

## Graduation Address

*This is the text of the address given by Ashley Curtis to the graduating class of 2010 at the Senior Dinner on June 10th*

Towards the end of the *Wizard of Oz* there's a kind of slapdash graduation ceremony. The Wizard, who is in fact a great fake and no wizard at all, confers a diploma on the scarecrow, who has no brain. He tells him that "Back where I come from, we have universities, seats of great learning, where men go to become great thinkers. And when they come out, they think deep thoughts and with no more brains than you have. But they have one thing you haven't got: a diploma." He then grants the scarecrow the title of ThD, Doctor of Thinkology.

What the writer of the *Wizard of Oz* seems to be getting at is that the piece of paper you will receive shortly will not, despite what the Wizard says, make you a smarter or a better person than you already are. What is it for, then?

It's practical. It will help you get into other schools and jobs and so on. But it's also a potent symbol. The word graduation comes from the Latin word *gradus*, which means step. And you are now, indeed, stepping away from a world that you've been living in for some time, that you've been enriched by and frustrated by and protected by. Your diploma represents this step – and it's a big step – from a place you know very well into – what?

I don't know. You don't know. Some of you know what college you plan to go to, one of you has even already taken classes there, but you have scarcely any idea of what awaits you at your next port of call, if and when you actually arrive. This is incredibly exciting, and it's also scary, this not knowing. It's something you're probably acutely aware of right now, and I'd like to take advantage of that fact to suggest that this not knowing, this radical ignorance, is in fact always with us, usually hidden beneath habits and routines.

What do I mean by that? On the one hand, that the future is always uncertain and unpredictable. Will you really go where you think you will? Will you stay as planned? What kinds of friends will you make? What unexpected good fortune or calamity will interrupt your plans, changing everything? But this is a fairly obvious, if often repressed, kind of not knowing. I'm thinking of something else as well, something that's not always quite so obvious to us. Melissa spoke a short while ago about the narratives we create for our lives, and I suppose my idea is closely related, because what I mean is that whatever *seems* to be happening at the moment is never anything like the full story of what is going on.

In the best case, this means that we live like honey bees. We go about doing what we think is important – for the bees, that's gathering nectar to make honey. But when you think about it, the honey they make is the least of it. There's something much larger going on, because by gathering that nectar to make that honey the bees are unintentionally cross-pollinating flowers. They have no drive, no instinct to cross-pollinate flowers – the drive is for the nectar. But without that accidental cross-pollinating there would be no new flowering plants, which would mean the end of 90% of the plant kingdom.

What great or terrible or freaky things are we unwittingly affecting by what we do or don't do? Like the bees, we hardly know the half of it. Many years ago, on the street right in front of Wagenschein House, the innocent waving of my hand brought on the death of a wonderful young man. How many others have I killed, without knowing it? How many saved? We live in a state of radical ignorance, ignorance not only about the future but even about the present. How many well-intentioned projects lead unwittingly but inexorably to catastrophes? How many lofty goals, ardently pursued, lead in indirect ways, ways we will

never recognize, to disaster? And how can we respond to this? Despair? Give up? Eat, drink and be merry?

One thing I'd suggest is simply to be aware of how little we can know. A realistic appreciation of this, I think, not only keeps you healthily humble, but also liberates you from a lot of the worries created by our illusions of control. Engage with your not-knowing, and embrace the continual surprise of life.

Meanwhile, however, despite all this profound not-knowing, you have to do something! And what will it be? How can you decide, if you can know so little? Jon Kabat-Zinn, the author of a book with the wonderful title *Full Catastrophe Living*, suggests that, even in the middle of our ignorance about what will come and about what is going on in the big picture, each one of us has a job on this planet, a job with a capital J. Not necessarily the job you get paid for – rather, the job for which the universe is your employer. You don't need to know everything, or most things, or maybe anything at all, to do this job. Ask yourself repeatedly, he says, "What is my job on the planet? What is my job with a capital J?" If you answer, "I don't know," just keep on asking. By the time you're 35, or 40, or 50 or 60, this asking may have taken you to a lot of crazy places. Once the universe is your employer, very interesting things start to happen, even if somebody else is cutting your paycheck.

If you do this, if you check in regularly with yourself and ask what *your* job is, you may avoid a great danger. What's the danger? *That you might end up doing somebody else's job*, maybe without even knowing it. The bee's job is to make honey – let it do it, and do it well, and let the universe take care of the flowers. Imagine lying on your deathbed, and realizing: that wasn't my job, that job I did – I should have been doing another!

Paul Geheeb, I think, was a man who found his job with a capital J, though he was 40 years old and by almost any reckoning a worldly failure when he finally got around to starting his school – with his wife's father's money. You are about to graduate, to *step* away from, Geheeb's school – which Martin Wagenschein, by the way, called not a school but an anti-school. It's our hope that you will step away from this school, or this anti-school, with a sense of self that gives you the courage to look for *your* job on the planet, not someone else's. And though we may not be able to know this, I think it's a pretty good guess that, the truer and sweeter that job is, the more it's likely to affect things you can't even imagine, and may never know, in true and sweet ways.

To symbolize this wish, I'd like to present you each with a small gift along with your diploma. It's a gift that you can eat. It's sweet. And although you can eat it right away if you feel like it, you can also keep it for as long as you want. It's the only food in nature that never goes bad. It was collected by Heinz Herren in Reuti, and it was made for you, unknowingly, by the bees of the Hasliberg.