

WORDS OF WISDOM

"Doug, it's Bruce." My oldest friend was on the phone. We've known each other since four-year-old kindergarten. Amazingly, we're still speaking. Well, actually he does most of the talking. "How are you? Great? How are your lovely ladies? Great?"

"We're fine."

"Great. We're all great here. Great, great, great. Listen, as you know, our fiftieth is coming up soon -"

"Fiftieth birthday?"

"Hah, hah. We wish."

I know full well he's referring to the fiftieth reunion (depressing thought) of our high school class (depressing thought.)

"Our committee is planning the reunion and you know what everyone thought would be great? - "

"If you called the whole thing off?"

"Hah, hah. You wish. We thought it would be great," he said, "if you'd give your speech again ..." And silence hung in the air ... "Hello?"

My speech. Indeed, a little over 50 years ago, palms damp, throat dry, nerves jangling, I gave the valedictory address at my high school commencement in Ottawa.

The same way there are people who like kale (very few) and sensible people who don't, there are people who like reunions and people who avoid them like the plague. Falling firmly into the latter category, I had no desire to even go to the damn thing let alone deliver that old speech again. Far from wanting to deliver it, I didn't even want to look at it. I was sure I'd find it sappy. Or tedious. Or just plain embarrassing.

"I'll think about it," I said to Bruce. In other words – I lied.

In order not to disappoint Bruce further, and jeopardize our Guinness Book of Records length friendship, I did drag myself to the reunion and actually enjoyed myself more than I thought I would. But when the time came various people got up and spoke, but not I. One fellow, John, was particularly good. Perhaps finally making up for the fact that *he* hadn't been chosen valedictorian, he passed along various life lessons he'd learned. "Always remember," he said, "You are not your children." Heck, that could be a book title. Another one. "Remember, when you're on the golf course and you hit a particularly awful shot – it's not you. It's your clubs. It's the equipment." I mean, that's a nugget. Stick that up on the fridge. That could get you through any number of bad times. In short, he was pithy, he was amusing -- all things, I knew deep down, that I hadn't been 50 years before.

But what had I been back then? I remembered climbing up on the stage, the tension-riddled feeling of delivering the speech, but not the words themselves. So a few months after the reunion I finally dug out the damn thing. But even with it in my hand, I didn't really want to read it. I wondered if there was a single sentence in it that wasn't going to make me cringe.

May I first thank the Student Council for this honour although I realize others were more deserving than I." Hmmm. Nothing like starting with a bang.

And so it went. I thanked the teachers – "*There is no finer calling than passing on the gift of knowledge to young people.*" I thanked the parents or, more accurately, I didn't – "*A group of people I will not even try to thank are our parents*

..." I went on at length about owing a debt to the school that we could never repay *"even with a million dollars."*

You get the idea. I won't subject you to the whole thing. A sample or two will convey the gist. *"In each of us our school has implanted, not only the basic fundamentals of knowledge, but perhaps even the beginnings of wisdom."* Really? If only it had implanted the wisdom in me to delete that sentence. *"Only now, as we come to leave here, do we begin to realize the overwhelming debt we owe to our school, but the only way to pay one's debt to the past is to put the future in debt to oneself."* Um – say that again. Slowly.

"If people little note nor long remember what I say here tonight, it won't matter much. It's what we here tonight do that will really count." Hmmm again. A thinly disguised attempt to sound Lincolnesque. Fail. *"While we were students our paths converged for a while and now they have diverged and gone their separate directions, and this is the way of life."* Yikes. Boiler plate meet cliché.

It got marginally better as it went on. And on. From who-knows-where I dredged up quotes from Eamon de Valera (?) and Lord Tweedsmuir (??) not exactly go to guys in the valedictory canon. Indeed, the best parts were where I quoted someone else, credited or not. But let's not call it plagiarism. Let's call it having the good sense to steal. Like Shakespeare.

Building to the end, I quoted an unnamed father to his son *"Just remember, it's easy to tell when you're on the right road. It's all uphill."* Well, not so bad. Doubling down on the road imagery, I finished with *"May the road rise to meet you, May the wind be always at your back ..."* etc. I'm sure you've heard it countless times. But maybe it wasn't quite so

shopworn 50 years ago. And you can't go wrong with an old Irish blessing, can you?

So did I learn anything? Were these long forgotten words a window into a long forgotten self? The thing was coherent (mostly), it was grammatical, it was earnest to a fault. Was that me at 18? Earnest and grammatical? Probably.

And it was crystal clear to me why I hadn't wanted to read it at the reunion. I'd been afraid, and rightly so, that it would reveal me – not to be brilliant, or hilarious, or preternaturally gifted – but to be the somewhat callow youth that I evidently was. But weren't we all callow youths once? And where's the shame in that? Maybe it's reassuring to be embarrassed by our 18-year-old selves. Maybe it's good that I found the whole thing a bit cringeworthy. If it was scintillating, if it was witty in the vein of essayists I admire like Nora Ephron or David Sedaris, if it was just the sort of thing I'd want to write now -- what's been the point of the last 50 plus years?

And yes, I cringed, but not at every single sentence. Sure, I wish it hadn't been quite so conventional, quite so safe. But it was a safer, more conventional time. I wish it had been a little more original, or at least more entertaining. But really, in the cold, unforgiving light of a half century's passage, I can honestly say -- it wasn't completely awful.

And maybe there are worse valedictions. Maybe that's all we can reasonably expect from our endeavours – someone to look us in the eye, or to look ourselves in the eye, and offer a heartfelt “It wasn't completely awful.” Always bearing in mind, of course, through all our myriad bumbings and stumbings, fumbings and failings, that it wasn't us. It was the equipment.

All of this happened a few years ago and already there's talk of a possible 60th reunion. It's still way off down the road, but, who knows, if Bruce calls and says it would be great if I'd like to dust off the old valedictory ... well, heck ... I might just ...

... Hah!

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