

What My Graduation Speech Would Have Been

Greetings, Concord High School, and thank you Mr. Connolly for the introduction. It is with great amazement that I come to speak before you today at our graduation. As I've been thinking about graduation, I began to wonder what graduation is really all about. Well, I've decided. Graduations are a celebration of human intellect. Now, some of you may be thinking, "Gallager, what are you talking about? I'm not that smart." Actually, you are that smart. You were smart enough to graduate. The graduation requirements mostly make you complete classes that require you to use different intellectual abilities, whether it's memory, critical thinking, or self-expression. By graduating, you are showing that your intellect is indeed developed. But the mere act of graduating is not the only way in which we celebrate intellect here today. Look at the speakers: The salutatorian and valedictorian are always traditionally important speakers at graduation. Most of us here are going to college next year, which is a place for people to develop their intellect. In the medieval conflict between the man of letters and the man of arms, the man of letters has clearly come out on top.

So, now that we've established that graduations are a celebration of intellect, the question arises, "Why?" What's the big deal about intellect that causes our culture to set aside a specific day like this to put it on a pedestal? What use does it have that makes it special? For many people, the whole point of learning and developing our minds here in high school is so we can go to college, so we can get a good job, so we can make a lot of money, so we can satisfy our material needs and desires, which is somehow supposed to make our lives meaningful. Now this may be a good enough reason for many, but to me it seems a little superficial. Really, there has to be some reason beyond the cynical why we celebrate what our school has been teaching us. Well, it turns out that Western Culture has a long history of celebrating intellect. Plato, the guy who invented reason as a separate part of the human mind, thought it was important because it was an escape into the eternal realm of ideas. And I guess for him it kinda worked, I mean his ideas have survived this long, but will they survive for the rest of eternity? I don't know. Still, by thinking and recording his ideas, he was able to reach beyond himself into the future. By transmitting his ideas to the future, he gained some power in shaping it. This is an example of what Francis Bacon meant when he said, "Knowledge is Power," and if you believe Nietzsche, power is the goal of all human actions. However, knowledge doesn't just have to be power over the future. It can also give mankind the power to shape his current, physical environment. The same human intellect that organized these graduation chairs, planned, built, and maintained this stadium, designed our caps and gowns, and overall made our immediate environment the graduation it is, is the same human intellect that has shaped the environment of the larger world around us, by giving us modern medicine, the internet, the moon landing, the atom bomb, and the Nazi concentration camps.

Now wait a moment. Not all of the things I just listed sounded all that good. They can't be products of the same human intellect we're having this graduation to celebrate, can they? Well, sadly, they are. Human intellect, while powerful, has its limitations. Such a powerful tool can be used for many purposes, but it can't decide what these purposes are for us. Reason can't tell us what we want, it can only tell us how to get there. People with all sorts of goals have realized that reason often works, which often leads to people managing to use it to reach disagreeable goals. I pray that all of your goals are agreeable, and that if they are, that you may reach them. If you're not sure, well, I hope you find out.

However, besides being limited in that it cannot decide what it is used for, human intellect is limited in other ways, too. It has long ago realized that it cannot solve everything. The example I always think of for this is the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, which states that we cannot know both the location and velocity of certain subatomic particles. Since then, we've discovered other things we can't know. We have realized that it's no longer going to be possible to know everything. Now some people might say that the point was never for any one person to know everything, but for humanity as a whole to know everything. But what if I'm selfish? What if I want to know everything myself?

This is where the final limitation comes in, not just on human intellect, but on everything

human: mortality. Imagine you set out on a goal to learn everything in existence: you would still die before you get anywhere near achieving your goal. And, as you die, everything you know goes with you, unless you managed to write it down or tell it to someone else. And what happens to the knowledge you leave behind after you die is uncertain. It could be forgotten quickly, or survive far into the future. Either way, your intellect is still limited in the fact that it will someday end in death.

Now, many of you may be thinking, "Gallager, what are you doing bringing all this depressing shit into my graduation? GTFO the stage!" Well, maybe you're right. Maybe I am being too morbid for the situation. Maybe a graduation is a place for unbridled optimism. And yet, somehow I don't think I could come up here and honestly give you a completely positive speech. Somehow, I feel it is my duty in life to be a memento mori: A reminder that you, personally, will die. And I suspect that I feel that I must do this because I hope that you will find a way of accepting your mortality that also works for me, and that if you do, you tell me, because I still haven't found it for myself yet.

So, now that I'm done defending my choice to include mortality in my list of limitations on human intellect, we are brought back to the question of why, with all these limitations, we still celebrate human intellect. Well, first of all, human intellect isn't the only human quality with limitations. If we refuse to celebrate something because it is limited, then we are left with very little to celebrate, and that would be no fun. Limitations can create wondrous things. Isn't it more amazing to create a structure out of three sheets of paper that can save a falling egg from breaking than it is to create the same structure out of anything you want? Human intellect is not worth celebrating because it can do anything, but because of what it can do within its limited framework.

Still, though, there are other qualities besides human intellect that we could be celebrating. While our minds may have helped us pass our classes so we can graduate, other things will help us succeed later in our lives. I remember some of you saying you wish you were as smart as I am. Well, that may be true, but I wish I had thought to tell you how I wish I were like each of you. While you may wish you had my brains, I wish I had your social graces, or your musical or artistic talents, or your good looks, or your athletic abilities, or your personality, or... did I already say social skills? While these many qualities may not have helped you graduate as much as your brains did, they will help you have a good life. Let's start living these lives today. Thank you.