

Commencement Speech

Beck Krefting

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I am deeply flattered to be selected to speak at this year's commencement. I can only assume most of you didn't vote. Before I launch into this, I want to extend gratitude to administrators, faculty and staff here at Skidmore for so warmly welcoming and supporting me these past several years.

Moreover, I want to thank the class of 2013. I am consistently in awe of the way you harness college and community resources and your own skill sets to achieve your goals and all that you bring to the classroom—your sharp acumen, your creativity, your hunger for knowledge, and your desire to be engaged, thoughtful, pro-active citizens. You strive for excellence and in doing so you make what I do so enriching. Speaking here today, for me, is the highest honor you could bestow because the satisfaction I derive from the time I spend in the classroom and the relationships that we build, this is more valuable to me than a dozen published books, more valuable than being granted tenure.

After contemplating a number of possible ways to address you, I've decided to offer what I believe are key tips for life, lessons that I've learned along the way or as I say in the classroom: "I'm pelting you with pearls people, listen up!" I was told I have 8 minutes to speak, which I think will give me just enough time... to tell you everything I know... probably with a few minutes to spare. If there is any time remaining I'll use it to lip sync a song that prognosticates your future—an original score from the 1970s Broadway hit *Annie* but more recently popularized when Jay Z released a remake in 2007; that song is, of course, "It's A Hard Knock Life." And make no mistake about it. It is a hard knock life. You will see people treated unfairly based on sex, race, ethnicity, creed, sexuality, gender expression, ability, class, nationality and any other identity category that differentiates us from the dominant culture. You will see people continue to degrade this earth, squandering non-renewable fossil fuels and resources, polluting our precious water and making unsustainable energy and food choices all in the name of commerce. You will see people exploited for labor, sex and services and you will witness profiteering firsthand. You will see loved ones stricken by illness and injury, some temporary, some terminal. You might be the one with such a diagnosis. You will see the people that mean the most to you exit this world and you will sit shiva, comfort the bereaved, and attend memorial services. You will cry; you will feel pain. It IS a hard knock life, but what you do have, what we all have, is each other. And so that's where I begin in offering you tips for life, twelve of them to be exact.

Tips for Life

1. Though your family members may try your patience and the prospect of hearing your mother tell you one more time about the sacrifices she made to have you makes you want to turn and run full speed into an oak tree, cherish your time with your family and love them deeply. Find out who they are—we often assume that early character templates still apply. They don't. Be respectful and grateful when they or anyone gives you advice. It's a small offering and you can still do what you want to do anyways.
2. You don't choose your family but you do choose your friends. Choose them wisely; you only have so much time, so pass it with people who make you feel better not worse about yourselves. With friends, it's quality not quantity. I also recommend that you make friends with germophobes because when you find money on the street, they will **not** fight you for it.
3. Take time to day dream and time to play and time to dance and time to laugh, they are perhaps the only mechanisms for staving off cynicism.
4. When including Jerusalem artichokes on your dinner menu, plan to spend your evening alone. If you've had them, you know what I'm talking about and have surely passed your own air baby... if so, mazel tov.

5. Challenge yourself and learn to take criticism. This is how you will grow. I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't developed a thick skin and stepped up time and time again to say: yes, I will do better; yes, I will persevere; yes, I will have another glass of wine.
6. I have not just drawn from my own life when devising these tips, but also from the mistakes others have made. So, when operating a riding lawn mower, know where your external propane tanks are located on the property. That tip comes courtesy of my mother. Thank you mom.
7. Though I'd like to tell you that I got this scar on my face while saving a set of triplet infants from a pack of rabid dingos... it is actually from the removal of melanoma (skin cancer) found when I was 24. Please, take care of yourself. Despite scientific advances, we only get one husk, one shell to shellac for a lifetime. Wear sunscreen, be active, get rest, and eat healthy.
8. I worked at McDonald's when I was in high school and one day a man, whose order was incorrect, leaned across the counter and told me in no uncertain terms that I was a piece of trash. As many times as I've gone back and imagined using the pin on my name tag to stab him in the hypothalamus, which I'm fairly certain he would neither know how to pronounce, locate, nor spell, I still believe nobody is better than you are—not by virtue of social identity, pedigree, wealth or vocation. Also, be good to those in the service industry, treat them kindly and tip them generously.
9. Acid rain, erosion, oil spills, global warming, toxic waste, radiation exposure, hydrofracking... We can't undo the damages already done to this earth, but we can do our part to make it inhabitable for generations to come. Keep up with local and national politics and consider the environment in your activities, voting practices and purchases.
10. Spend your money wisely and while I know it feels like the universe is giving you a gift when you can get 2 chalupas for \$2, that's not what I mean. Spend and invest your money in businesses, organizations and products that are socially responsible. Where we collectively spend our money determines what we have access to and what kind of world we will live in.
11. I joined a choral group my sophomore year of high school. After repeatedly being assigned humming roles, I got the message. I love singing, but that doesn't mean I'm any good at it. I quit after 6 weeks and went back to theater where I landed lead roles the rest of the year. Know your limitations and play to your strengths; others are none the wiser and it makes you look and feel like a rock star.
12. Last tip: If you tell someone something long enough, they'll believe it and become it. Tell your family, friends and colleagues how amazing they are every chance you get. Seeing the best in others is not a lie, it's a selective omission that I suspect both parties prefer. Do this and watch the waters part for you as you make your way through life.

I want to close with my favorite quote. A quote I read when speaking at my own graduate commencement. It is by Robin Morgan from her book *The Anatomy of Freedom: Feminism, Physics, and Global Politics* (1982).

“Your life is the one place you have to spend yourself fully—wild, generous, *drastic*—in an unrationed profligacy of self... And in that split second when you understand you finally are about to die—to uncreate the world no time to do it over no more chances—that instant when you realize your conscious existence is truly flaring nova, won't you want to have used up all—all—the splendor that you are?”

Now, go and be splendid... and know that I already think you are.