

## Why Graduation Speakers Should Not Offer Advice

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May 21, 2011

Let me start by giving everyone in the room a little advice. If you are ever lucky enough to speak to a group of graduating seniors, don't give any advice. Why? Well, for the most part hardly anyone will recall the details of what you said. And, let's be honest, any advice that can be passed on to 100, 200, up to 1500 people simultaneously is probably something they already know they should be doing anyway.

So, if graduation speeches are not about advice then what are my options? Well, at the very least I should spend some time congratulating the students for what they've accomplished, and I'll get to that in a few minutes, I promise. But first let me say a word just to the parents and caretakers in the room. During the past 4 years I'm going to guess many of you had doubts this day would arrive. The tuition payments, the roommate crises, the time when your son or daughter said to you in desperate tones that broke your heart – "I don't think I'll ever finish the work I have this semester;" these things raise doubts. Admit it, you were worried. And yet, here we are. They've done it! They are actually graduating with a Hofstra degree *and* an Honors College designation! They've learned more, earned more honors, and in a few notable cases, gotten into more trouble than you could have imagined. And all of it is good.

Graduation really is a great moment. I know, I had two daughters graduate from college and can tell you few things rival attending your child's college

graduation. It gives parents a quiet sense of accomplishment. Granted, the graduating students did all the actual schoolwork. Nevertheless, you got them here. With so many roadblocks, so many dangers, so many wrong turns that could have been taken, you managed to deliver them to our doorstep, and happy day (!), we managed to make good our promise. We are delivering them back to you smarter, wiser, more experienced, more civilized, and best of all with that degree in hand. It doesn't get better. It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes what you did to get them into and through the college years. So, congratulations to all of you.

Aside from congratulating the parents, there are a few other tried and true strategies when writing a good graduation speech. People usually love it if you tell an interesting anecdote. It's best if your story has a point, but sometimes that's not so necessary, if it's a really good story.

For example, a few of you might have read in the papers this week about the big world peace conference held in Newark, New Jersey. Now, aside from the obvious question – What were they thinking when they placed a world peace conference in Newark? – there are a couple of other things worth mentioning about this event.

First, there were a lot of important people there starting with the Dalai Lama, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and an all around funny guy to listen to. If you've never heard him speak, I recommend it. He just may be funnier than Eddie Murphy if you listen to him in the right way. Goldie Hawn was there (I mention her for the parents in the room), the economist Jeffrey Sachs, Shirin Edabi – another Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Jody Williams a world famous anti-landmine activist who

also shares the Nobel Peace Prize. So this was quite a gathering, lots of people, 3 Peace Prize winners, all dedicated to working together in the name of world peace.

Now I'm guessing you already have an image of people sitting in a big room listening to earnest speeches about how we might all learn to "just get along." And surely that's what it was like most of the time. And yet, here's the *New York Times* headline describing the event:

### **Promoting Peace, Nobel Laureates Square Off, Politely**

Apparently, things were not all hunky dory at the peace conference. The article explains that the Dalai Lama and Jody Williams got into a public spat right up there on the stage during a panel discussion of how "inner peace" is needed to bring about world peace.

According to the Times reporter, the Dalai Lama "said that people must attain inner peace in order to learn, and promote peace in the world. 'Too much emotion, attachment, anger or fear, that kind of mental state, you can't investigate objectively,' he said" (NYT, Pérez Peña, 5/13/2011). If you know anything about Buddhism, you'll recognize in the Dalai Lama's statement central Buddhist doctrines that are the basis for Buddhist practice and the whole Buddhist belief system. Upon hearing these assertions Jody Williams the anti-mine activist is reported to have said: "I thought it was strange to be asked to be on this panel on inner peace, because I don't have much,"[inner peace] she said. "It's anger at injustice which fires many of us" (ibid.). To give you a bit more of a sense of the rising tension in the room, the Dalai Lama is quoted later in the article as saying about Jody Williams, that she is "quite blunt." That's about as near as you can come to being in a shouting

match with the Dalai Lama, who like I said earlier is among the most congenial humans on the planet.

Having placed this image of the Dalai Lama and Jody Williams “squared off” on stage at the Peace Conference, I want to ask you to consider the question: Whom do you think is right? Clearly the Dalai Lama has a point. It’s hard to imagine how someone who is riled up, angry, and ready for a fight could possibly see a situation clearly enough to do the right thing and actually promote peace. Just look at this week’s conversation about the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. How can we ever hope for a resolution among people whose “emotions, attachments, anger and fear” are at such a pitch? It’s frustrating, and devastating to see their stalemate continue year after year.

And yet, at the same time, Jody Williams has a good point as well. If you know about the destructive consequences of landmines for children and civilians you’d get angry at those who use such tactics – even if they were your friends. Sometimes righteous anger is the only response that makes any sense. Think of the things that might never have come about in this country without the fuel of righteous anger – women would never have gotten the vote; Martin Luther King and Malcom X would not have been able to help lead this country away from a cruel form of social apartheid, itself a legacy of the slavery that had to be overcome by a war that cost this nation the lives of more citizens than any other.

How can the Dalai Lama and Jody Williams both be right? At this point I’m hopeful that our students are already putting to use that great education they’ve gotten. We live in an age where the shorthand advice you get at graduation

ceremonies sometimes tells you to stick to your beliefs, don't give up your values, don't waver in the face of adversity. And yet, if we've done our jobs right, we've helped you to see why that advice *unchecked* can lead you into fanaticism, totalitarianism and the destruction of the human spirit. The Dalai Lama is right. If we do not find a way to calm our spirit, to step back, to allow ourselves to doubt the righteousness of our own emotions, there is no way we can expect to see things clearly or lead others toward peace. Nelson Mandela looked past his pain and righteous anger and found a way to lead South Africa from the brink of chaos. At the same time, however, Jody Williams is right too. The turmoil roiling Arab countries in the Middle East and north Africa this season, tells us there are times when righteous anger toward a cruel, non-responsive government is the only way to bring about change. Sometimes the urge to compromise can cripple a movement and allow those who illegitimately hold the levers of power to continue to do so when they should not.

And here's the point of my anecdote – I can't tell you ahead of time how to decide which path to take. Sometimes, it's right to stand up and shout like Jody Williams, and other times, the world needs the quiet voice of a Dalai Lama or a Nelson Mandela to show us the way. The education we tried so hard to give you was not designed to send you out into the world with pat answers or absolute certainty. All we could do, all we ever wanted to do, was give you the tools to wade into the fray and make the kind of informed judgments we need you to make if this country and the world itself is to have any chance of moving forward.

And so now you see why I don't think graduation speeches should give students much in the way of advice. There's no way to know ahead of time outside of the particularities of any given moment in time and space whether the path you ought to follow is the one outlined by the Dalai Lama or Jody Williams. You'll have to make that judgment on your own. But that's ok. I feel good about leaving that decision in your hands. I feel good because I know we've equipped you with the tools you need to make good choices. You *are* leaving us smarter, wiser, more experienced, and more civilized than when you arrived. How do I know? I remember when you arrived! My colleagues and I have witnessed the changes and experienced the special joy that comes with seeing the transformations unfold in you. We've dedicated our lives to fostering such transformations and to see you now at the threshold of this great transition is immensely satisfying. You've worked hard, you've learned much, and you are ready to enter a world where there are no pat answers. You have what it takes to make good judgments. You'll make mistakes along the way. But we have great confidence that your mistakes will teach you too.

As you head out I'd only ask one favor. Stay in touch with us. Allow us to see how what we've done with you bears fruit in extraordinary and unexpected ways. We're grateful that you chose to share these precious years with us, and are looking forward to all there is to come for you. Congratulations!