

Members of the Needham High School class of 2014,

We have asked you do quite a lot in the years you have been in the Needham Public Schools. You have responded brilliantly and are here today with your families, who are justifiably proud of what you've accomplished. In a few short months many of you will go on to college, where you will have an even wider array of subjects of study to choose from, more activities to be involved in, new people to get to know and the challenge of living on your own. At some point – believe it or not – you'll all find your way into the world of work and career. And there, too, you will be asked to learn and do a lot.

But in getting there, you don't want to find yourself in the position of the professional workers who were the subject of yesterday's New York Times article entitled "Why You Hate Work – Excessive demands are leading to burnout everywhere". In it, successful professionals up to and including CEOs report frustration, a lack of engagement in their work, a failure to connect with the mission of the organization and a sense of burnout. For many, the 24/7 expectations of today's office are robbing them of the pleasure that originally brought them to the work.

I can't solve that problem, but I can offer a couple of suggestions that may help. One is a do and one is a don't.

First, the don't. Don't believe you can multi-task your way through. You can't. Because you can't really multi-task. Even computers don't truly multi-task – they do task switching, just like we do. When a computer is interrupted with a more urgent task, it carefully puts aside all the information for what it's currently doing, gathers all the information for the new task, then works on that task until it's interrupted again, when the process repeats itself over again and again and again.

Today, computer hardware is so fast and so accurate that we think it's possible to do multiple things at once and well. But it takes more than hardware. Software is pretty good at task switching, but not as good as hardware is. And the third component of the system is the worst of all. Relatively speaking, it's slow, it makes mistakes and its behavior is hard to change. It's what Silicon Valley calls the "wetware" – us, the humans. The weakest link in the chain.

Now, as a member of the Class of 2014, you may be thinking, that's ridiculous. I do it all the time. I listen to music, do my homework, tell my mother I'm doing my homework and check Facebook, all at the same time and it all gets done. The

answer to that is yes, you can do multiple things at the same time – the proverbial walking and chewing gum – you just can't pay attention to more than one thing at a time. Something gets shortchanged. So when you find yourself “multitasking” – as we all do – make sure that you know – and pay attention to – the one task which is truly important at that time.

Now, for what you can do. Stop and think for a moment about something that you like to do and that you do well. It could be anything, and it will be different for all of us. But whatever it is, we'll all probably find two things in common - we put a lot of time into that activity and when we do, we focus on it. Perhaps we've even experienced what endurance athletes describe as being “in the zone” – so focused that what we're doing just flows.

That's so much more rewarding than task switching – and so much more productive. It's not always possible, but it's what we should strive for.

The most valuable commodity we have – and the most precious gift we can give or receive – is not, as we often think of it, our time. (We've all experienced the myth of “quality time”.) It is, instead, our attention. When we focus our attention on something or someone, we are both rewarded and productive.

Consider one of the most demanding and difficult jobs in the world – that of President of the United States. One of the most successful at accomplishing things that were not thought possible, one who was probably the most well-liked, even beloved, of Presidents, and one who really enjoyed the job, was Theodore Roosevelt.

Two of the characteristics that made Roosevelt so successful were an incredible ability to focus on a task at hand and the ability to be present for others. In that, Teddy Roosevelt had what was described as “the gift” – the gift for making every person feel that he or she was ‘at that moment the exact [person] of all the world's population [that Roosevelt] loved and most desired to see’.

With Teddy Roosevelt's example in mind, let us now turn our full attention to what we most desire to see and what is bringing us together as a community on this beautiful afternoon – seeing each member of this Needham High School Class of 2014 walk across the stage and be recognized for what they have accomplished. Thank you.