
GRADUATION SPEECH / DFFB / 2022

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Commencement and graduation speeches are solid fixtures in the rituals of academia. Nevertheless, when you are old enough to be asked to give one, you realize the slight perversion of it. You sit at home, trying to write one. You mobilize your whole being, because you are a filmmaker, which means that this is the only way you can function. If you are just half involved, you are useless. So, you sit at home and instead of writing, your thoughts go in a thousand directions to escape that slight unease you feel when you imagine the following: flying to a distant town, walking into a building, grabbing a microphone, then, for about twenty minutes, giving wise advice to your young colleagues about their future, preferably spiced up with some surprising twists and daring puns. You sit at your table and think of all the sub-genres in these speeches: the solemn ones, and the bold, irreverent ones, the emotional or the warm-hearted cynical ones and all the possible combinations of these, not to mention the fake ones, like the brilliant, but never-orated speech of Kurt Vonnegut actually written by Mary Schmich, a journalist at the Chicago Tribune.

Commencement and graduation: these are beautiful rituals, and I am all for them. They help you to transform the stormy happenings of your life into a tale, they help you to create your own mythology. Rituals are important. My function inside this ritual event is to give you advice for your future. And this is what blocks me. I feel my deep inadequacy for this task. Whatever words I tentatively write down, I feel a tingle, an instant awkwardness, and the slight shame of being a fraud.

So, instead of your future, I will speak to you about what you are leaving behind today—I will speak about schools.

A once-reluctant student who became a passionate teacher, I cherish these institutions. They disguise themselves as places to receive practical knowledge and skills to fit in, to be a good citizen, to find a fine job, to succeed in life. Quite often even the participants—teachers and students—believe in this disguise and kill the real function of a school: to hit a hole in the wall of necessities and dive into, get lost, immerse yourself in a passion. To enter into an intense communication about the subject of your shared passion with your teachers and fellow students. You ignite fires, and you are swept off your feet by the unexpected beauty of the flames of the others. You discover yourself, surprise yourself, and make peace with yourself by permitting yourself the luxury to be unpractically interested in something that does not offer an immediate and well-defined reward. Instead of pacing, you float, instead of resolving, you are opening. Kindergartens and art schools are alike in the sense that they are especially good at safeguarding this hidden function of schools: to use your mind and soul in a wildly unusual way.

How can we better describe this beautifully unpractical, but so indispensable to artistic creation, functioning of your brain? Alan Watts, the hero of my teenage years of the nineteen seventies, calls it flood-like consciousness. This is different to the area of consciousness that problem solves—when your attention is sharp and defined, like an intense ray of light that jumps from subject to subject and enlightens its objective, leaving the rest of the world in shadows.

Or, this is, what Alison Gopnik, the amazing neuroscientist of early cognitive child development calls lantern-like consciousness. I quote her briefly.

“As adults when we attend to something in the world, we are vividly conscious of that particular thing, and we shut out the surrounding world. The classic metaphor is that attention is like a spotlight, illuminating one part of the world and leaving the rest in darkness. In fact, attending carefully to one event may actually make us less conscious of the rest of the world. We even know something about how the brain does this: connections from the prefrontal part of the brain both enhance our perception of the attended event and inhibit our perception of other events. And there is a chemical basis for this, too. When we pay attention to an event certain brain chemicals called cholinergic transmitters make a small part of the brain more flexible and “plastic”, better at learning, and simultaneously other inhibitory transmitters actually make irrelevant parts of the brain less flexible.”

Alison Gopnik describes the shock and surprise of the research team when they repeated the electroencephalogram experiments on babies (previously performed on grownups who focused on something specific). The research team observed the brain functions of small children while they were strongly interested in something. The team expected strong activity in certain brain areas and a limited, suppressed one in all others. Instead, what they found was an intense activity in most of the brain territories. I quote again Alison Gopnik:

“We say that children are bad at paying attention, but we really mean that they’re bad at not paying attention. [. . .] Young brains are bathed in the cholinergic transmitters that enhance attention in adults, but the inhibitory transmitters that damp consciousness down haven’t yet come online. If you put all that together it suggests that babies’ consciousness is more like a lantern than a spotlight – that it illumines the entire world around them.”

All of us in this room share a common passion: filmmaking. We are extremely lucky people. To exercise our profession in any field—from writing to grading in the frenzy of pressing deadlines and budget cuts, in the midst of calculating the price of overtime and making decisions depending on next day’s weather forecast, in this frenzy of our enhanced spot-like consciousness while jumping with super speed from subject to subject—there is an elementary need to let to the surface and use our lantern-like consciousness too. It is a rare privilege, and we all feel—from prop master to best boy—when it happens. And, in the rare, blissful moments when it happens together, collectively, this is the best reward of all. This is the key to create something that is not just good, but alive.

The audiovisual results of our work also have a chance to ignite this function in spectators, to give them a chance to step out from the chain of sharp snapshots of the photoflash’s crude and raw light, and instead to float in a soft, tender glow that illuminates what is generally hidden.

To describe this better, I quote Hungarian poet Sandor Weöres from a text written in prose from his volume *Towards Plenitude*.

The Blurred Borders

When you begin to deconstruct your own personality, you experience as the border between your soul and that of others gradually dissolves. If you look into the eyes of your fellow human, you feel their emotions and realise: "this too, is me." If you pet a dog, you feel its world blending with yours: "this too, is me." If your touch lingers on a piece of furniture, you absorb its unstructured silence: "this too, is me." Your soul is not just your own, and the soul of all is your own. Everything is transparent, as if made of crystal. Suddenly, you become immeasurably abundant; your body and soul are refreshed, and, in this state, work, rest, company and solitude fill you with equal joy.

Good schools are those privileged secret gardens where you are permitted to bring to the surface your lantern-like or flood-like consciousness. To change from problem-solving mode into problem-creating one. Instead of fitting in, to be yourself in a full, relaxed way and simultaneously feel the evidence that you are a small, but happy part of something immense. Good schools are like that. Kindergartens and art schools are the places that have the most chance to be like this. What I know about the DFFB is that among film schools, it is especially open and encouraging of this direction.

I wonder, how much you were aware of this privilege while being a student here. I wonder how much you used it. Or did the anxiousness to succeed in this tough profession block you? Or, perhaps, you overused it and now you are resenting that you did not get more nudge or even stabbing from your teachers? I wonder. I invite you now to look back instead of looking forward. Have a good look at yourself. Have a good look at the pattern drawn by your many acts, hurries, hesitations, angers, and defiance, by your sudden epiphanies, by the exceptional moments of deep connection with others. You walked in the narrow alleys of this secret garden and the marks of your steps draw a unique pattern in the soft ground. Whatever you see there is beautiful. Your task is not to correct it. Not to pick up the good parts and try to drop the rest. If you want to fight your flaws, the flaws will win because they will tie you to themselves. Have a last good look, cherish this pattern, and close the gate of the garden behind you. Here we are today, the handle of the gate is in your hand already. This is the ceremony, the ritual of closing it. How to do it?

All our rituals contain elements that are incomprehensible to our contemporary logic. Why do we clink our glasses of champagne (you will do it quite soon) before lowering it? Once, there was a reason, but we do not remember it. Why do we shake hands? Yes, we've heard something about showing that we're not armed, but really. . . who was thinking about that while reaching out towards a hand in happy pre-Covid times?

Religious rituals, even if we look back deep in our distant past, always used dead or unusual languages. Most of the time you understand the text only vaguely. That is because they are not meant to address the intellect—this is perhaps the biggest misunderstanding of Protestantism—they aim for something more elementary. They are simple but efficient tools to reach a state of trance, they help you dissolve in the haze of flood-like consciousness. While performing a ritual you do not remember, but you evoke, relive an event what happened once, in the distant past with humans' dead for hundreds or thousands of years.

It is not through your intellectual understanding, but by the repetition, the rhythm of the gestures, of the words pronounced, of the chanting, singing, moving your body, the standing, kneeling, or touching the ground with your forehead in a holy order—a highly structured, pulsating series of well-defined acts—that ritual works. This is what helps you to numb your spotlight consciousness and give a chance to your always functioning flood-like consciousness to become perceivable to you.

Today, hopefully in not disturbing too much of the normal flow of this joyful ceremony, I invite you to partake in a little game—to create a ritual for yourself, to be able to evoke this special autumn day later. What you do with this opportunity depends on you and the unpredictable group dynamic inside your “Class of ‘22”, consisting of strong and independent individuals, keen and proud of their individuality. Let’s vote if you are ready for that. . .

If yes, please, take the game seriously—the way kindergarten children play, the way crew members behave on set creating something never existed—otherwise it won’t work, and you will just waste your time.

I give each of you a piece of paper and a pencil—a rare object in today’s pockets—and ask you to think of ANY element that this special ritual should contain. An object, an act, a place, a time of the day, something to wear or something to bring or something to perform. It can be random, quite arbitrary, there is no thematic pressure of any kind. But, please, write propositions that are physically doable and not too exotic. Ancient Greek folklore sorcery rituals use simple but noble elements: wine, honey, milk. Do not troll this group effort by proposing something that will make the execution of the ritual hard or impossible. You have exactly 3 minutes to think about it. Afterwards, please fold the paper in four and bring it here.

So, what I ask you to do is to stay together after the festivities. Discuss and then decide the ritual you will fix to evoke this day, and with it, your times spent here. Define how often you plan to repeat the ritual. Once a year? Every five years? Or you chose another magic number? Will you perform the ritual by gathering in person? Or online? Whatever you decide, I am truly curious to know. Please, send me a note about it!

“We’re hallucinating all the time; when we agree about our hallucinations, we call it “reality”.

Anil Seth – Neuro Scientist