

The Commencement Speech I'd Give

Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

In the quiet of this place,
May we hear the psalms of the ages,
Calling us to the sacred center of our lives,
Helping us to find a quietness of mind and heart,
The loving center from which all kindness flows.

And from this quiet place of peace and love,
May our prayers reach out to all in need of loving support...
Those who are ill, or hungry, or without a home.
Those harmed by violence, those living in fear, or loneliness.

May our prayers embrace all who suffer, that all may be healed.

So may it be.

Readings

from the *Bhagavad Gita* (selections from ch. 2 and 3, trans. by Stephen Mitchell)

The wise person lets go of all
results, whether good or bad,
and is focused on the action alone.

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Without concern for results,
Perform the necessary action;
Surrendering all attachments,
Accomplish life's highest good.

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Though the unwise cling to their actions,
Watching for results, the wise
Are free of attachments, and act
For the well-being of the whole world.

from *Soul of a Citizen* by Paul Rogat Loeb

The forces that impel any of us to act and take risks will always, at their core, remain a mystery, one that "the talkers talking their talk," to use a phrase of Walt Whitman's, will never be able to explain. We can only glimpse the reasons by means of what Whitman called "faint clues and indirections." Fighting for our deepest convictions requires relinquishing control and accepting messy uncertainties. It demands working as well as we can at efforts that feel morally right, and then having faith that our labors will bear fruit, perhaps in our time, or perhaps down the line, for somebody else. "If you expect to see the final results of your work," wrote the journalist I.F. Stone, "you simply have not asked a big enough question."

Sermon

My college graduation was 37 years ago. Our commencement speaker was a much-beloved soon-to-retire professor. He was the choice of our graduating class, and he was quite a character, known among other things for splashing cold water on students who were sleeping (or *trying* to...) during his 9 a.m. classes.

But I found his commencement address disappointing. I remember nothing about it, other than that I was bored and kind of sad for him that he didn't seem to rise more effectively to the occasion. At least for me there was no message that stuck.

I do remember the day in very general terms – a perfect spring day which allowed for an outdoor graduation on the quad in front of stately Roberts Hall.

Then I remember the letdown of driving home, my four years accumulation of books and stuff somehow packed into the car, just as my head had been packed with ideas and knowledge.

Then I remember the months afterwards, years actually, of not knowing what I would do with my life. They weren't *bad* years, just not clearly directed.

I don't know if a different commencement speech would have changed any of that. Some things you just have to learn for yourself. Even so, all these years later there are a few things I sort of wish I'd heard then that I've only learned (or at least begun to learn) since.

The short version of my commencement speech would be something like this:

You want to be happy?

Of course you do, everyone wants to be happy.

So... three things:

First, as much as you can, do what you love, do what makes you feel most alive, in your work whatever it is, and in the rest of your life (because your work is *not* the whole of your life).

(And parenthetically but quite importantly: Don't worry too much if you don't know right away what that "thing that you love" is. Just try one direction, then another if you need to, then another if you still need to. That's what this time in your life is for – and maybe beyond "this time" too.)

Second, help others. Whatever you do, loving it or not, help others, serve life in all its forms and manifestations, *moving in the direction of what most touches your heart*: because, since we can't each do everything anyway, we each might as well help out in the direction of what touches us the most. Further, most of the ways we help and make a difference may well

seem relatively small: But as Mother Teresa once said, what matters is that we do small things with great love.

Third, don't expect to see all the results or even be able to control the results of your efforts in life. Relax about results – do what you can as best you can, help others, then let go.

So that's the short version.

Most of which is far easier said than done, particularly for young people facing a job market in which unemployment in the age group 18-29 is hovering over 30%.

Even so, to begin with, my commencement speech would still affirm: at least *seek* to do what you love. How do you know what you love to do? It is not always as easy as we might think it should be.

Joseph Campbell had some thoughts on the matter. A famed scholar of mythology, Campbell taught for many years at Sarah Lawrence College. When advising a student who came to him wondering and worrying about her future, he would talk with her about her life and her interests until a moment came when she lit up, when she was talking about an interest or activity that brought a light to her eyes and a lightness to her being. That, Campbell said, meant she was talking about what she loved in the world and in her life – was talking about her bliss. And Campbell advised his students (and all of us) to “Follow your bliss.”

This might sound selfish, but it isn't. For our deepest bliss, our deepest happiness, doing what we love, may involve challenge and sacrifice and at the same time connects us to everyone else, connects us to the world in ways of more use to the world than if we were doing something we hate.

An organic farmer named Jim Miller says it this way:

You know why we're so successful?
Because we love what we do.

And “what you do” doesn't have to be a fancy career or any sort of career at all. Part of our bliss, maybe most of it, might simply be a matter of how we are with each other each day, the aliveness and love we bring to each encounter and to everything we do.

You want to be happy? Do what you love and help others, serve life... and then let go of how it will all turn out. Because all you can control is how you throw the stone that is your life. You have no control over the ripples once the stone hits the water.

We heard this message in both readings this morning – but it is not easy to take to heart or to live. The *Bhagavad Gita*, to begin with, admonishes us quite directly to act without attachment to the fruits or results of our actions. Yes, have goals, try to “make a difference,” but then let it go, because like it or not we do indeed have no control over the ripples of our actions into the lives of others, into the world, into the future.

Even in our personal lives we often won't know how we've affected others – but we *do* affect others.

Fortunately, now and then we will hear how we've made a difference, and the “now and then” can give us faith that our lives matter in other ways as well.

A small example: years after college I heard from a classmate who told me that something I had said on the team bus on the way to a cross country meet had stayed with him – some sort of advice or lesson or perspective that made some difference in his life. I had no

memory of that day or of what I'd said, and now once again I can't remember what he told me I'd said.

But without even intending to, I had made at least a small difference in another person's life. This time I heard about it – mostly we never do.

Yet our words, our actions, *all* ripple into the lives of others. So? Live and speak and act with care. And then, like a pebble thrown into a pond, let it go.

In the larger world it is even more the case that we most often won't know how we've affected the course of events. But we *do* affect the course of events.

For though each one of us is only one among six or seven billion, no one among those billions is more than one. We each affect the whole, whether we know what sort of difference we've made or not.

Again, sometimes we do come to know, and that can give us faith that everything we do matters, makes a difference.

Among the many stories Paul Rogat Loeb shares in *Soul of a Citizen* is the story of a therapist, a woman named Ginny Nicarchy, who was in the 1970s writing one of the first books of support and advice for battered women. She was running out of funds for the project, and running out of energy too, when an acquaintance to whom she had mentioned the project gave her \$500. It wasn't much, but it was enough to pay some bills and refresh her energy. Well, the book found a publisher and became a kind of bible for women affected by domestic violence.

In short, that simple act of spontaneous generosity rippled into countless lives.

Yes, moved by whatever of the world's challenges touches our hearts most deeply, we actually can make a difference on behalf of the health and well-being not just of one nation or another, one party or another, but on behalf of all life, whether close at hand or far away, the effects of our love, of our actions rippling into the world, rippling throughout the web of life.

But as we heard in the second reading: "If you expect to see the final results of your work," wrote the journalist I.F. Stone, "you simply have not asked a big enough question." So, instead, be at peace with work done with all your heart, and then let go.

Graduates today are beginning their adult lives in a troubled world. We undeniably live in challenging, even perilous times – I don't have to make the list for you. But hasn't it always been so in one measure or another? I graduated from high school and college during the Vietnam War, the Cold War still churning, the threat of global nuclear conflagration an ever-present shadow over our lives. Are things better or worse now? More or less perilous? Who knows? How are we to judge?

But... more or less challenging, the reality is that we have no choice but to live in the times that are given us.

And as it has always been, if you are eighteen or twenty-one years old you have the enduring concerns that come with your time in life – what shall I do with my life, does *my* life have meaning, does *life* have meaning? Questions that, truth be told, for most of us resonate on and off throughout our lives.

But you know... whatever else you might believe, if nothing else, life has the meaning we choose to give it – as we seek to do what we love, as we respond to that which touches our hearts, as we live every day as kindly and compassionately as we can, letting the ripples of our lives take care of themselves.

Well... thinking back again to the commencement speech by that professor at my college, lo these many years ago:

Yes, it is true that I remember nothing – *absolutely nothing* – of what he said on that splendid day. But, I *do* remember those stories of how he would wake up sleeping students with a splash of cold water.

Waking up. Maybe that was the message... of the man, if not of his commencement speech. Wake up! Thoreau asserted in *Walden* that one of his objectives in life was to be *awake*, to be fully alive. What came of that? Well, when Thoreau died he could not have known the extraordinary influence his writing and the example of his life would have – on Gandhi, on Martin Luther King, Jr., on countless peace activists and environmentalists, on millions of people around the globe. How did Thoreau manage such profound influence? He had simply paid attention to what was in front of him each day, followed his “bliss,” did what woke him up, what he loved, spoke up on behalf of what touched his heart. And then, yes, though he didn’t see the results, he did end up serving the world, serving life, influencing and inspiring us to this day.

You want to be happy? Well, you need enough to eat and a roof over your head, but beyond that it is not about money! So then, in my commencement speech I’d say it again, one more time in yet one more way: It’s about waking up to what you most love and to what most moves you – which means waking up to life and serving life even though you will never know all the myriad ways that *you* and your life will influence others, will make a difference.

(And not incidentally, though I’m not sure where this would fit in, I sense it connects to everything I’ve been saying: I would tell graduates these days to spend as much time as possible away from computer screens, television screens too – breathe the air of fields and woods, and city streets too; be with actual people and have actual conversations.)

Well, that would be my speech, some of what I would have liked to hear almost forty years ago. And I’m sticking to it...

Benediction

Amidst the mystery and wonder of life,
May we live with peace in our hearts,
And act with love and compassion through our hands.

So may it be.