

Authenticity*

Good evening. I'm very pleased to be with you on this night dedicated to celebrating our honors college graduates. We are celebrating you because we are impressed by who you are and what you have managed to achieve during your time with us. And no, I don't mean that in the ironic tone we parents sometimes adopt when we say to our children: "I'm *impressed* that you actually made it to the finish line, given what else I know about your life." Absent their close up, day to day contact with you, we in the Honors College had nothing but high expectations when we welcomed you into the HUHC community. And today we are happy in the knowledge that we were right about you. You did make it to the finish line – we always knew you would.

I encourage you to savor this moment. It is the culmination of much time, effort, and lest we forget – financial resources. That's why we start celebrating your graduation with this dinner the night before it happens. I hope you and your family revel in the pleasure that comes with graduation. It's an extraordinary day for you and for all those who helped make it possible.

Still, though we celebrate, I suspect some of you are experiencing that mild discomfort that comes whenever we find ourselves in a liminal state. Liminal refers to being on a threshold. Right now you are leaving behind your undergraduate identity, and yet, as of today, you are not quite out in the world. Interestingly, being betwixt and between *sometimes* stimulates us to look backwards at who we've been and forward at who we might become. This explains why so many graduation speeches tend to mix memories and promises.

Now looking back is *always* nice; unless you are talking to your psychiatrist. It's nice because for the most part we pick and choose what we remember. We all tend to rosy things up a bit in our memories. Given enough time, you'll remember your way into being as good a student as your parents claim themselves to have been.

The future, by contrast, confronts us with two extremes. Sometimes we imagine a future as rosy as our remembered past. But the future can also be frightening. I expect some of you are wondering: Am I good enough to get on in the world? I earned a Hofstra degree, an Honors degree to boot, but what they don't know is that I never really did understand half of what they were talking about. What if my first boss or graduate school mentor figures it out? I might lose my job or drop out of graduate school? I'll be humiliated in front of all my friends and family – the same people who are congratulating me today!

There's no way around this. Every finish line is a starting line. There's no ending that is not a beginning.

Well, this talk has taken a dark turn. By now, more than a few of you are asking yourselves, "If life consists of an endless cycle of endings that are beginnings, how do we know whether we're making any progress?" The short answer, of course, is we don't. Those of you who studied the modern period in C&E know that we never get a "god's eye point of view on things" and so we are never in a position to measure life's achievements against some fixed and unchanging standard. There will always be accomplishments in your future. But behind each one comes a new challenge. It's exhausting just thinking about it. Poor Sisyphus springs to mind, endlessly pushing that stone up the hill, only to see it roll back down again.

Well then, what's a graduation speaker to do? I've already told you how proud and pleased we are over your accomplishments. I could follow with the strategy devised by Senator Chuck Schumer and tell you a story that culminates in the phrase "go for it." But, you'll hear that from the senator tomorrow.

Throughout the past week, as it became clear that you would in fact be leaving us, I began to fret a bit about this speech. After all, to many of you I'm a newcomer. I became dean only last July. In that context my main worry was that without our having shared much over these past four years, my words might appear inauthentic.

This led me to think a bit about authenticity itself. Authenticity is not something you achieve once and for all. It's not a goal like graduation, your first job, marriage, or that first million. It's a quality we aspire to continually. When it is present we live in and through it and the world feels as if it has more meaning and order. When it's not there, when things are inauthentic, we feel disjointed, disconnected, and unable to get past a veil that seems to separate human beings from one another.

Two weeks ago I traveled to Texas where a dear friend was being celebrated as he stepped down after over 30 years as dean of the University of Houston's Honors College. The events surrounding his retirement drew together hundreds of honors college graduates, many just like you – as well as many who in age at least were just like your parents. These were students for whom the honors college had been a launching pad. Some had enjoyed unimaginable successes. All had experienced heartaches and disappointments. That's how life is.

The thing about the ceremonies that caught my attention, however, was the way the planners stayed away from over blown praise and kept their focus on the here and

now. Students performed music, poetry and a bit of comedy. A few speeches were made, but mostly the time was spent cultivating an awareness of a reality that this community had shared across a 30+ year period.

Walking away I remember thinking *that* was an authentic event. The feelings were real and shared. It wasn't a slick production, and yet it wasn't slipshod either. Care and warmth were evident throughout. No one was faking it. Everyone had good reasons to be there.

On the plane home I got to thinking that authenticity is not a quality inherent in a thing, event or even a person. Authenticity is conferred. You can hear that when the word is turned into a verb and we say that we authenticate something. By coming together in the way that they had, the members of that honors college community authenticated the life's work of one man and the role that institution – the honors college itself – had played in all of their lives.

So now, having frightened you a bit earlier with the daunting prospect that life might be nothing but an unending series of Sisyphean goals (job, marriage, kids, retirement . . .), I'd like to end by suggesting that what enlivens our goals, what keeps them from being just one damn thing after the other is the extent to which they are authenticated by others. Of course, you are the one who earned the grades and passed the courses and whose name is on the diploma. But by standing with you tonight and tomorrow your parents, family and friends help to confer on your achievement a kind of authenticity that is as real and palpable as the diploma itself. What we're doing tonight, and what you will be celebrating tomorrow is about more than just that piece of paper. I hope that to you the diploma represents the friendships you've formed, the faculty who

nurtured your intellect, the family who supported you and helped you to carry the burdens that had to be carried to get the job done. All of them are part of what makes your college experience authentic. Strip them away and you really do have just a piece of paper.

And, as you move forward from this accomplishment and look ahead to what comes next, I am hopeful that each of your achievements will be authenticated in the same way. That you will see them as emerging from within the context of a community that knows and cares about you, and for whom you have deep feelings as well. This, I believe, is what keeps our lives from being reduced to just one goal after another.

And finally, I hope that you will always see yourself as a part of this HUHC community. Who you are now, what you become in the future, and the way you stay connected to us, all help authenticate what we do.

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*This, my first honors college graduation talk, is dedicated to my good friend Ted Estess on the occasion of his retirement as dean of the University of Houston's Honors College. Like musical "variations" on themes by a previous master composer, this dedication and the talk itself are meant to display the extent to which much of what I know about running an honors college comes from the time I spent as a member of Dean Estess' faculty in the then Honors Program at the University of Houston.