

This tribal custom of a commencement address is a funny deal. The college has had you the past four years, and now I'm supposed to do you some good in the next ~~fifteen~~^{ten} minutes?

Maybe the theory is, that commencement speakers get chosen by how many commencements they've been able to sit through. Counting from high school, I've sat down there--where all of you are in your choir robes--a total of four times. Which gives me the best possible motivation to be here at the microphone, ^{on} on this idyllic campus, ^{usually} ^{visited} ~~Retaliation. At last, I get to be up here.~~ ~~on this august occasion. Revenge. At last, I'm up here.~~

Another part of the tribal custom is that the person up here has to intone advice down at the rest of you. ~~So let's get the advice over with in a hurry.~~ Three pieces, ^{now} from three automatically wise sources--people who make their living working with words.

The first is the comedian who warned us, "You can't have everything-- where would you put it?"

The next is the writer Loudon Wainwright, who tells us, "Anything worth doing, is worth doing ^{poorly} ~~badly~~." Wainwright was referring to cross-country skiing, and the pleasure you can get from pastimes even if you're not out to win the Olympic gold medal. ^{But} ~~Another~~ ^{of wisdom} ~~wise~~ writer, Barbara Ehrenreich, has given us Ehrenreich's corollary of Wainwright's law:

(Ehrenreich)

she writes,

"The secret of the truly successful, I believe, is that they learned very early in life how not to be busy. They saw through that adage, repeated to me so often in childhood, that anything worth doing is worth doing well. The truth is, many things are worth doing only in the most slovenly, half-hearted fashion possible, and many other things are not worth doing at all."

of something not worth doing well,

Barbara Ehrenreich's own chosen example, she says, is balancing her checkbook. paying any attention to the existence of

My own, is watching television. I have every confidence that each of you will be able to find some facet of life ~~that does not~~ satisfactory to give short shrift.

Life, that word life--it always pops up about now in the advice portion of commencement. I lend you now the third and final piece of wisdom, ^{this one} from the folksinger Gamble Rogers, which I regret to report is no less true after you're out of college than when you're in it: "Life is what's happening to you while you're making other plans."

I trust that those fulfill the first of the tribal expectations of today. Now I need to talk to you a bit about your own part in the tribe--the community of time we live in. Never forget that you and the people around you are a tribe--in the strict dictionary definition, "a social organization comprising villages, ~~bands~~, districts, lineages or other groups and sharing a common ancestry, language, culture and name."

Probably more of you will become doctors and lawyers than you will Indian chiefs, but the long line of tribal life will be threaded through you. Some of the behavior is surprisingly unchanging. A reporter for The Oregonian a few years ago decided to go up into the skyscrapers of this city and see where the corporate leaders ^{have} ~~had~~ their offices in those big buildings ^{downtown}. He found that ^{in building after building} ~~almost invariably,~~ a chairman or a president of a bank or a company had his office high up in the northeast corner ~~of each building.~~ Easy enough to explain--because of their views of mountains and river from ^{that corner} ~~there~~. Or is it. At the great archeological dig at Cape Alava, up the coast near the mouth of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, when the diggers uncovered longhouses of hundreds of years ago, they found that

the long-ago tribal elders of the Makah Indian tribe also always claimed a favorite corner of those longhouses--the ^{same} ~~the~~ northeast corner.

Other persistent behavior by members of our human tribe, I hate to say, is equally preening--but a lot more dangerous. In 1967, the elected government of Greece was overthrown by a group of army colonels. Many years before that, a colonel named Juan Peron toppled Argentina into decades of dictatorship, and as recently as last month the coup in the Pacific Island nation of Fiji was led by a colonel. And it's no news to anyone ^{who has lived through the news of recent years} ~~was~~ that Momar Kadafi of Libya continues to call himself a colonel. In the human tribe the rank of colonel seems to be a particularly restless one, where you find these men who have risen high in life but not nearly as high as they think they ought to be.

In the Iran-contra hearings, ~~on the unblinking eye of the television screen,~~

we have seen American Colonel Robert Dutton with his photo album of his favorite in the congressional hearing room

clandestine weapons, and this summer we can look forward to seeing American

Colonel Oliver North. I'm sorry to say, to those of you stepping from college

today to the bloodier world outside, you are ^{always} going to have to watch ~~the~~ the

renegade colonels of the world. All the harder, because they won't always have

^{silver} a ~~gold~~ chicken on their shoulders; they won't always even be in uniform. You'll

know them, though--they'll be the ones arrogantly contemptuous of the careful

pace of ~~the~~ democracy.

And as quick as that, we are at the part of the commencement rite where the tribal talker who ~~controls~~ has been awarded the microphone says something about the future. This one is only going to pass along to you an anthropologist's version of the future. An anthropologist who was also one of the best writers of this century--the late Loren Eiseley.

The opening story in Eiseley's book, The Immense Journey, tells of a day on the long-grass prairie of the middle of America when he went down into a crack in the earth--a narrow limestone slit which, he realized when he had inserted himself into it, "was a perfect cross section through perhaps ten million years of time." An anthropologist being an anthropologist, Eiseley writes next: "I hoped to find at least a bone."

What he found instead was a skull, embedded in the limestone. It was not human--some creature pre-human: with, Eiseley says, "a low, pinched brain case... and the face of a creature who had spent his days following his nose, and whose power of choice was very small. Though he was not a man, nor a direct human ancestor, there was yet about him some trace of that low, snuffling world out of which our forebears had so recently emerged." Under the prairie sky, Loren Eiseley stares down at that skull. The skull stares, sightless, up at him. And Eiseley writes of that moment: "This creature had never lived to see a man--and I; what was it I was never going to see?"

(Pause)

It seems to me that in that single sentence, Loren Eiseley managed to write the immense continuing story of humankind.

Now to get myself, and you, to the end of this ~~speech~~ part of the commencement ritual, and on to the really good stuff--the diplomas. You may remember the passage in The Education of Henry Adams, where Adams ponders the roaming around Europe he had done as a young man--about the age of ^{many of} you graduating here today--while supposedly he was studying ~~civil law~~ at the University of Berlin. If his father had asked Henry Adams, at the end of it all, what he had achieved for the time and money put into him in those college years, ^{Henry} Adams thought the only possible answer would be: "Sir, I am...a tourist."

At least nobody in this class of '87 looks to me like a tourist. Bring on the diplomas.

(Shorewood)

1

This tribal custom of hauling somebody in to give a speech to a graduating class is a funny deal. Shorewood High School has had you the past four years, and now I'm supposed to do you some good in the next ten minutes?

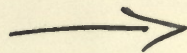
Maybe the theory is, that speakers get chosen by how many of these ceremonies they've been able to sit through. Counting from high school, and on through three college degrees and some honoraries, I've sat down there--(where all of you are in your choir robes)--a lot of times. Which gives me the best possible motivation to be up here at the microphone. Retaliation.

2

Another part of this tribal custom is that the person up here has to intone advice--I see on tonight's program it's called "inspiration," which is even more likely to make your eyes and ears glaze over--the person up here has to intone advice down at the rest of you. Three pieces now, from three automatically wise sources--people who make their living working with words.

The first is the comedian who warned us, "You can't have everything-- where would you put it?"

The next is the writer Loudon Wainwright, who tells us, "Anything worth doing, is worth doing poorly." Wainwright was referring to ~~something~~ cross-country skiing, and the pleasure you can get from pastimes even if



you're not out to win the Olympic gold medal. But another writer of wisdom, Barbara Ehrenreich, has given us Ehrenreich's corollary of Wainwright's law:

"The secret of the truly successful, I believe," she writes, "is that they learned very early in life how not to be busy. They saw through that adage, repeated to me so often in childhood, that anything worth doing is worth doing well. The truth is, many things are worth doing only in the most slovenly, half-hearted fashion possible, and many other things are not worth doing at all."

Barbara Ehrenreich's own chosen example of something not worth doing well, she says, is balancing her checkbook to the last penny. I have a couple examples of my own, that I'm willing to admit in public--one is paying any attention

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to the existence of television, and the other is the need for lawn care. Do those two poorly enough, and you find entire eons in your life you didn't know were there. I have every confidence that each of you will be able to find some facet of life to give satisfactory short shrift.

Life, that word life--it always pops up about now in the advice portion of speeches like these. I lend you now the third and final piece of wisdom, this one from the singer Gamble Rogers, which I regret to report is no less true after you're out of high school than when you're in it: "Life is what's happening to you while you're making other plans."

I trust that those fulfill the first of the tribal expectations of tonight. Now I need to talk to you just a bit about your own part in the tribe--the community of time we live in. Never forget that you and the people around you are a tribe--in the strict dictionary definition, "a social organization comprising villages, districts, lineages or other groups and sharing a common ancestry, language, culture and name."

Probably more of you will become doctors and lawyers than you will Indian chiefs, but the long line of tribal life--American, West Coast, Puget Sound, Shoreline district; however broadly or narrowly you want to look at lineage and culture--that long line of tribal life will be threaded through you.

For the older generation of the tribe to tell the younger generation anything is always like thunder trying to catch up with lightning. (One's split and gone while the other's still clearing its throat, right?) But let me give you one little blast: remember where you came from. From a neighborhood such as this, from a public school. I don't mean to make your parents and grandparents any more uncomfortable than you've managed to make them in these high school years of yours, but the fact is that you ought to ignore some recent behavior by your elders in American society, and find your own way back to this vital matter of remembering where you came from. California's Proposition 13 and other unlucky numbers of taxpayer revolts of the past fifteen years or so

have been a kind of social Alzheimer's disease among some of the members of the generations older than you. People who've forgotten that public schools and public libraries have been the lifeblood of the American tribe. One of the worst things about the adult greedheads of the 1980's--I know that's saying a lot, to single out one worst thing about that distinguished prison-class of Michael Milken and Ivan Boesky and Charles Keating, and sundry other money manipulators--but one of the worst things about that 1980's bunch who ruled in both finance and politics was their grabby assumption that public schools and public libraries, public anything, didn't matter because they could buy private stuff of their own. They had a slogan, probably a BMW bumper sticker, that

"He who dies with the most toys wins." Incredibly, that mindset which did its best to starve down public expenditures by saying "there's no free lunch" never seemed to realize there's definitely no free box of toys.

So, it takes some remembering, to keep the tribe going. Some remembering, some wondering, some sense of proportion about ourselves on the computer screen of time.

Now to get myself, and you, to the end of this part of the tribal ritual, and on to the really good stuff--the awards. In the autobiographical book, The Education of Henry Adams, Adams more than a century ago ponders the roaming around Europe he had done as a young person--about the age of you graduating now--while supposedly he was studying in Berlin. Adams concluded that if his father had asked him, at the end of it all, what he'd made of himself out of all the time and money put into him in those years of "studying abroad," there was only one possible answer. Henry Adams figured he'd have to draw himself up, look at his father, and tell him: "Sir, I am...a tourist."

At least nobody in this class of '93 looks to me like a tourist. Bring on the awards.