

COMMENCEMENT SPEAKER FROM HELL

By Michael Ventura

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A graduating high school class eyes the speaker with everything from polite suspicion to impatient disdain. The kids are in a kind of daze, not quite able to believe this day has come -- it don't feel real. They are experiencing two simultaneous and opposite senses of time: Everything's happening too quickly and too slowly, people are moving in double time and slow motion; every word spoken, whether casual or heartfelt, has too much meaning and none at all; they are in a nether world between one order of existence and another -- high school and whatever comes next -- and are discovering that at such times life behaves like a dream. They want to wake but fear what they will wake to. And this cursed speaker is a part of it all, an interval within the dream that must be endured but doesn't have to be listened to. I can't remember my commencement speaker at all -- whether it was a man or a woman, what was said, nothing. I can't even remember that such a speech occurred, though I know it did. I only remember being giddily happy -- high school was over! And underneath that, a great grief: I would never again have a reason to see Mark and Jayne and Dennis and Carl and Sue and Sara and Jean and Glynis and the others every day. (As it turned out, we all disappeared from each other's lives quickly and permanently.) But ... there's that pesky speaker, and he or she must speak -- a fact decreed, it would seem, by some demonic aspect of the graduation dream itself. One last time, high school must assert its high-schoolness and pointedly ignore (or worse, pay mere lip service to) the poignancy of the moment. Celebration must be couched in terms of boredom or something real might happen, and we can't have that. (As Zelda Fitzgerald once wrote, "Families always think the idea is for nothing to happen to people." The diploma perhaps should be printed with just one honest word: Goodbye.)

This speaker ... the kids expect the speaker to spout a shameless mishmash of well-meaning clichés, more to comfort their parents than to instruct them, and they think they could recite in advance the speaker's earnest admonitions, which will amount to:

"Be good, work hard, change the world but be sweet about it and don't tinker too much with the established order which has worked very well for me or I wouldn't have been invited here to tell you to be good and work hard and change the world and don't, for heaven's sake, upset us unnecessarily. Deal?" Between the lines there's a subliminal message, insidious and forceful: "All the changes you read about haven't changed the power of money, kiddo, and if you make good money you'll find that money has a dark magic that will force you to be a lot like me, like us, and then you can get up here and tell some other captive audience to be good, work hard, change the world but politely and not more than you -- who are one of us now -- can bear."

The speaker can be expected to prate about how much the world *is* changing and will change -- but the dullness of the speech mitigates against that message. How different can the world be if dullness is still in such great supply? How much difference do the differences make if everybody is still chomping the same clichés?

What the kids don't realize yet is that, by some feverish fluke of the dream, this particular speaker isn't here to tell them to contribute constructively to the GNP. This speaker is an artist, and a representative of artists, and artists are people whom the nether world follows around; they bring the nether world with them wherever they go. They are

generally not very good at being good -- or at least not very consistent at it; they adore money (though they're loathe to admit this), but tend to spend it recklessly on travel and lovers and questionable habits; though full of grief and the cause of grief, the art of their art is to surrender to wonder -- their "self-expression" is merely a by-product of the attempt to record an often baffled and appalled but always boundless wonder. This makes them not soft but tough, in the purest sense, for those who surrender to wonder cannot often be pushed around by anything less than wonder. Their demons are great and they're prone to horrid mistakes, but they leave behind fragments of incomplete beauty, works which invite you, by their very imperfections, not to sell out your imperfect humanity; your reaction is the completion of every work of art, so the artist is always admitting a grateful dependence on others. And why is the nether world always so near them? Because every artist is a living meeting-place between the here and now and the never-never, one order of existence and another -- all human beings are, really, but artists admit it and live there. They are, in short, not here to tell you to behave.

At least this speaker will be brief:

"If you sign up for a dull life you'll always be afraid of death."

Suddenly some of the kids are surprised to be listening.

"Because dullness *is* death, and what most people are afraid of when they're afraid of death is ... the death they're already living. High school has already taught you that the world doesn't make sense and tends to be cruel. Study history and you'll see it's always been that way, and all our technological tricks haven't changed that. Maybe they've even increased it. People select a dull safe life to protect themselves from the senselessness and the cruelty, but all that does is cut down their maneuvering room. Severely. You want room to maneuver, room to live -- then cultivate dangerousness. I'm here to tell you to be dangerous. I don't mean dangerous-tough or dangerous-brutal -- believe me, the last thing you'll forgive yourself for is the causing of preventable pain. I mean I want you to be dangerous in the sense that nobody can count on you to sign up and toe the line ... nobody can make you accede to anything you feel is wrong ... nobody can make you do anything you don't confirm, for yourselves, in your soul. That's dangerous. You can be counted on to show up but you can't be counted on to bullshit.

"Most of you are already expert hypocrites. You talk a lot about individuality but you worry more about fitting in.

"Dig it: Nobody fits in. That's the big dirty secret. Everybody feels like a stranger. Even, and probably especially, your mother -- and your father and the valedictorian and the prom queen. Everybody feels like a stranger but few are willing to *be* a stranger. Well ... you can't help but be a stranger ... yes, a stranger in a strange, strange land. The whammy, the paradox, is this: The only people who feel at home are the people who are willing to be strangers. Everybody else is a prisoner. You're either a stranger or a prisoner. That's the choice. Be aware of it. Choose.

"I don't know how the world got this way, but I know how it can free itself, and the prophets have known it for a long long time: Treat everyone, and I mean everyone, as though they are as bewilderingly complex as you. 'Cause they are. They may or may not be as smart as you, but you can bet your life -- and every moment, whether you know it or not, you *are* betting your life, no matter what else you think you're doing -- you can bet your life they're just as complex.

"We fucked up the world. Now it's your turn. Yes, you're gonna fuck it up too -- though I hope you do a more interesting job of it than we did. The world is here to be fucked up by the likes of us. That's one of the reasons it's so beautiful. We keep fucking

up, and the world keeps returning the favor with beauty. Just look at the sky. We can pollute it, we can radiate it, but we can't make a sunset ugly. All we can do, if we really try, is kill our own capacity to see its beauty. If we pollute it enough it'll kill us, which is only fair. If that happens, it'll be because more people were willing to be prisoners than strangers.

"Which is why wars happen, and which is why the tigers and elephants and eagles are becoming extinct, and which is why millions of people the world over take so much shit from a handful of the ruling class: because they're afraid to be strangers, they're afraid not to have money, they're afraid not to be liked, they're afraid. Love certainly doesn't make the world go round, but neither does money. The glue that keeps all the crap in place is fear.

"And the place to face that fear is in the mirror. First. Right there.

"And if you think that's a cliché, try it sometime.

"The whammy is, once you face your fear it doesn't necessarily go away. Not usually. It's right there, to be faced again, over and over -- you've just learned to do some facing, is all, and you'll have to do it for the rest of your life. Some days, and some years, you'll be better at it than others. And you'll be just as afraid in a dull life as in a risky fascinating life, so why put up with the dullness?

"OK, I'm done. Your turn, kid."

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