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## Graduation Address

Dr. Byungdo Park

Director of the Office of Educational Innovation and the Chairperson of the Departments of Arts, Chungbuk National University.

As someone who merely holds the administrative post of Director of the Office of Educational Innovation – a mathematician whose true calling is the pursuit of pure mathematics – I feel enormously daunted to be delivering this address at the graduation ceremony for the Department of Fine Arts and the Department of Design, especially with both department chairs present. I cannot help but ask myself, “Who am I, and what am I doing here?” And yet, like you—the guest of honor of today’s ceremony—I, too:

- lived through my twenties, humid and heavy like the sea air of August, and remember reading Kim Seung-ok’s *Record of a Journey to Mujin* so many times I practically had it memorized;
- felt my heart race at that single passage in the final chapter of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where the Dean tells Steven “*Per aspera ad astra*”—through darkness, look to the stars—and yet spent my twenties not truly knowing what was darkness and what was light;
- knew well that I should live each day earnestly, yet spent vast stretches of time on social media, in dead-end conversations with friends, and – more time still –refusing to get out of bed, lounging the hours away.

As someone who has lived through all of that, I have put together a few thoughts I hope you, as you step out into the world, might consider at least once.

## First

Never forget that the time you possess right now, in your early-to-mid twenties, is precious beyond compare. It is meaningless to compare one hour of your life now with one hour of mine at my age—because my hour no longer holds the *possibility* that yours does. No one is born with the immovable heart of the Buddha, a fortress of unwavering composure from the start. Those people you encounter in life who seem so impervious that not a single drop of blood would come if you pricked them—chances are, they have weathered every storm imaginable. If you feel empty, let yourself feel empty. If

you feel lonely, let yourself feel lonely. I hope you will not run from the very emotions you experience in your twenties. Even if your heart becomes so unbearable that you drink cheap soju alone, throw it all up, and collapse asleep on the street—even that time when you let go of the rope out of sheer exhaustion, your life records it as an asset. When you turn forty, open the wallet of your heart and see for yourself—whether those moments have become diamonds, or whether they have not. And so I ask you to think: what is the very best thing you can do for yourself?

## Second

I wish I could offer warm words like the optimistic Dean in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. But I am closer to a person of gray—neither optimist nor pessimist—and such words are not mine to give. What I can say is this: after living day by day with that line in mind—*through darkness, look to the stars*—I have found that light and darkness are, in truth, inseparable. Mathematics is still enormously difficult for me. That difficulty still burdens me with pain and pressure. And yet, when I think about it from the other side—if that difficulty did not exist, there would be no reason to stake my life on pursuing it. Countless people keep their distance from mathematics simply because it is hard. But in turning away from the difficulty, might they also be giving up the starlight that is bound to it? So this is what I wish to say to you: do not look at only one face of something and, because it displeases you, let go of the light that is inseparable from it.

## Third

Imagine you are stranded in the middle of a jungle. You must find your way out to survive. What gives you the best chance? Most likely, it is to pick any direction at all, commit to it, and keep moving forward without changing course. Mathematically, this yields the highest expected value for survival. If you change direction randomly with every step, like a drunkard, the distance you move from your starting point grows only in proportion to the *square root* of time:

$$d_{\text{random}} \propto \sqrt{n}.$$

But if you hold your course and walk straight, the distance you cover is directly proportional to time—to the number of steps you take:

$$d_{\text{straight}} \propto n.$$

In other words, even after  $n = 10,000$  drunken steps (about 7 km of walking), you will have drifted only about  $\sqrt{10,000} = 100$  steps (roughly 70 m) from where you started. If you believe you are perfectly comfortable as you are and have nothing left to strive for, then I have nothing more to say. But if that is not the case, the reason you must press forward without looking back is that this is a *mathematical fact*. It has nothing to do with whether or not you possess some special talent.

I wish you success and good fortune in the life that awaits you after graduation.