

THE TRUTH ABOUT LUCK AND GRACE

Good evening everyone. Thank you so much for joining us on this night dedicated to celebrating the accomplishments of these wonderful, wonderful students.

To the parents, families and friends, I begin by thanking you for sharing these students with us. We're so grateful for your trust and for the privilege of playing a role in their educational achievements. And, by the way, we're also grateful for the tuition that came with them!

To the students, our about-to-be-graduates, what can I say other than that we are already beginning to miss you. Springtime prompts a double consciousness in faculty. On the one hand, we really would enjoy having you around for another semester or two. There's so much more to talk about, things we didn't cover, things we know you'd enjoy. On the other hand, we know it is time for you to go. You have the tools you came for. It's time to put them to new uses.

This is my annual graduation speech. I'm calling this one "The Truth about Luck and Grace." It's a topic I came to with some help. Recently, my wife and I were having dinner with dear friends and their youngest son Gabe. Like the students here tonight, Gabe is graduating this week. He's a senior at Boston College where his dad teaches. He's into music and philosophy and plans to spend the next year roaming around trying to make a living with his guitar. I know, the very thought of such a plan strikes fear in the hearts of most of us parents. But Gabe's folks are ok with it, for now.

Anyway, Gabe has always been gifted with a large measure of openness and sincerity, traits essential in the songwriting trade. About halfway through our dinner it occurred to me that Gabe might be able to help me come up with a topic to talk about at tonight's dinner. Turning to Gabe I said, "Hey Gabe, you're graduating this spring. I'm giving a graduation speech. What would you like to hear in a graduation speech?" Gabe paused a beat or two before saying: "Well, just tell 'em the truth." At that moment I made a mental note to self – "Don't ask songwriters for help with speeches."

The truth? Who wants the truth at graduation? Everyone is happy at graduation. We faculty are happy and proud of our role in your achievements. You students are happy. You've made it, you are over the last hump, the goal is won, your degree will be in your hands momentarily. Friends and extended family are happy, because they see you smiling, relaxed and breathing normally again. And of course, your parents are delirious. What is better than witnessing a moment when your child has achieved a major milestone? They were there the first time you picked up your head in the basinet. They saw your first steps, and listened intently for those first words and sentences. There was the period in your teen years when they wished you didn't have so many sentences. And now here you are graduating from college with an honors designation. It doesn't get better – especially when they remember that after this graduation you will likely stop generating new tuition bills.

At times like these, with good feelings floating around, the truth arrives at the table like an uninvited guest. Graduation speakers typically do what we can by pointing to the future through a gauzy lens that blurs life's edges. We tell lots of

jokes, we speak about endless possibilities and of our desire to pass the torch and get out of the way while you take up the job of changing the world. We pat you on the back and shout “go for it.” We tell you, you can be whatever you want to be. We say things like don’t ever give up – live your dreams. And it all feels good.

But let’s be honest, it’s not true. It’s not a lie of course. We mean all of those things when we say them. We know you have amazing potential – we’ve seen it. We really do want you to change the world (please, please, please, change the world!). But rah rah graduation speeches don’t convey the truth because they tell an incomplete story. They ignore a very deep human paradox. Much of what we desire is desirable because its availability is limited. Think about that for a moment. So much of what we want for you, so much of what you want for yourself, is desirable in part *because* not everyone can have it.

If you start meditating on that fact for very long, you pretty much run yourself into a graduation speech dead end. How am I supposed wish you all success knowing that only a few get to enjoy it? That would be like wishing that everyone is above average. It just doesn’t work.

Let me explain by giving you some examples of things whose value stems from the fact that not everyone can have them.

We can start with your degrees. The value of your college degree is tied in part to the fact that only 30% of U.S. citizens manage to complete one. So, even now, in one of the richest and most powerful countries ever to have existed, only one out of every 3 or so Americans gets to do what you are going to do tomorrow.

Think next about the value of that killer first job you are seeking. It stems *in part* from the fact that thousands of other new graduates are after it too. The same is true of admission to medical school or graduate school. Gazing a bit further into your future, that corner corporate office, the trophy home, .com riches, success in politics or government or on the stage, in film, or on TV – the value of all these things stems in part from the fact that you have to beat out others to get them. Now that's the truth. And it's not something graduation speakers tend to talk about very much.

Why? Ultimately, I think it's because we don't like admitting that at the highest levels success stems in part from things beyond anyone's control. Hard work and merit are always important. In pursuing your dreams you have to work hard and stay focused in order to be as good as everyone else in the race. But ultimately, in a world where thousands of well qualified, hard working, talented individuals are in the race, the difference between a winner and someone who ran a close second is determined by intangible, unpredictable factors – in other words by luck or grace.

Some will think it strange that I equate luck and grace in this way. Grace is one of those words religious people use when they want to point to some good that has come to them unbidden and unearned. Grace is literally a gift from God. You can't do anything to earn grace, all you can do is prepare yourself to accept it when it comes. And to many, I suspect this description of grace sounds a lot like what we mean when we point to luck. Luck is not something you earn or deserve; it's just something that happens. When it happens, when you get lucky, you smile and enjoy

it. And when it doesn't happen, when you are disappointed, you can't blame yourself for things that are out of your control. You simply accept that you are playing a game that only a few can win.

To this point I've spoken mainly about the pursuit of those things whose value stems from their limited availability. Moreover, I've argued that in truth luck and grace play a bigger role in whether we succeed in these pursuits than we tend to admit.

I hope, however, that somewhere in the back of your mind some of you have begun to say to yourselves: "But wait, that's not all there is to life. This 'truth' you are describing it too is incomplete. There are things I can pursue that are valuable not because others want them, but simply because they are good in themselves." And if you've had that thought please allow me to smile. It means that something stuck from your days in C&E. It means your HUHC and Hofstra education has taught you to look beyond the surface of an argument to challenge unstated assumptions.

So, what are these intrinsically valuable things? What kinds of things might we want not because others want them, but simply because we see them as good. Well, you can spot them easily once you start looking. In the interest of time, I'd like to focus on just one example.

I ask that the students here tonight look across the table. Gaze directly into the eyes of the people who brought you here. I have no idea whether you are looking at someone lucky enough to enjoy significant career success. I do know that the love and care they bestow upon you comes freely and unbidden. You receive it just for being who you are. Moreover, I know that there is literally no limit to that

love. You are not getting it instead of someone else. In the right circumstances it can be grown, cultivated and extended to others. The more everyone works at it the more there is.

People sometimes laugh and say love is nice but money and success make the world go around. But I think those people are just not paying attention. Look around this room. How many masters of the universe do you see? How many corner office executives are here? How many TV stars? How many M.D.'s or Ph.D.'s. There will be some of course. Statistically speaking there have to be a few in a group this size. But that's the point – statistically speaking there can *only* be a few and as I've tried to explain they have what they've achieved in part by being blessed or by good fortune.

Now look around the room again. How many parents and family members do you think would trade the life that brought them to this extraordinary moment with you for a life that was lucky in material goods but that did not include you? Can you imagine anyone saying to themselves right now: "Given the choice between being your parent and being a billionaire, I'd take the billions?"

Where does this response come from? It appeared, unbidden and unearned, the moment you were born. God or evolution, whatever its source, I see it as a higher form of grace than that associated with career success. We are lucky to be alive, and I mean that literally. And ultimately, this luck has little to do with whether we are lucky materially.

So, what's the moral of my tale? Am I suggesting that you give up the quest for material success, stop pursuing high-end jobs, refuse to get on the merry-go-

round of life. Don't be ridiculous. I want you to work your tail off and do everything you can to be ready for that moment when luck or grace might bestow upon you its blessings. At the same time, however, I urge you to keep in mind what is making this moment so special. It's not just that you worked hard, it's not just that you've achieved much, it's not just that you've won a race to get ahead of the 2/3rds of the nation without bachelor's degrees. What makes today special is the fact that all of those achievements were made possible in part because of the unconditional love you receive from your parents, family and friends. Call it luck. Call it grace. What matters is recognizing its source and doing your part to cultivate and extend it.

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