

One Long Assignment
Fay Weldon
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President Austin, fellow honorary degree recipients, distinguished faculty and trustees, staff, alumni, families and friends:

This is a very emotional day. For you the students, you the parents and families, and you the faculty. And indeed for me. We are all of us having our lives and achievements acknowledged and celebrated.

You, the students, in particular. You have weathered the dangers of growing up, got to college, stayed there, and won your just reward. You should feel very pleased with yourselves, and just this particular day of your lives no-one will grudge it to you.

No one is going to say to you, at least today, you should have worked harder, spent less, gone to bed earlier, kept away from this boy, that girl, walked the dog more often, not treated this house as an hotel, whatever - they are just going to say well done. And if they are parents, they will utter a great sigh of relief.

They got you to this point safely. I too have got my degree, if a long, long way down the line, and it feels pretty good, and I am old enough to utter my own sigh of relief.

You have resisted drink, drugs and idleness, all the temptations along the way. You must have - at least sufficiently well enough not to have fallen by the wayside.

I had a childhood in which even a glass of wine was seen as gross extravagance, and at my first college party, finally liberated, I drank and drank and ate a dish of spaghetti bolognese, and was so ill it took me days to raise my head from my pillow. I was completely cured, I may say, of spaghetti bolognese. I never touched it again.

All my life: fifty years of it, and still I can't eat it. Truly. Things never go quite how you expect.

I am very proud, flattered and honoured, to be here, and indeed are quite surprised, when I consider what has gone on along the way. I am a writer: I get reviews: some of them are quite nasty: I think the whole world must surely see them and despise me; I do not notice the good ones. I say things which are true, and other people would rather were not true: no better way to get yourself into trouble. Still you want me. Thank you.

You will have photos taken today, and you will show them to your children on their graduation day, and they will look at the clothes you were wearing and your hair cuts, and probably fall about with mirth. Imagine them, the youngsters of 2030, their sideburns shaking with laughter. Perhaps they'll be genetically engineered, designer

babies, bred for looks and intelligence, not left to chance, as ours were. The future can look pretty scary but it's exciting too, and it's all yours.

You might fairly complain that older generations have bequeathed you something of a mixed inheritance. Global warming, for example. But you come out of this splendid University, UConn: you are trained to think properly, feel sensitively, and you'll cope. You will take social responsibility on yourselves.

Because I do believe that that what today's society, today's education, has given your generation in abundance, as has never happened before in history, is this. It's Empathy.

Empathy is, simply, the ability to understand what it's like to be someone else. Without empathy, social and political co-operation between nations and peoples is a trudging, tragic business. With it, it's a matter of easy common sense: the victory of good-will.

It's the technology of the present, keeping you on your cell phones to each other, keeping you up late at night on Youtube, which fosters the empathy the future depends on. The pundits need not really fret about it. When it comes to social responsibility, I have no doubt that you, graduates of UConn, will deliver.

And parents, friends, families. An emotional day for you, too. I have four boys, now all grown. Two graduated, two did not. 50% success rate: though the other two seem to be doing well enough. I also have three grown step sons: so I do know what parenting is like. Seven boys.

And I have come to believe that on the children's birthdays it's the parents should get the flowers and the gifts; as a token of the children's regard and respect. The annual bonus for having survived another year bringing them up. An apology card might be in order, sometimes. Which is not to say that our children are not our pride and joy, the reason for existence. And today is the day we can publicly declare; look at them, didn't we do well. And didn't we just.

And if there was trouble on the way, getting them here, apparently none of it's their fault. But neither, thank the Lord, is it yours.

Research comes out of my country, England, which tells us that for young persons the diurnal clock gets out of kilter: it is normal and natural for them to rise at midday and go to bed at four in the morning, and unkind to try and stop them.

It is quite normal for hormones to turn late adolescents into strangers to their parents - to make them snarl and snap when once they smiled and beamed, and the boys swear and the girls slam doors. It was normal: it was no-one's fault.

So you see, new graduates, you are exonerated by research. Your sins, on this commencement day, are washed away. You couldn't help it. Welcome to the world of

adulthood, where everyone leaps out of bed with the alarm clock, goes to bed at a sensible time and knows what they're doing.

Yup, well. Quite a few of us, apparently, never grow out of adolescence. You will meet us, through life, all the time.

An emotional day as well, for your teachers, for everyone on this platform, though they will be well practiced in hiding it.

For three, four years they have been in locus parentis, they have had the responsibility of bringing you to adulthood, of delivering you out into the world with your minds trained, your bodies fit, and your souls tranquil. It is a great responsibility and a great privilege and we feel it.

I can say 'we' because after a lifetime of active non-teaching I now in charge, albeit theoretically, of a department of creative writing at the University of Brunel in London. And I know the rewards and trials of teaching, and the seriousness with which we take the task, and the pride we have in your achievements, which are our achievements too.

Being proud of you, on this day, we can feel proud of ourselves.

And we also rather fear for you, I must admit, because it's quite scary out there in the world: and we know it can take a year or two or more to get settled: because you'll want to find a job which suits you: without quite knowing what that is - and all I can say is, as parent to four and in locentis parentis to three, any job is better than none, and you never know what suits you until you try: and in the end, miraculously, your skills will find you out. Society wants you, needs you: and there are more jobs out there than are dreamt of, in any career manual's philosophy.

Words of advice from the old to the young are traditional at this time, and will rightly go unheeded. But coming out of a creative writing environment, I am going to read you a poem. Prose, on a good day, is not so different from poetry, or at any rate ought not to be. It just has to be *publishable* poetry. The poem is *If*.

It was written in 1895, by Rudyard Kipling. It has inspired many a parody, because its very simplicity, its head-on-ed-ness is, to the sophisticated, quite embarrassing. So stand by to be embarrassed, but listen well, and consider it, because it is worth considering, and a good account of the tribulations we all endure, and manage to overcome.

Kipling sometimes gets a bad press, because he had the values of his time, and wrote about them: but it is a very bad idea to spurn what was written in the past because it does not accord with what we think today. In a hundred years time what we believe now will seem rather odd, like the clothes we wear, but we do not deserve to be disregarded because of it.

In a hundred years time probably no-one will eat meat - if only because of the methane animals produce - and carnivores will be seen as repulsive: but that does not mean the future should not read and appreciate say, Kurt Vonnegut's books, just because he ate steak and chips.

This is how the Kipling poem reads:

If
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If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss:
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

A real pity the word woman doesn't scan. And daughter doesn't rhyme with run. But nothing there you notice, about war, nothing about empire, just the wisdom of a grown man. And now women too have battles to fight, incomes to earn, status to aim for, the world to contend with. So we just have to translate the poem in our head: or else see Man as inclusive of women.

Yet I do wonder what today's female version would be? Perhaps someone here would try and write it? I wouldn't want you to feel that with Commencement Day all possibilities of assignments were finally over. Life, you will find, is one long assignment, to deliver with the best will, and the best results, that you possibly can.