

Why Graduation Speeches Usually Fall Flat and Why We Continue to Give them Anyway

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I was driving to Hofstra yesterday morning, thinking about the fact that I'd be giving this talk tonight. Graduation speeches are always a bit terrifying. "What could I possibly say that hasn't been said before?" Still, I'd be lying if I didn't also acknowledge that I find giving graduation speeches exciting. Viewed the right way they are a final chance to offer heartfelt congratulations to happy students who have accomplished so much, who have such amazing potential and who already mean more than they realize to me, the Honors College and Hofstra as a whole. To be a graduation speaker is to deal in dreams and hope, and it is a blessing for whomever is asked.

And yet, let's be honest, graduation speeches do tend to fall flat. At the very least they aren't usually memorable. Graduation speakers know this. After all, we've already graduated! I can recall the ceremony, the day, the joy, and the happiness reflected in my own parents' eyes as I greeted them when it was all over. The one thing I can't do is "remember the graduation speech."

So, why is that? Why do graduation speeches so often fall flat? Why are we typically waiting for the speeches to be over so we can get to the action? And, while I'm asking such questions, Why do we keep giving them? Why not skip right to the ceremonial dessert – hand out the medals and diplomas and get on to the post-graduation party? Sometimes I get the feeling that graduation speeches are the

functional equivalent of vegetables that you have to eat first before you can have dessert, even on graduation day.

It seems to me that graduation speeches are most likely to fall flat when they project vague generalizations onto very particular lives. After all, as you sit listening to me tell you how much potential you have, or how the torch is being passed to the next generation, it's fair for you to ask me, or other speakers: How can you know anything about my potential and my future without a detailed understanding of who I am and where I am from. You might say to a graduation speaker: Where were you when I was wrestling with final papers, or struggling to understand organic chemistry, or trying to make sense of complicated accounting strategies? How do you know anything about *my* potential without a sense for my deepest fears, my family's struggles, the boyfriend or girlfriend I lost in sophomore year, the grandparent who passed away when I was a junior or any of the other agonizing disappointments that inevitably accompanied all of the joy and pleasure and exhilaration I experienced during my 4 years at this institution. These are legitimate questions to ask graduation speakers who presume to tell you something about your future without really knowing all that much about who you are.

You see who we are and who we are likely to become is rooted in such concrete realities, the specifics of lives lived. In light of this, what's a graduation speaker to do? I want to say the right thing. I want to be uplifting. I'd like to send you away with a memorable tag line that comes to mind whenever you reflect upon your graduation day. But, the moment I start addressing you as members of a group

I'm led to language which doesn't honor what *you've* done, or recognize who *you* really are.

The other day I was listening to the radio, again while driving in my car, and I heard a report on an army unit shipping out to Afghanistan. A key element in the story involved listening in while the unit's commanding officer gave the "send off speech." I couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the responsibility this leader bore as he sent these men and women into harm's way. He said, and I'm paraphrasing here: "Before I send you overseas I need to look each of you in the eyes and see that you are ready for what your country is asking you to do."

Now that was some graduation speech! He acknowledged their achievements and praised them as a group. But the heart of his speech, the thing that made it powerful, was the phrase: "I need to look each of you in the eyes." When I heard it I thought to myself here was someone who found a way to cut through the platitudes and focus on the one thing that matters – In that momentary look he was able to reflect back to his soldiers what he saw in their eyes, that they are ready for what is coming next.

Happily, you are not in an army unit. And we are not sending you into battle. For the most part, the biggest danger you'll face in the next 48 hours involves trying not to trip on your graduation gown while reaching for President Rabinowitz' hand. Still, I'd like to steal some magic from that general's send off. I want to look each of you in the eyes as I hand you your medal. And in doing so I intend to confirm what I know I will see there. That you are indeed ready for what the world is about to

throw at you. That you have all of the training and confidence you need to take the next steps in a life that will be long and rich with adventures.

In this moment between the general and his soldiers or the dean and his students, I think you can see why we keep giving graduation speeches even though they sometimes do fall flat. Ultimately, the best speeches aim to reflect back and thereby confirm what the graduates already know. While it may seem hard to talk about such things generally, it becomes easy once you recognize that ultimately the power and the energy of the speech comes not from any wisdom brought to the table by the speaker, but rather from the quiet confidence of students who know they've worked hard, who love one another, their alma mater, their family and the world they are rushing forward to embrace.

And so, on this the occasion of your graduation, I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to play mirror to your dreams. Over the next few days I encourage you to look deeply into the eyes of your friends, your teachers, and especially your family. I predict you'll experience the continued confirmation of what you know to be true. You are ready for this, all that's left is to do it.

Over time we in HUHC and at Hofstra will look forward to watching as your lives unfold. As that happens, always keep in mind that you will forever be a Hofstra graduate with an Honors College designation. Though we played a role in launching you out into the world, you remain close to our hearts. So, do stay in touch, and give us the pleasure of seeing our accomplishments reflected in your own.

Warren G. Frisina, Dean

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