I have three ideas to share with you on this very special evening. Let me get right to it, as I am keenly aware that you graduates are the stars of this show. You are the reason that these many folks came out tonight. I might be thought of as “window dressing,” and I am altogether comfortable and honored to be in that role. Let me begin.

Thanksgiving! This is a night for thanksgiving. This is a night for you graduates to take special care in expressing thanks to the men and women who have touched your life, made a difference for good in your experience here at Kentucky Country Day. This is a night to remind ourselves that, “We all warm ourselves on fires we did not kindle. We all drink from wells we did not dig.” This old Celtic saying, one of my favorites, rings true in this new century. To my way of thinking, there really are no “self-made” men or women. That designation, though possible I guess, just doesn’t square with experience. Each of us has been encouraged, supported, and lifted up by parents, family, friends, teachers, coaches and others who have gone before us to kindle fires and dig wells in order that we might have the opportunity to grow and learn – to be warmed and nourished, if you will – by the sacrifices of others.

In line with being thankful, I would suggest to you that being smart is insufficient! In the class I teach during CentreTerm at the College, I remind my students on day one that being smart, being blessed with a good mind, is a powerful asset, a distinct advantage, a true blessing. BUT it – being smart – is insufficient. The evidence for this truth is all around us and in every facet of the human experience – academics, athletics, music, theatre, research, production, and all the rest. Hard work, the capacity for sacrifice, the encouragement and support from others, that thing we all call common sense that, often, it seems, is not so common, are “additions” to having a good mind or even a superior mind that are essential – I repeat, essential – for leading a life of accomplishment, success, joy.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his 2008 book, Outliers, seeks to identify those circumstances in life that predict extraordinary success for some among us. And, while I commend the book to you, I would report that there are many of his conclusions with which I agree and there are some with which I disagree. This is a good thing, as all of us who write or even make speeches should welcome, even encourage our readers, our listeners, to do so with a critical eye or ear. There are two propositions Gladwell offers with which I am in complete agreement: one, and in line with my comments about smart being insufficient, he maintains that one needs to be “smart enough.” Then, he maintains, that extraordinarily successful people need to have emotional intelligence – the capacity to work with others, to negotiate, to communicate, to work as a member of a team, and to understand the importance and value of culture in an organization. Two, a common theme in his book is the “10,000-Hour Rule, where he claims that greatness requires
enormous commitments of time – he suggests 10,000 hours or about 10 years – on task, in study, at practice. I am not sure Gladwell is right about the number of hours, but I am in complete agreement that to become a person of high accomplishment is more about hard work and sacrifice and the important support from family and advocates than it is about “natural ability.”

Remember, you graduates, that in 50 years, as some of you are coming to the end of your chosen career or, more likely, careers, you will be the ones who have “kindled the fires” and “dug the wells” from which others will be warming themselves and drinking. In your time, it will be necessary for any number of you to achieve greatness in your chosen field. This is a great responsibility, and you have no choice but to accept it!

Dreams and Hope! I believe tomorrow’s citizen-leaders – like you graduates tonight – must be women and men who dream big dreams.

People who dream big dreams are the ones who make fire and dig wells. It is my deepest conviction that our nation must sustain and, in fact, grow in its capacity to encourage men and women who are prepared to dream big dreams. You will encounter cynicism; don’t let it steal away your commitment to being your best. You will encounter people who are willing to accept less than their best; don’t let them discourage you from doing your best – or from dreaming your best.

The progress of our towns and cities, our states and nations depends on women and men with the vision and the courage to make their dreams come true. Your school has long been about the business of equipping young people to make a difference for good, and your teachers and others here this evening are counting on you. My dreams include the belief that the most remarkable inventions of all will be patented in these next 100 years. That plans and ideas for the best buildings, cars, airplanes and medical cures are tucked neatly away in the recesses of young minds not yet out of high school. I believe that the most wonderful music is yet to be composed, and that the best doctors and lawyers and athletes and musicians and scientists and teachers and leaders of our local, state, and national governments are just now moving into adulthood. I believe there is a group of men and women who will find peace in the Middle East. I believe our war on terror, though not likely to be over soon, will end with a victory for those nations and those people who value freedom.

And what of hope? The root of my hope grows from two basic commitments: a matter of personal faith, and two, my own abiding view, my unabashed optimism that we – that you – are up to the task of making this world a better place.

Men and women who live with hope – often manifested in their commitment to faith – have moved this nation and the world forward in remarkable ways over the centuries. There is every reason to believe your generation and those that follow can and will continue this legacy of high achievement. Most of the bad news and conclusions about today’s young people – those under 20 – are exaggerated. It makes for good magazine and newspaper and TV journalism pieces, but it is grossly overstated. It is an idea that
sells America’s young people short, and suggests to me that many of us – those over 40 – have forgotten about our own adolescence and our young adult years.

This is not to suggest we do not have serious problems among our youth, but history would suggest that “youth bashing,” something that seems to be perpetually popular, bears a striking resemblance to what went on 25 years ago, and 25 years before that. I remain extraordinarily optimistic about you, tomorrow’s citizen-leaders, and I do not accept the forecast that our nation and other countries that value freedom are about to destruct. My experience at Centre suggests something completely different. The students I have come to know and had the privilege to teach give me countless reasons to be wildly optimistic about the future.

Bottom line: I count on you being people who will dream big dreams, live with hope. What I suggest in this portion of my remarks will not be easy – things that really matter never are easy.

Courage! My third idea is more important than the first two. Preparing for your future, our future will require you to make choices – good ones at that. People who make good and courageous choices are the ones who build fire and dig wells.

You should know that there is no personal quality I find more compelling than courage. People of courage live their lives with a sense of freedom because they are determined to do the right thing, no matter what the cost.

Personal courage for me is not the “run-into-the-burning-building-to-save-a-child” type of thing or the front-page news variety for doing something heroic. I am talking about the every day, it’s-a-part-of-my-life courage that manifests itself in the way you treat other people. It takes courage to include those who may not agree with you or treat you right. And you must be brave if you are going to make good decisions about how you will conduct your personal and professional life.

When I think of courage I think of people, not acts of bravery or valor. I am reminded of great men and women of worldwide fame like Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Helen Keller, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa, to call off only a few. I am also reminded of folks unknown to you and whose names will never grace the pages of our history books. These were the men and women who were my teachers, my coaches, my parents, my wife, Susie, and some of my friends who taught me firsthand what courageous living was all about. Each of you has encountered such people. Make some of these folks your models for everyday courage.

Describing courage often gets reduced to some simple sentences, and this is not a bad thing. One I like best is “Do the right thing.” This is quite basic advice. It sounds easy, but to consistently “do the right thing” is one of the greatest challenges we face, at every age. To be a person of courage is a goal each of us can achieve, and all of us should hope and pray that we would be remembered by friend and foe alike as a person of courage. One who had the courage to be honest, loyal, steadfast, devoted, kind, principled,
forgiving, and committed to doing the right thing whatever the cost.

I promise you that within the hour, some of us will be faced with the choice of doing the right thing or just “going with the flow.” The challenge to do the right thing will happen right outside these doors. It will be your choice, my choice, and we must summon the courage to do the right thing.

Some of you have been making good choices for some time. Some of you are just getting used to doing this. Some of you need to do a better job of it.

I really wish I could relieve you of this responsibility – doing the right thing. These times in which we live make it necessary for young people – even the very young in some cases – to start making good choices, courageous choices. I am one who believes that young people and people of all ages do understand the difference between right and wrong, and even the subtle differences between doing the minimum and doing your best. I know what’s right. So do you. Do I have the courage to make good choices? Do you? Do we? God, I hope so.

People who are thankful, people of dreams and hope, people of good courage are the ones who build fires and dig wells. It’s always been that way. Our future depends on it.

We all warm ourselves on fires we did not kindle.

We all drink from wells we did not dig.

Thank you, again, for letting me join you this evening. Thank you for your kind attention. Thank you in advance for the good things, the important things, the courageous things you will do in the years that lie ahead. Godspeed!