Kevin Baron’s Graduation Speech

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Kevin Baron. I don’t know why I’m standing here, speaking to you all tonight. I do know that Ms. Bakketun pulled me out of class a few weeks ago to tell me that the Kamiak staff had chosen me, and the student body had chosen Ted Kramer, to both speak at graduation. I know that I said “Ok, I can do that,” and turned in a speech on Monday like I was supposed to. And I know that I got up on my feet and walked to the podium just now. I get all that. But what I still don’t really understand is *why*. Why does the staff want me, or anyone, to speak and add another couple of minutes to a ceremony which they know will already take hours to complete?

Is it some kind of reward? For the kid who is naturally shy and whose right leg shakes uncontrollably at every choir concert if he dares look at the audience, speaking in front of five hundred peers and their friends and families can seem a little more like a punishment than a reward. That can’t be the reason. No one person is worth wasting the time of so many other people.

I don’t *know*, but I *think* that the reason the staff wanted me to do this was that they trust me to share a meaningful message with everybody here tonight upon which to think and reflect, and if it matters to enough other people, then some eighteen-year-old’s few minutes with a microphone suddenly and magically becomes worthwhile.

I’d like to thank the staff for such trust. And while I’m on the subject of thanking our staff, I find myself in an appropriate position to lead us all in a little staff appreciation.

As we all know, teenagers can be crazy and difficult to deal with at times, and many parents stop having kids because they realize that the more of us they have, the more of a pain we’ll be down the road. But our teachers and other faculty members intentionally go to a place every day where they are extremely outnumbered by us crazy, difficult teenagers, and not only do they survive each day, but they somehow craft and shape who we are and what we know about the world along the way. They do a really tough job day in and day out for four years and I think one of the real reasons for graduation ceremonies is to remind the staff formally why they did all that hard work: Oh yeah, so that one day they might eventually get rid of us. Well they did it; we’re out of here, and I believe that the feet kicking us out the door deserve a big hand!

During graduation time, we often find ourselves looking simultaneously into the past and the future. Sometimes this scares us because we see things in the past which are missing in the future: best friends, a place to call home, clean laundry, and good food. At other times, it scares us to see things approaching in the future, which we’ve never seen in the past like having to make adult decisions and take adult responsibility for those decisions.

And in making all these comparisons between past and future, it becomes easy to get lost and forget about the most important time, the present. The present is most important because it is the critical point of contact, the moment where the other two fuse into one. They say that he who looks only at the past wanders backwards aimlessly into the future and yet she who gazes only into the future will one day turn around to find she hasn’t much of a past to look at.

The idea is to have balance. We always look back and forth, spinning to see a snippet of the past and spinning again to glimpse some tiny fragment of the future. We spin around and around, and it is this churning, swirling, confusing, dizzying, sometimes sickening motion which we call the present. This gyrating vortex of the present is amazing because it somehow carries enough momentum to propel us forward through time.

And the best part about it is that every single person is his or her own distinct vortex with unique pasts and futures. The fun part is when vortices collide and combine, dancing and twisting and then separate, spinning off in different directions toward other vortices. You can call these short little interactions many things: learning, transfiguration, growth, or whatever else you’d like. For the last four years, through all sorts of different combinations and interactions, we’ve been altering each others’ paths and defining rotational patterns, sometimes in small ways and sometimes in very big ways.

What I’m very pleased to see here in front of me tonight is the chance for us all to spin together one last time in spectacular unison before the final separation. And I honestly can’t think of any other people with whom I would rather spin this glorious present time. I hope I’ve just shared a message that was worth your while. Thank you all and enjoy the ceremony!