

Life's an awesome, awesome beach

By MORTON MARCUS

I WANT TO THANK you, the senior class of Santa Cruz High School, for inviting me to speak at your graduation. I'm especially honored because this is the last such ceremony at your school in the 20th century, the end of the current millennium. However, for you, every one of you, today, June 10, 1999, is not an ending but a beginning, a launching forth on your own, in many ways leaving your parents waving good-bye to you from a receding shore.

Because of my constant sense of your future in the new millennium and my existence in the old one, this talk has been difficult for me to prepare. I was born in the 1930s and graduated from high school into a now-forgotten war in the early 1950s. My life has been spent grappling with the events and dilemmas of this century, the one your future is pulling away from. Let me put the problem as I saw it this way: For you, the future is a gleaming starship called Enterprise that is streaking where no man has gone before. For me, at your age, the future was a rolling ocean liner, and for my mother it was the leaking cattle boat she arrived here on as a little girl in 1912.

Do you understand my problem? I kept asking myself, "What can I, so much a representative of the ideas and traumas of this century, possibly tell you that you'd want to hear, or that would be relevant to your lives in the next century?"

After weeks of trying to solve this problem, I finally realized that all I could talk to you about today were the guidelines I've discovered for myself among this century's bric-a-brac, guidelines that have made my life meaningful and will hopefully touch some part of your imaginations.

One thing I knew early on that I was not going to talk to you about was money. I'm not going to talk about your achieving material success aboard the starship Private Enterprise. You've heard, and are hearing about, that subject from all sides, I'm sure. Not that I have anything against money or material success. In fact, I wish every one of you careers and jobs that will allow you and yours to live sumptuous, comfortable lives. I sincerely do. But you see, very little of what has made my life worthwhile has had to do with money in the end. Luckily, I earned a livable salary as a teacher, but it was being a teacher, not earning the money for being one, that was worthwhile for me. And what was worthwhile was — well, let me tell you a story.

I N JUNE 1975, almost a quarter of a century ago, I found myself in Greece — Athens to be exact, ready to embark the next day on a ship to the island of Crete, where I'd been dreaming of going for years, because Crete is the site of one of the most intriguing of lost worlds, the Minoans, who built vast stone palace-cities, with indoor plumbing and rainbow-colored murals on all the walls, at about the same time the Egyptians were erecting the grandest of their pyramids. You still don't hear much about the Minoans because their civilization wasn't unearthed until 1905, and the stipulation, made to the Cretan people for his work by Sir Arthur Evans, the man who spent his life digging the Minoans' greatest city out of a hillside, was that their art treasures must never leave the island. Suffice it to say, many archaeologists believe that Crete is the lost continent of Atlantis.

So that's what I was thinking about that warm evening in Athens as I strolled along a street near Syntagma Square, when suddenly I heard my name being called: "Mr. Marcus! Mr. Marcus! Awesome!"

And I turned to see two of my former students, boyfriend and girlfriend, who together had taken an English class from me that winter at Cabrillo. They were energetic, bright kids who had stumbled on me half a planet away from Santa Cruz, in a country not only where a different language was spoken but where all the street signs were written in a different alphabet. In other words, they were in a situation where anyone from home, even a teacher, is a welcome sight.

I greeted them with a big hello, took them to a



pastry shop on the square and quickly found out that they'd just arrived and would be taking the ferry to Crete three days after me. I was surprised and delighted. "So you're going to see the ruins," I said.

They stared at me blankly. "The Minoan ruins," I elaborated. Still staring at me, the boy slowly shook his head, as if he had just realized the person he was talking to had sunstroke. "Nooo," he said uncertainly, "we're going there for the beaches. We've heard that Crete has the best beaches in Greece."

"Beaches?" I said incredulously. "You've come halfway around the world from the beaches of Santa Cruz just to go to the beaches in Greece?" And I launched into a tale of gold and jewels and massive stone palaces lifted three stories high on bright red columns — the history of the Minoans and their world, that went on for hours over dinner at a cheap taverna I knew, and then with the three of us trudging (rather tipsily, as I remember) below the hill of the Acropolis lit that night not only by floodlights, but by a full moon rising over the temple ruins high above us.

The couple staggered away finally at about 2 in the morning, and the last I remember of them as they turned to go were their flashing eyes.

I never saw them again, but when I got back to Cabrillo that fall there was a postcard from Crete waiting in my mailbox. It was from them, with a picture of the island's most famous Minoan excavation on one side, and their names and one word on the other, "Awesome!"

I'VE LONG CONSIDERED that "Awesome!" one of the best teacher evaluations I ever received, and its meaning as I see it, is what I want to impart to you today.

That "Awesome!" let me know that the Crete my two ex-students found was different from the one they had originally sought. Even after our evening together, they could have gone to a Crete that was beaches and five-star hotels, but what the "Awesome!" said to me was that they had found an island and a people with traditions and a meaningful existence beyond what they had known; that they had connected their lives with the centuries — no, millenniums — of human endeavor called history that has brought us as a species to where we are now.

As I prepared this talk, all these thoughts tumbled through my mind, and I realized that the new millennium and this old century are connected, as everyone here — young, old, middle-aged, parents and children — are connected. If you will permit a poet his metaphors as silly as they may sound at first, we're all like body surfers riding the same cresting wave of time into the future. Because that's how we travel in the end — not in cattle boats, Titanics, or starships named Enterprise or that, but in our bodies, surfing our lives.

“ It's the year 2050. Your children are grown, you're retired, most of you are almost 70 years old, and you're looking back on your lives much as I'm looking back on my life now. 'Was my life successful?' you'll ask yourself. How will you answer that question? What are the guidelines you'll use to measure such a success? ”

And so I decided to say to you today what I said to my two students a quarter of a century ago: Learn and continue learning. Try to be as aware, sensitive, thinking and feeling as you can every moment. In fact, be quiveringly alive to every instant of your existence, for whether you're rich or poor, everything around you is as laden with wonders as the vanished world of Crete or the legends of lost Atlantis.

That's how I've tried to spend my days. Oh, yes, I've had to work. But as often as I could I've filled my hours with ideas, with a passion for life, with news of who we as a species are and have been, and with an awareness of who I am as an inhabitant of the planet. Those pursuits have made my life worth living. And that is the simple message I not only have to tell you today, but which I urge you to use as a guideline for your lives.

BUT I WANT to go further than that. I also want to urge you to take up some kind of creative activity to go along with that endless learning — music, dance, painting, drama, writing — so you can express your responses to this great march of time because creating is a scintillating way to discover for yourself what you are thinking and feeling about the world; and the creative act provides the greatest high you will ever know. Drugs be damned, as far as I'm concerned, not because they're illegal, but because they keep you from being aware, sharp, in control of your faculties and able to hone them to a pitch where every dust mote floating through a sun-drenched window vibrates like an instrument in a symphony orchestra.

So experience the world as fully as you can, but realize there are dangers in such a pursuit, dangers that I think we as a society and a nation have fallen into, whether we pursue an existence of material comfort or the kind of personal awareness I have been talking about. You see, we can become so alive to every nuance of our changing moods, can feed so much on our whims and desires, can become so self-absorbed, that the world we experience becomes nothing more than a giant supermarket in which we constantly cry, "I want, I want, I want," and we forget that we live on this planet not only with plants and animals, air and water, but with others — family, neighbors, fellow citizens and fellow human beings all over the world.

There is another dangerous area of self-absorption I want to touch on, one that I was a victim of for years, and that is the nursing of self-pity, harboring resentments — in many cases for good reason, against parents, siblings and friends. I'm not telling you to forgive the wrongs done you. I just found I was getting bogged down in my resentments for things others had done to me when I was 12 years old. I wasn't growing and one day I realized I was on my way to being a mental teenager all my life. From that day, being mature for me has meant getting beyond my childhood angers and resent-

ments. Yes, I'd try to make my parents and friends understand how they had made me unhappy, but if they couldn't or wouldn't comprehend what I was saying, I'd reason that the problem was theirs, not mine. I'd put it behind me and go on my way.

Over the years I found several ways to avoid the dangers of self-involvement. Let me share the most important one with you. It's simple, actually. I realized I wasn't alone. This came about because by sharpening my sensibilities, I couldn't feel fully alive, no matter how aware or personally in tune with myself I was, unless I was also entering the lives of others through compassion and imagination. I had to be involved in making the world as livable for my fellow human beings as it was for me. And it went beyond that. Part of going to Crete for me, and I hope what I passed on to my two students, was a passion for learning by being open to the experiences of other lives and other ways of doing things. In my case, creating or recreating in art, allowed me to approach the lives of others as closely as I could.

Continually learning, using your imagination and compassion, and making the world ever new and full of joy for yourself and others — those have been the guidelines of my life, and I hope you may find

them suitable or at least thought-provoking for your own lives in the next millennium.

That's all I have to say. But before I go, I'd like to do a little experiment — one that may seem a bit unorthodox for a commencement address. I'd like you to look at your lives from a different perspective. For this experiment, I don't want you to look toward the future; I want you to look toward the past. Ready? Close your eyes ... Take a deep breath. Go on ... Good. Now imagine you are old. June 10, 1999 has long been a faded memory. It's the year 2050. Your children are grown, you're retired, most of you are almost 70 years old, and you're looking back on your lives much as I'm looking back on my life now. "Was my life successful?" you'll ask yourself. How will you answer that question? What are the guidelines you'll use to measure such a success?

LET ME END my talk by telling you the conclusions I've come to on this question. First, I hope you'll be able to say, as I hope I can, that you'll leave this planet a little better than you found it; that you'll leave it with a minimum of regrets and guilt feelings because you've tried to keep the planet flourishing in a number of ways, not because you're environmentally or politically correct, but because you've realized this planet, its plants and animals, its winds and waves, is your home.

And I hope you'll be able to look back on your lives with the satisfaction of knowing that you haven't compromised your ideals of right and wrong, or that you've compromised them on the fewest occasions — and at none of those times did you intentionally hurt another human being, because you've realized that more than anything else you've learned in this life, it is vitally important to be able to live with yourself if you want to be free of guilt and regrets, and that possibility becomes harder to accomplish the more you compromise your ideals.

As for hurting other human beings, sacrificing their feelings or their lives for your ambitions or desires or material comforts, ridiculing them for their religion, race, or ethnicity or keeping them from living a life as good as yours — those are the hardest compromises to live with or forgive yourself for — not because you're a "do-gooder" or think you should help your fellow humans, but that you recognize every person on this planet is your relative and deserves the chances you've had for a good life. For only when you acknowledge that all the people on earth are your brothers and sisters, and that you've worked in your own small way for them to lead the same life you have, will you be able to say, "I have lived a successful life!"

■ Morton Marcus, a poet who taught for 30 years in the Cabrillo College English Department, is the current Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year.