

Commencement Address  
Tony Kushner

The last time I attended a college commencement — it was a couple of years ago and I won't say where — the commencement speaker was an Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court, I won't say which one but it wasn't one of the really scary Justices, not one of the ones who jimmed open a window in the White House and gave you-know-who a leg-up as he clambered his ungainly way into the Oval Office. This Justice was one of the other ones. Instead of offering to the matriculants the usual bromides, advice or inspiration, Associate Justice X took the opportunity to read aloud bad reviews of some of the decisions he'd delivered, and to respond to the reviews at considerable length, even though I don't think any of the critics who'd written the reviews were present at this graduation ceremony. I was sort of touched by his speech because it had never occurred to me that Justices' decisions are reviewed just as plays are reviewed and that Justices probably hate critics as much as playwrights do, at least as much as this playwright does, at least the moronic wicked corrupt critics who criticize me. Associate Supreme Court Justice X had brought with him a huge black ring-binder full of bad reviews, each review carefully preserved under plastic, and it had about it the aspect of being frequently and lingeringly perused, this binder did. And the commencement speech had about it the quality of a grudge match, of a settling of scores. It was not inspirational or uplifting. But I was sympathetic. I found it honest and brave and instructive-by-example: even if you rise as high in life as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court you will be pursued by critics as the damned are pursued by fiends in hell, and you will find yourself grumbling embarrassingly about their reviews, grumbling in inappropriate places, dampening festive occasions. I assume the point the Justice was making, by example, was this: "See, graduating students! It never ends! You will be graded forever! And YOU WILL NEVER BE HAPPY!" The applause after Justice X finished his grim tuition was suitably ashy; but then, under the smiling blue skies of May, under the woozy influence of the heatstroke which perennially adds its charm to graduation ceremonies, everyone promptly forgot everything the commencement speaker had spoken and that giddy graduation mood compounded of jubilation, accomplishment, bankruptcy, terror, and exhaustion carried the day to its traditional sun-shiny apotheosis.

I enjoy commencement because it's a summery affair, a warm-weather ceremony of liberation, lovely young people frantic to feel for the first time since toddlerhood what it's like to be a person rather than a student - and I don't want to harsh anyone's buzz or whatever it is you say nowadays but when you're 80 you will still be waiting to find out what it's like to be a person rather than a student, even if you haven't been a student for 59 years you will still feel more like a student than a person, because in this country, in this world, the only thing we do worse than education is life. Vassar being the great exception to this, I must stipulate to that, I can tell just by looking at you not only how thoroughly and capaciously and meticulously you have been prepared for matriculation, but also how fantastically lively you all are, you are radiant, each and every one of you, your parents are shepping major naches at how radiant and formidable you have become, they're maybe not entirely sure why this effect was so expensive to produce but looking at you robed and mortarboarded and aflame with vision ambition and hope, they are certain it was worth every penny and each drop of spilled blood and they look forward to long years exacting their subtle and exquisitely costly vengeance. They have earned this vengeance, your parents, so you should not complain too much, it will build your character, which, even after four years at Vassar, may yet face further construction and benefit from it.

45 I hope you are aflame with vision ambition and hope, I came here expecting to get a  
contact high from you, what a bummer it would be to discover that you are not aflame, that you  
have managed on this day of days merely to smoulder! A bummer but not a surprise, I mean who  
could blame you, really, hasn't this past year, your senior year, hasn't it been the worst year ever  
in the history of humankind, maybe it's the beginning of the end of the world, but please, you  
50 should not feel personally responsible. Blame someone else, blame your parents, why not? They  
are blaming your grandparents. Or blame the Bush administration, that's what I do; if that gets  
old, blame Ralph Nader. And Happy Graduation!

What to say to the graduating class of 2002, to you vibrant young people leaving college  
and entering the great world beyond just in time to be trampled flat by the Four Horsemen of the  
Apocalypse? "Duck!" might be a good place to start. "Stockpile canned goods and huge vats of  
55 water". Beyond that, what to say, I could read some bad reviews I've gotten, I don't have a ring  
binder but I have several of the most malicious committed to memory, it would be a chance for  
payback for the critics I particularly dislike. But this can hardly be the reason you've invited me.  
If you'd wanted bitterness, you could have asked a Supreme Court Justice, there are 9 of them  
and each is more bitter than the next, except for the one who likes to lead group singalongs  
60 featuring songs of the Old South sung in funny accents, he isn't bitter, just terribly alarming, you  
could have invited him. But you didn't, neither kvetching nor Stephen Foster were what you  
wanted to hear in this speech, among the last words you will hear before you are officially  
diploma-ed and commenced.

You wanted to hear from a playwright, at least some of you did, at least someone at  
65 Vassar did, unless a mistake has been made and you actually meant to invite Tony Kushner the  
British holocaust historian. He might have been a better choice, holocaust with either a big or  
little "H" being something we all have to think about constantly during these very dark days. If  
you meant to invite me, and let's proceed from that assumption, then you wanted a playwright  
and I have to say what a strange choice, what with Gabriel blowing his trumpet and the Book of  
70 Revelations unfolding seal by seal and all; it's as if you'd been warned of years of calamity and  
famine ahead and in response you anxiously stuffed an after dinner mint in your pocket. You  
should have gotten the British Tony Kushner, or maybe Condoleezza Rice, who is I believe  
actually mentioned in the Book of Revelations - I know Stanford University is mentioned, I  
know her boss is mentioned, I know John Ashcroft features prominently, and not pleasantly, with  
75 batwings and horns, really, you can look it up. This is a time of crisis and in a time of crisis we  
all have to focus on getting real, and you, what do you do? You get a playwright to deliver the  
2002 commencement speech.

Thank you for inviting me, but I worry about you. Haven't you been reading the papers?  
Weren't your parents worried when you told them who'd be speaking, didn't they suggest you go  
80 in another direction, maybe get someone who could explain to you how the new arms reduction  
agreement Bush and Putin just signed, which seems to me to leave the number of intact nuclear  
warheads unchanged but allows Bush to go ahead and begin building Star Wars, which seems to  
me proliferation rather than disarmament, you could maybe get someone to explain how this is  
good news and an improvement over an actual arms reduction treaty. I would have bought a  
85 ticket to Poughkeepsie just to hear someone explain that. Am I some sort of gesture, some louche  
trilled cadenza sung while the ship goes under, am I a symptom of your despair, and if I am, why  
couldn't you have gone for something a bit more techno-savvy, someone from the movies,  
Spiderman for instance, why someone from the theater for God's sake, do you want everyone to  
think you're gay?

90 Is that it? Is it because I'm gay? Did you hope to shock your grandparents? But you  
know, since the Bush administration began issuing those warnings every ten minutes that more  
terror is on its way and we apparently can't do Thing One about it, I have been feeling incredibly  
uninterested in sex. And anyway I am a very old-fashioned kind of homosexual, or rather sexual  
95 minoritarian, I am the kind of homosexual sexual minoritarian who believes that sexual  
minoritarian liberation is inextricable from the grand project of advancing Federally protected  
civil rights, and cannot be separated from the liberation struggles of other oppressed populations,  
cannot be achieved isolated from the global struggle for the abolition of the legacy of  
colonialism, cannot be achieved isolated from the global resistance movement against militarism  
and imperialism and racism and fundamentalisms of all sorts, the global movement for the  
100 furtherance of social and economic justice, the global multiculturalist, anti-tribalist identity-  
based movement for pluralist democracy, I am the kind of homosexual who believes that all  
liberation has an inextinguishable aspect that is collective, communitarian, and also millenarian,  
utopian, which is to say rooted in principle, theory, dream, imagination, in the absolute non-  
existence of the Absolute and in the eternal existence of the Alternative, of the Other, in the  
105 insistently unceasingly mutable character of our character, I am an old-fashioned sort of  
homosexual/sexual minoritarian and I think if you wanted a gay commencement speaker in this  
dark day and age you might have chosen one of those newfangled neo-con gay people with their  
own website and no day job. This is a world in which the Netherlands becomes the latest  
European country to lurch to the anti-immigrant anti-Muslim right through the offices of a gay  
110 politician assassinated by an infuriated vegan anti-mink farming gun-toting lunatic, and I am  
simply too old-fashioned and maybe just too old to explain to you how we got from Stonewall to  
Pim Fortuyn, I'm still trying to understand how it is that I pay taxes but I can't marry my  
boyfriend, but I bet you can get the Netherlands and more explained for you on [http://backslash-  
backslash-neocongaypundit.com](http://backslash-backslash-neocongaypundit.com), and maybe you could have gotten that guy, you know,  
115 [whatsisname](http://whatsisname.com), to come to explicate further the future we face of new crusades and the clash of  
cultures and how laws against discrimination and hate crimes are actually bad for gay people.

Perhaps you asked me to make this speech because I am a working artist and you are,  
many of you, graduates-to-be and their parents alike, wondering about the market value of this  
120 diploma you're about to get as you contemplate a career in the arts. Vassar has a, well, you know,  
arty reputation, so I imagine some of you are thinking of careers in the arts and you picked me to  
come talk to you today to give you advice about making a living as an artist. What I usually say,  
when asked, is "Go for it" and "Be prepared for the day when the devil knocks on your door".  
Making a living is much easier than getting a bachelor's degree, and much more of a sure thing  
125 than surviving till 2003; but the bit about the devil is the tricky part, and I wonder if maybe you  
should have asked a rabbi or a minister or an imam, who would had you done so probably be  
standing here telling you that if avoiding doing deals with the devil is important to you, maybe  
you could find a field somewhat less proximate to the infernal realms than the arts.

WHAT AM I DOING HERE is I guess my question, and it seems to me that it's a good  
question to ask in a commencement speech. WHAT AM I DOING HERE, or perhaps another  
130 way of putting it, WHY ME? Which is a very useful question, two simple words which,  
depending on their inflection, can express everything from dark-night-of-the-soul-delving to  
adenoidal self-pitying whininess, either one of which is suitable to the occasion of graduating  
from college. WHY ME? WHAT AM I DOING HERE? Perhaps you invited me to do the  
speech because you know no one in the theater would have the poor taste to try to answer a  
135 question like that.

You could ask your parents WHY ME, if in asking you mean how did I come to be like this; they, after all, made you, at least some of you, no one will ask them to take responsibility for the whole of you, but if in asking WHY ME you are inquiring after the specifics of your specificity, WHY AM I ME AND NOT SOMEONE ELSE, you could begin by looking into  
140 your origins; some of the answers can be found in your home, and by setting the answers you glean through observation, coercion and psychoanalytic psychotherapy in a dialectical spin with the facts of your place in history, in time, your place in the world at large, in the culture which is your larger context, in the ideology you have inherited and I hope transformed by living and which with your psyche is the prism through which your self or your soul is refracted, the light  
145 and air baffle which your flame or the smoke from your smouldering traverses to reach the exterior world, by setting the inner and the outer up as combatants on the epic dramatic stage in your head, you will arrive, maybe by the time you're 80, maybe earlier if you work hard at it, at some understanding of yourself, if you don't fear the dark night of the soul you will; and you won't fear it so much as long as you remember that no one is happy, only Bush is happy; the best  
150 you can hope for is to be happy-ish; remember too that the real value of a dark night of the soul is that it's maybe the surest way of ascertaining that you have one, a soul that is. A few rare souls are genuinely native to daylight but in my experience most of us, if we have souls, have the nocturnal kind; they aren't dark but darkness may be their element, darkness is a comfort to anything so divided against itself. There, see! Who needs a rabbi?

155 Having some answer to the WHY ME question, having done the work to change the way you inflect that question from the adenoidal to the introspective, is useful as you try to answer the other question, WHAT AM I DOING HERE, a question which vast forces of reaction, otherwise known as the devil, the Republican Party, the petrochemical industry, Dick and Lynn Cheney, call them what you will, vast and nearly-ineluctably persuasive and pervasive forces of  
160 reaction will seek to answer for you: you are here to consume and to surrender. You are here to comply, to be in agreement. You are not, these agents of sin and of Satan will tell you, here to do anything, or rather you are not here to ask what to do, or why. The only action, the only agency permissible is the secret compact of compliance you are expected to make with an order so vast it is nearly invisible, the secret surrender you are expected to have made of your own specificity  
165 in the name of an anti-human unjust anti-egalitarian anti-democratic ideology that masks its brutality in the guise of an Individualism that enforces conformity and a Freedom that exists within a desperately circumscribed arena of economic terror, scarcity and selfishness. What you are doing here is knowing never to ask the question WHAT AM I DOING HERE in such a way that your perilous security is imperilled, in such a way that your civilization's failure to provide  
170 for you anything like a civilized security, safety, luxury, home, is exposed through your asking and answering. This has always been true, as I'm sure you have learned in your classes, and in your lives, there have always been these forces, these imps and demons, this terror. But you graduate into a world in which the terror has become exponentially greater, though its aim is essentially unchanged, its aim remains the preservation of the global economy of violence and oligarchy, the preservation of grotesquely unequal distribution of the world's wealth and the human services and societal and cultural infrastructures that go with wealth, its aim remains the  
175 perpetuation of the tragedies of unequal development, its aim remains injustice, and though it doesn't even know it itself, it is one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

180 The answers you provide for yourself to the question WHY ME will be of great consequence to the way you answer WHAT AM I DOING HERE, but if I may succumb to the immemorial nasty habit of commencement speakers since back in the days when the robes you

are wearing were street clothes, and offer you advice: one of the answers to the WHAT question ought to be: I am here to organize. I am here to be political. I am here to be a citizen in a pluralist democracy. I am here to be effective, to have agency, to make a claim on power, to spread it around, to rearrange it, to democratize it, to legislate it into justice. Why you? Because the world will end if you don't act. You are the citizen of a flawed but actual democracy. Citizens are not actually capable of not acting, it is not given to a citizen that she doesn't act, this is the price you pay for being a citizen of a democracy, your life is married to the political beyond the possibility of divorce. You are always an agent. When you don't act, you act. When you don't vote, you vote. When you accept the loony logic of some of the left that there is no political value in supporting the lesser of two evils, you open the door to the greater evil. That's what happens when you despair, you open the door to evil, and evil is always happy to enter, sit down, abolish the Clean Air Act and the Kyoto accords and refuse to participate in the World Court or the ban on landmines, evil is happy refusing funds to American clinics overseas that counsel abortion and evil is happy drilling for oil in Alaska, evil is happy pinching pennies while 40 million people worldwide suffer and perish from AIDS; and evil will sit there, carefully chewing pretzels and fondly flipping through the scrapbook reminiscing about the 131 people he executed when he was governor, while his wife reads Dostoevsky in the corner, evil has a brother in Florida and a whole bunch of relatives, evil settles in and it's the devil of a time getting him to vacate. Look at The White House. Look at France, look at Italy, Austria, the Netherlands. Look at Israel. See what despair and inaction on the part of citizens produces. Act! Organize. It's boring but do it, the world ends if you don't.

And as long as I have slipped and am offering advice, here's some more: Don't smoke, are you crazy? Don't take drugs, aren't there enough chemicals in your shampoo and your apples and your air and your antihistamine, don't drink it makes you sloppy, don't drive an SUV are you crazy, don't make deals with the devil don't even do lunch with the devil don't even take his phone calls; he wants you to write a screenplay for him and he wants to give you NOTES.

Will the world end if you act? Will the world end anyway even if you find an organization, stuff envelopes, give money, organize? Maybe. Quite possibly. These are monstrous times and there's no telling. Look across the globe and when have you ever seen such a dismaying crew in occupation of every seat of power, a certifiable nutcase here, a tinpot dictator there, a feckless blood spattered plutocrat in this office, an unindicted war criminal in that office, miscreants, meshuginahs, maniacs, and every one of them has the means of doing the most appalling damage. You aren't fundamentalists, you have had a superb education and you have learned how to read, you have learned that all reading is interpretation, you are smart readers but we've failed miserably to educate the world and so there are many poor readers out there, many fundamentalists, and every one of them has the means of doing the most appalling damage, every one who wants to can do quite a lot towards bringing the world to an end. But hope isn't a choice, it's a moral obligation, it's a human obligation, it's an obligation to the cells in your body, hope is a function of those cells, it's a bodily function the same as breathing and eating and sleeping; hope is not naive, hope grapples endlessly with despair, real vivid powerful thunderclap hope, like the soul, is at home in darkness, is divided; but lose your hope and you lose your soul, and you don't want to do that, trust me, even if you haven't got a soul, and who knows, you shouldn't be careless about it. Will the world end if you act? Who can say? Will you lose your soul, your democratic citizen soul, if you don't act, if you don't organize? I guarantee it. And you will feel really embarrassed at your ten year class reunion. People will point, I promise

you, people always know when a person has lost his soul. And no one likes a zombie, even if, from time to time, people will date them.

230 The great Polish poet, Czeslaw Milosz has a poem entitled "On Angels" - you can imagine why I was drawn to it - and it concludes by articulating the best possible answer to WHAT AM I DOING HERE and WHY ME: The poet is haunted by a voice:

I have heard that voice many a time when asleep and, what is strange, I understood more or less an order or an appeal in an unearthly tongue:

day draws near another one do what you can.

235 The first time I had to give a commencement speech I was so nervous, I'd been dating this guy, not a zombie, a nice guy, a grad student in Victorian literature — here's another piece of advice, only date people who have read a different set of books than you have read, it will save you lots of time in the library — and I told him I didn't know what to say in this commencement speech and he said "You ought to look at Emerson's commencement address to the Harvard Divinity School," and I said, "Oh of course, I love that" — and here's my last piece of advice, never admit to not having read something. So I went home and read it, and it's so beautiful and so true that I was blocked from writing for several weeks; it's so beautiful and true that after Emerson delivered it, Harvard refused to let him back on campus for thirty years.

240 The Address begins so beautifully I must to read it to you:

245 In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. 250 The mystery of nature was never more happily displayed. And even in rough tough butch Poughkeepsie, even under stormy skies, one hundred and twenty seven years of additional environmental despoliation later, we still know what Emerson is talking about.

255 And then he goes on to say many many extraordinary things, and you should all read Emerson, all the time, talk about a soul divided, talk about a bright soul living in darkness; but I thought this would make a perfect way to conclude; for better advice could one offer to graduates, to citizen souls, than this: "But speak the truth," says Ralph Waldo Emerson,

260 and all nature and all spirits help you with unexpected furtherance. Speak the truth, and all things alive or brute are vouchers, and the very roots of the grass underground there, do seem to stir and move to bear you witness. Good is positive. Evil is merely privative. It is like cold, which is the privation of heat. All evil is so much death and nonentity. Benevolence is absolute and real. The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. The dawn of the sentiment of virtue on the heart, gives and is the assurance that Law is sovereign over all natures; [But speak the truth] and the worlds, time, space, eternity, do seem to break out into joy. It's time to stop talking. Oh it always goes like this, I start out not knowing 265 what to say and before I know it I can't shut up. So commence already! A million billion mazes to you and your parents and your teachers and Vassar for having done so self-evidently magnificent a job. I am certain you are aflame. Hurry hurry hurry, now now now, damn the critics and the bad reviews: the world is waiting for you! Organize. Speak the truth.

Vassar College  
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