

College of Charleston
Graduation Commencement Speech
May 7, 2016

By Michael N. Couick

Thank you President McConnell, Chairman Padgett, Trustees, graduates and other friends.

When President McConnell asked me to speak to you, I asked a favor. Please let me talk to my people. I want to talk to those brave souls who put their chips down on a degree like history, philosophy, or anthropology. Those brave enough to follow their own dreams rather than to just lease out their lifetime. You are my people, and I stand before you with my degree in English Literature—with a fondness for the wit of Jonathan Swift and a passion for the poetry of Robert Browning—to say:

1. You can both make ends meet and make a difference
2. Knowledge is never wasted, and
3. Each of you has a purpose.

The Cistern Yard is beautiful. It has to be the most beautiful graduation venue in America. And why not! It is in America's most beautiful and historic city. Oh, to be 21 again for just today. I'd have a hard time choosing between listening to Runaway Gin or BYOG at The Pour House, or kiteboarding on a northeasterly breeze at Breach Inlet. Probably both — with a burger from Poe's sandwiched in between.

Take two trips with me this afternoon. Let's leave the "here and now" for at least a few minutes.

For our first trip, start by looking up at these majestic Live Oaks. Think of all they have witnessed. From acorn to gnarled giants. Close your eyes. (Really. Just for a minute.) Focus on your breathing. Relax. Breathe.

Now. Capture a mental snapshot of the answer to this question: "Where are you from?"

Yes, where are you from? What do you see? What do you feel? Some good, some maybe not so good.

Open your eyes.

Let me share my mental snapshot: I am nine years old. Laying on my back. In the middle of a pasture near Clover, South Carolina. Green grass, white-head cows grazing around me. I hear the call of a bobwhite. I smell wild onions and grass clipped by a mower. I watch the reds, the pinks, and the oranges of the celestial crayon box melt to form a sunset. All is good. All is well. I

belong. Everything belongs. I am in a cocoon of peace in a not-so-perfect world. This is where I'm from.

Where are you from? To me, it is the essential question to be answered in life. I believe it defines your success and your happiness. It defines all that you can be.

In fact, I believe: "If you don't know where you're from, you will end up being somebody else."

For me, when I know where I'm from, I also know—through my heart, not my head—that:

- 1.) Where I am from is not a place. It is my core. It is my original blessing from the architect of the universe.
- 2.) I know that I am unique, perfectly unique. My hard-wiring is indefectible, and
- 3.) I believe the same two things about each of you.

If I don't or if I forget, I become like the person lamented by Thomas Merton, who spends his or her whole life climbing the ladder of success only to reach the top and finds that their ladder is leaning against the wrong building!

Again, "If you don't know where you are from, you will end up being somebody else."

The world—this world in so much tumult—needs us to be the unique puzzle pieces that we were designed to be. Only then do we fit together.

Our divine DNA, our primeval architecture feels alignment with the best in:

- 1.) Music
- 2.) Art
- 3.) Literature
- 4.) But most of all, it feels alignment with others who are plugged in with where they are from.

Senator McConnell, it is that sweet spot where collaboration begins and consensus works.

It is the place where a group of S.C. farmers started 75 years ago when they brought electricity to that 98 percent of our rural population—people who did not have electricity. Places like Johns Island, Awendaw, and Kiawah. Yes, they flipped a coin in the 1950s, and the loser had to take them all. Nobody of political or economic importance lived there then. (A group of community leaders lost the coin flip on Hilton Head Island as well.) And they called themselves *electric cooperatives*.

That primeval architecture of my subconscious has allowed this boy from Clover, South Carolina, to:

1. Work with environmentalists to scuttle plans for what would have been our state's last coal fired plant, and
2. Share with the White House a way to bridge the divide between the cost of fighting climate change and the absolute necessity of fighting climate change.

Discovering your roots—getting back to where you are from—is not easy. It is day-to-day work. If you are like me, you can get lost. We can believe that what we see on TV is reality. We can believe that fear and the fear of *if-you-get-yours-I-won't-get-mine* is our natural state of being. We can vote as if fears are an appropriate jumping off point for not only ourselves but also for our political leaders. But, fear leads us, at least temporarily, into a state of mind focused on what is wrong rather than what is possible.

There is so much that is possible in South Carolina. Consider our 11 persistent poverty counties — think those counties along I-95 and a few more — where 20 percent or more of the population has lived below the poverty level since 1971. In these counties:

- 1.) Infant mortality rates hover at the bottom — more like Libya than Lexington, SC.
- 2.) Literacy rates are more like Morocco's than Mount Pleasant's, and
- 3.) Like China, the population trends older as younger folks leave home to find opportunity — a death spiral for our rural areas.

Unless we are tightly bound into our purpose, our puzzle piece, our architecture, our hard-wiring, our Divine DNA, we are tempted to see through the lens of the tyranny of the *either/or*. Yes, that great would-be dictator *either/or* — believing that for every winner, there must be a loser.

Now to that second trip I promised you. Let's go to your favorite coffee shop. You might prefer a Starbucks. I go for local places with names like Daily Grind, Drip, or Black Tap. I love to listen to people order. It sounds as if they are selecting options for a new car.

1. Macchiato
2. Venti
3. Skim
4. Extra-shot of caramel
5. Extra-hot
6. Extra-whip
7. Sugar-Free

Folks sound so serious.

My favorite order to hear is the God Shot — the supposedly unreachable utopia for a barista — the perfect divine espresso shot. A double ristretto. Essentially, one ounce of beverage packed with three ounces of caffeine — an exam crammer’s Special.

However, that’s not a real God Shot. A real God Shot reminds us where we are from. It always comes within the context of history and place. If we are listening, a God Shot reminds us of that next step home. A God Shot always reverberates.

Here are three real God shots for you, complete with context, words and reverb.

- 1.) Context — Addiction is pandemic. In the 18–24 age group, about 7,000 South Carolinians enter rehabilitation each year. Rehabilitation can become part of their journey home if they can rely on their peers for support. They can forge a new way of living. When successful, it is a life reborn. When it fails, it is captured in our daily paper’s obituaries — another life cut short by overdose or suicide. Recovery is tough — believed to be impossible when done alone. Peer support is crucial.

Think of a teenager leaving home for college. He is also leaving his local support group. What does he face? Until this year, South Carolina had NO recovery communities on college campuses. Your school is the first. This year the college embraced a College of Charleston recovery community. It was a quiet God Shot — perhaps heard only by those affected. But the message, the God Shot, was clear:

“We believe in you!”

Reverberation — Peers pass it on. I predict that parents, friends of the best and brightest among our youth who have battled and are winning the war against addiction, will view the College of Charleston as a viable next step on the way home.

- 2.) Context — 4,000 feet to my left (to the northeast) and beginning nearly 350 years ago, the feet of free Africans first touched solid ground on a continent where slavery was lawful and they were personal property to be auctioned to the highest bidder. Forty percent of all slaves imported into the United States came through Gadsden’s Wharf. Come half the distance back to where we sit now. About 1,900 feet away and just 325 days ago, gunshots rang out. Nine mothers, daughters, sisters, brothers, fathers and sons lay dead. Just two days later, mothers, daughters, sisters and granddaughters poured out a series of God Shots claiming that hate won’t win. They said, “I forgive you.”

Reverberation — The President of the United States came to your campus and spoke and sang of Amazing Grace. A flag was furled. A nation—a world—heard.

And, our Creator willing, at least one of you here today will do even greater work carrying the standard of grace and forgiveness.

- 3.) Context — The year 1999. This one is close to home for me, and tender to talk about. A little boy of 4 with a rare form of cancer. For two years, it never slows him down. He takes his contagious smile and dance moves to the hallways of St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis. Two years of the very best in medicine fail. His kidneys shut down. He lapses into a coma.

But comas don't stop a God Shot. My wife and I debate whether we have done enough. Is there another experimental treatment? Out of that coma, he comes. Eyes open, voice clear. He was ready to head back home, to where he was from.

Were those his last words? No. The next morning—the day before he died—he did the medically impossible one more time. He raised his head and told his parents and his sister, “I love you.”

Reverberation — I'm here today in the stead of a son who would be 21 and might have been graduating with you to share his “I love you.”

God Shots: I believe in you. I forgive you. I love you.

God Shots. If we don't know where we are from, we end up being somebody else

“God Shots remind us where we are from.”

Thank you.