

THINGS I BELIEVE
A Graduation Speech
Pacific Unitarian Church
May 26, 2019

I have asked you to imagine a lot of circumstances. Today I am asking most of you to imagine yourself an eighteen year old high school student, or a twenty-two year old soon to be college grad in cap and gown, *ready to walk out into the world.*

Let's begin.

I know you have learned a lot here, as students. But we have some last bits of business to learn as you prepare to step out into the world.

My first bit of advice is, first, don't be self-absorbed. It's a bad look, and will distract you from your happiness. As some Buddhist type said, you need enough ego not to step out in front of a bus, too much more can be dangerous. Being too focused on yourself will distract you from your happiness. I am not even talking about the impact on others— you, yes you, will not be able to entertain your ego and libido enough to keep them happy, if you are selfish.

Wow, that's a big one right out of the gate.

Say it with me one time, "Only I can prevent narcissism."

Second, don't ever double park. Double parking is really selfish and will distract others from their happiness. Pull in front of a fire hydrant if you really have to, that's illegal, but still way better than double parking. If there is a fire, the Fire Department is going to need the lane, and besides, *some of us are trying to get by you to get to Starbucks to finish writing our graduation sermon speeches*

Now, while I appear to be in the common courtesy advice section, unless of course it is a 911 call, please limit talking on your cell phone in any public place that is covered by a roof to one minute. It does not take more than sixty seconds to say "I'm running late," or, "Do we need milk?" Nobody wants to hear about, whatever you in the blue jacket at Starbucks is talking about, after all some of us are trying to finish their graduation-themed sermons.

Also, and I know it is an oldie, but it remains true. Never under any circumstances wear plaids together. Look, it's obvious to all that I know next to nothing about fashion, but even I can see that multiple lines should not criss-cross like that. You're not lady Ga Ga.

Ok, with that out of the way—set good eating habits and commit to exercising now.

I'm just gonna say it again.

Set good eating habits and commit to exercising now.

You don't have to be fanatical, just know that unless you plan on losing your ego and getting hit by that bus, *your health is going to be the most important thing in your life. Look I am old enough to feel that now. Health is wealth. Don't be an idiot and run marathons when you're kinda chunky on sprained ankles, cause you can, NOW!*

And I shouldn't have to say it, but don't start smoking cigarettes! If you already smoke, quit, *you're still young. It's worth it. While you're in the process of quitting you have my permission to skip the good eating habits part and raid the fridge to combat the cravings.*

Pick one or two of the following to do regularly,—meditate, do yoga, and or pray.

Being a Pastor I should probably focus more on this, but the point being, find some kind of healthy spiritual/physical processes. You're not that busy.

I hope you're writing this down.

Here's one of my personal favorite bits of advice.

Be transparent. As the French existentialist Albert Camus says. *"One must not cut oneself off from the world. No one who lives in sunlight makes a failure of their life."*

Again, I want you to pause for a second to quietly read Camus' line. *"One must not cut oneself off from the world. No one who lives in sunlight makes a failure of their life."*

There are three reasons to live transparently.

First, people have a remarkable level of forgiveness when people are authentic and transparent, and

Second, you give others permission not to be perfect, and

Third, Remember, you're young. Your frontal lobe is not fully evolved yet. Give yourself a fighting chance to make good decisions.

Wait, I just thought of a few more practical things.

Don't leave the house when you are cooking something.

Put a spare house key somewhere.

Put a spare car key somewhere on the car, (no, not in a visible place).

AND—

Back up your computer. Make it a ritual, buy hard drives, send it to the cloud, pay for a service, figure it out. I lost nearly two years of graduate school work, TWO YEARS that changed the course of my life when twice in the 90's my lap tops were stolen. Ouch.

And my last of the simple stuff—

If you are ever having company over that you don't completely trust, shove half a handful of loose marbles in your medicine cabinet and quickly shut the mirror.

Yup!

Then you can know if and when they can be trusted.

I know throughout your education you have had to take in some history.

Here's its main lesson. History teaches us that nearly everything every human being across the years have ever thought true, is not.

That's worth a pause and a repeat.

Nearly everything that has been held most true, fought and died about, is false.

The self-claimed immortal King Tutankhamun turned out not to have lived forever.

On every single day the World was promised to come to a divinely ordained disastrous end, it didn't.

The moon, much to the great disappointment of the French, turns out not made of cheese.

The falseness of everything believed throughout history is really history's main lesson. The best are details. Really it sounds funny, but I am serious.

More ironically, it turns out to be the things we are most violent and defensive about that tend to be the things we have historically been the most wrong about.

This great truth- the truth that truth is hard to find, can make you nihilistic, or indifferent.

Don't let it!

I am asking you to live with a disposition towards tolerance and humility. Let all that missing information that we can't seem to grasp fall into a bucket you label "Awe and Mystery." You will be better for it.

It's easy to go the other way and be cynical.

See, in addition to the fact that we get most things wrong, oddly enough the fact is, this life you're in right now is best lived with passion and wonder.

See, maybe worse than getting it wrong, is being so afraid to get it wrong that you sit idle.

Ironically, you should give yourself permission to be a little more optimistic about your goals than reality and history would warrant.

You have permission and encouragement to be a little more optimistic than you can guarantee you are aiming at the right thing.

Creating the reality you will live your life by, your narrative, your purpose, your mission, is a subjective craft. An art really. And, a little blind optimism is absolutely fair.

I encourage you to think about having passion towards something, as a form of cheating towards achieving that goal.

But if the wings of optimism are required, so is the establishment of the roots of good habits. In science class, you likely learned a thing or two about cause and effect. And no doubt in those demonstrations you were given the opportunity to see the clear connection between cause and effect, effort and result, action and re-action. Let me twist and undermine that by reminding you that much, to most, of any particular thing you do in life will not be noticed, and will bear no immediate discernible consequences good or bad. It is a sad fact of life that consequences are not as immediate as they should be, in the same way that stupidity is not as painful as it should be.

Given the lag between cause and effect in real life, it will be tempting to think that you can more or less get around what you do or don't do. And, you almost certainly will for a while. Don't fall prey to that laziness.

It is far more advantageous to live your life like the good you do will be rewarded, and all the bad or ill will come back to haunt you and others. Live your life as if your behaviors and attitudes will bear their natural fruit. For kinda mostly, our present President aside, they will.

Karma does not exist, but it appears to exist because it is so correlated with the way the world in the long run works, that we believe in it. For that reason, be cautious about the way you drink or use drugs too much. Drugs and alcohol are at best a temporary solution to the permanent problem of how to relax and feel good in your own skin.

Kids, that's actually pretty good, let me repeat myself.

Drugs and alcohol, really all unhealthy distractions, are at best a temporary solution to the permanent problem of how to relax and feel good in your own skin. If you make them a permanent solution to how you feel good in your own skin they will become another more permanent problem to face.

Got it. Take that in. I'm not saying don't have a good time and let your hair down, but don't use drugs and alcohol to cope.

As for other things that you suspect might be self-destructive or short-sighted, put them to this simple test. Use some of the writing skills you picked up in English.

I'm serious.

Take time to write down, and then say, in actual words, the things you are planning to do, or even are already doing.

For example, when you write down and read over something like, for example, "I am riding my motorcycle every day without a helmet because I have a gut feeling that I won't ever fall off or get hit."

When you can create some objectivity, you can see your behavior from a little healthy distance. And this, in a funny way, is a way of being transparent to yourself.

That almost sounds parental doesn't it. It should.

Your parents who are naturally worried about you are very likely to be right about the cautious stuff. However, they are less likely to be right about how you manage your passion stuff. That's got to be your department, and call.

Wow that sounded smart. Let's hear that again. Your parents who are naturally worried about you are very likely to be right about the cautious stuff. However, they are less likely to be right about how you manage your passion stuff.

See, a look back at what you studied in Science and History teaches us that success, whatever you want to call that, generally means you have to take some chances. The unsaid truth of history is that without mistakes, without risk, passion and yearning, we would all still be living on the same side of the river.

And what bloody fun would that be?

In perfect balance to what I said about watching what you do, you have to give yourself permission to follow your passion, and be willing to do some crazy shit. "Let into your life enough chaos that you represent some of the randomness that under-girds, and shapes the universe."

Hey, that's pretty good, let me say that again. "Let into your life enough chaos that you represent some of the randomness that under-girds, and shapes the universe."

By that I mean, learn to drive with your knee so you can change your shirt in the car.

By that I mean, make "Oh, what the *(bleep)*" a semi-regular part of your vocabulary. Find one reason each week to say one "Oh, what the *(bleep)*" per week that does not involve significant danger to self or others. In the summer, two per week.

However, if you are one of those who are just got excited that the preacher we had as our graduation speaker just said "Go nuts!"—what I meant for you to hear was—keep your hands at 10 and 2, and focus on owning one good pair of shoes and a dress or a suit you could wear to a funeral or wedding.

If you don't need any advice being crazy, or even if you do, what I meant to say was, "Permanently keep a toothbrush, a bathing suit, a towel, a change of dress clothes and shoes you can go on a date or to a funeral in your car."

I know, not very poetic, or spiritual, still.....

Do it.

You will need each of them at least once a year. If you find that you don't, re-read your notes about being more spontaneous.

Look, a life lived well will have in it some opportunities you can't plan for. Plan on that. If you are too chicken, too structured, or too ill-prepared for them, life will stop bringing you them. And that is worse than mistakes, isn't it?

Remember that the regrets people at the end of their lives are the chances not taken, not the mistakes that have been made.

A word or two from what you might have learned in Psychology and your brains.

In preparing this speech I first wrote "Be very careful what you think," but careful isn't the right word. What I mean is, be "mindful" or "thoughtful" about what you think. And what you spend time thinking about and how.

The wisdom is all over, it may not be as magical as some would suggest it is, but what you pay attention to matters. It really does. There is at least a little science to all that.

If you need a reminder of the power of your attention, watch where the car tends to go when you keep your eyes focused on the curb.

On second thought, graduates don't do that.

Just trust me. Hands at 10 and 2. Right?

Said another way, to a large but not hokey degree, what you think, you will manifest. Your brain is a tool, a tool that so likes to work. Your brain likes to work so much, in fact, you might have noticed that while your sleeping. Think about that for a minute. Even during the quarter to third of your life when your body is doing little but breathing, your brain is periodically off on a weird sci-fi meets spring break vacation.

Perhaps you have wondered in hindsight how in your dreams your brain got you from the kitchen table to the forest? There is a lesson in this I think. The subtle crazy brilliance of what your brain can dream up should remind you that your brain is perfectly comfortable spending time on distracting topics like "Do these pants make me look fat?" "Am I unlovable," and "Worry, worry, worry"

Give your brain something worthwhile to work on. Your brain is a race-car, and that car needs a driver. Make your brain work for your life, because it is not taught who is boss. If you don't believe me, go talk to Dan Dempster or Duncan Tooley, or any of our therapists or social workers like Lee Ann. Your life can easily become the cargo of your brain.

Write this down somewhere, on your diploma, in your hat. "Remind your brain now and again who it works for." This is easier said than done, but do it.

Repeat after me. "Brain. I'm in charge. Got it?"

Doesn't that feel good.

While you're at it, write the following questions down that your brain and your heart can collaborate on.

"Am I honoring, training, practice and share the best gifts I was born with?"

"Am I enjoying what I am doing?"

"Am I doing some good?"

"Am I having any fun doing it?" and,

"Am I preparing or ruining my future doing it?"

If you're spending a lot of time on things that don't fit into one of those criteria, well, seriously, ask your brain to think about a change.

Remember...

Whether you spend your life making leg spindles, parenting, welding the third bolt on the right tire of GMC's Apache Jeeps, you are engaged in something far greater than you are.

Never lose that truth.

You are part of something far greater, more interesting, than you are. Drink in its mystery, appreciate all life, and extend yourself as your kin.

That practice will likely let you grow a touch more comfortable with giving up this life for whatever comes next.

Amen