotic lands like Bali or to experience the many cultures of China and Strasbourg and Spain.

The story of Joseph—your story—is the greatest coming of age story in all of history, because we keep telling this tale and living these words, generation after generation and still today. It is your story, or at least it can be, when you will journey onward from this place in pursuit of your dreams. What dreams will you follow? To work, to school, to build a family or to build a better world? How will you become a part of your own dreams and the dreams of others wherever your paths might lead? Because our dreams don't come true because we dream them. Our dreams become true because we live them, stage by stage, and make them real.

And if the prospect of creating your own destiny seems somewhat daunting for you at the ripe old age of 22, don’t worry, because you won’t have to do this alone, I assure you. Your family and friends who have come to celebrate this day with you will be there at your side. The friends you have made here will remain with you, and in your lives, for as long as you “friend them” on Facebook or meet them in battle in Diablo 3, and then Diablo 4 and then 5. And those rumors you have heard about the Centre Mafia? They are real. They are the men and women in the fields you may yet wander through, and today you have become one of them. And just as you may find a connection in a Centre alum who can steer you on the path of your life, so, too, will you be handed the opportunity to do the same for others along the way.

Think of it this way, as it was explained to me by one of my favorite rabbis and teachers, who was for me a Man in the Field along the path of life which has led me here to speak to you this day. His name is Lawrence Kushner, and he taught me this:

Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. For some there are more pieces. For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble. Some seem to be born with nearly a completed puzzle. And so it goes. Souls going this way and trying to assemble the myriad parts. But know this. No one has within themselves All the pieces to their puzzle. Like before the days when they used to seal jigsaw puzzles in cellophane. Insuring that all the pieces were there. Everyone carries with them at least one and probably many
pieces to someone else’s puzzle. Sometimes they know it. Sometimes they don’t. And when you present your piece which is worthless to you, To another, whether you know it or not, whether they know it or not, You are a messenger from the Most High.


That, in a poem, is life. the people we meet and the lives we share and the pieces of the puzzle we half knowingly exchange. The man in the field in the Joseph tale didn’t need to be an angel simply because he changed the entire history of the world—he could just as easily have been a man, standing in a field, with just the right piece of the puzzle in his hand. Or to look at it another way: we, all of us, carriers of the extra pieces of the lives of other people we may not know or have not yet met; we, all of us, may imagine ourselves to be human, simply mortal, children of other women and men, without the fluttering wings or golden trumpets which we imagine all angels to have; and yet we, all of us, may actually be angels just waiting for God’s call, to change the destiny of the world, through our grand or simple efforts in others lives.

“All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost.” The title of this address, if you had not yet noticed, is taken from a poem by JRR Tolkien which frames the plot of his legendary fantasy novel, “The Lord of the Rings.” It is an odd beginning for a Baccalaureate address, I admit, and I am not at all sure that Tolkien had Joseph or the Centre College Class of 2012 in mind when he created the character of Strider and set him on his journey of wandering toward his destiny to become the king. Nevertheless, as we turn now to the opening stanza of that poem, “All That Is Gold Does Not Glitter,” the parallels to Joseph and to your lives resounds here just as well.

The earlier phrasing of this proverb, “all that glisters is not gold” is a quotation from William Shakespeare’s “Merchant of Venice.” Tolkien reframes the classic proverb to make a broader point on the meaning of life and the purposes of our labors within it. When he says “all that is gold does not glitter,” Tolkien is trying to teach us that some of the purest and most valuable things in this world may not appear on their surface to be as valuable as they can be in our lives. And whether he intended a parallel with our biblical Joseph here as well, I cannot say, and yet it is here, in the story of Joseph and in our lives as well.

When Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams, he learns that it is his destiny to carry more than his own dreams to fruition. He learns that through his life, he can save other lives—by feeding the hungry, by fulfilling his destiny, he can redeem the world. Consider this as well, Class of 2012, as you set forth on the path of life that begins for you on this day. You are the inheritors of a broken world, a world desperately in need of repair, a world waiting still to be redeemed.

There is great poverty in this land of plenty, and here in our own commonwealth children go hungry everyday. Kentucky ranks fifth in the nation for overall poverty, fourth in the nation for the number of our children under five years old who haven’t enough food to eat. If you dream for yourself a life of prosperity, hope and meaning, then consider also what you can do to help others to reach their more humble dreams.

Part of what it means to be successful in your life is to live a life of value, to make a difference in the
world for the good of us all, and most particular for those in need. These years at Centre have taught you much about the challenges we face in our world today. In the course of your four years here together, you have helped to rebuild the lives of tornado victims, you have transformed a pair of shoes into a means and a metaphor for healing the world through One Day Without Shoes and Soles for Souls, you have built homes with Habitat for Humanity, you have volunteered as teachers and translators in many ways. Many of you have chosen to enter professions through which you can teach, or protect, or heal the lives of others through your work. All of you, whatever you may choose to do in your lives, hold that power to repair the brokenness of our world within your hands.

Just a few days ago, President Obama gave the commencement address at Barnard College, and yes, I can tell you are thinking, they got the President of the United States, and you got me! But he spoke for over 40 minutes and I am going to give you the best part of what he said in only one paragraph. He wasn’t talking about the “Lord of the Rings,” or the story of Joseph, but the challenge he gave them was exactly the same as the one I place before you here today. He said:

“So don’t accept somebody else’s construction of the way things ought to be. It’s up to you to right wrongs. It’s up to you to point out injustice. It’s up to you to hold the system accountable and sometimes upend it entirely. It’s up to you to stand up and to be heard, to write and to lobby, to march, to organize, to vote. Don’t be content to just sit back and watch.”

Make a difference with your life—whatever path your life may choose—make a difference with your life and you will find a future more golden than you can possibly know.

My son Lev, whom I promised not to mention in this speech—sorry Lev—wrote on his application essay to Centre four years ago about how his life, as the son of two rabbis, was forever interrupted by funerals and the lessons he had learned from that fact. And, honestly, it is an occupational hazard for all clergy that we spend a lot more time with those passing from this world to the next than most. But if there is one lesson I have learned from the many righteous and not so righteous souls I have accompanied on that journey, it is this: I have never met one person who faced that moment at the end of their life and said, “I wish I had bought that great car, I wish I had landed that great job, I wish I had owned any thing.” Looking back on their lives, most people wish they had loved someone better. They wish they had finished some great task. They wish they had been able to share glorious moments in the life of their family like this one, for just a little bit longer. Simply put, sometime in what will hopefully be a very distant future, you will look back upon the life you have lived and you will hope that you made a difference. And right now, today and every day after this one, is the time you have to make that difference: for yourself, for your family, for the people you love and for the community we all share.

“All that is gold does not glitter, not all those who wander are lost.” It is a long and glorious journey you set out upon this day, a journey to discover your own destiny, a journey to create that destiny through your own lives. Make a difference along the way, and whatever may come, your way will be blessed.

In ancient words, that echo the most modern and universal of hopes and dreams, let me say: “B’ruchim atem b’voachem, b’ruchim atem b’tzeitchem, mei-atah v’ad olam, Halleluyah.” Blessed are you who have come here this day, blessed are you as you go upon your way. From this time forth and forever more, may you bless God’s Eternal name.