

# About Your Graduation: A letter to the class of 2020



*A few years ago, I wrote an “Always Wear Sunscreen” type essay for my writing students at their request. Since then, I’ve recycled that piece and given it to my students every year around this time. When my current bunch found out, they insisted that I write something new since they were facing a much different world than the one from a few years ago. I couldn’t argue with that, and this is what I came up with-*

To the Class of 2020,  
When I graduated high school, it was still possible to believe it was possible to get lost in the world.

Not to date myself, but this was pre-every social media platform except for AIM (worth Googling), which meant you could theoretically keep in touch, but the window you had into someone else’s life was small

to say the least.

Any major life announcement had to be put up as an away message, and even those were kept pretty cryptic. LiveJournals were a little more permissibly invasive, but if you think people spin their fortunes now, you have no idea what kind of back-bending we used to do to make our lives look interesting when all we had at our disposal was a purple background and clip-art.

We didn't really *know* people the way we know them now. For better or worse, we were only ever given pertinent information about twenty percent of our acquaintances, and so it was a lot easier to distinguish our friends from everyone else we interacted with on a regular basis.

Now I'm not sure if we even *have* acquaintances.

It might just be one of the things we lost over the years that went unnoticed because we lost it slowly. It's difficult to lose things abruptly, but losing them gradually is sometimes worse, because one day you go to reach for something and it's simply not there anymore.

I miss having acquaintances. They were a valuable part of life. Not quite friends, but respected colleagues on whatever journey it is you were on. People you could tip your hat to as you passed by them. They weren't expected to be more than that, and they existed as an in-between at a time when it was still okay to be in between one thing and another.

But this isn't about the loss of a term that sounds like "friend," but isn't. It's about the loss of your graduation.

First off, I am not going to tell you that this doesn't suck.

It sucks.

I don't know how much advice I'm going to be able to give you in this letter, but I do know that I want to tell you that it's okay for things to just, flat-out, full-on *suck*.

Right now, a lot of people are having a hard time processing what's happening in the world, because they believe that every situation has an outcome available to it that will *not* suck, and the rest of us know that it doesn't always work that way.

That's not an argument for despair. In fact, I think if you want to avoid despair, acknowledging something's suck-ishness is a great way to wave at despair off in the distance without getting close to it. Like acquaintances, "*This sucks*" is a happy medium when you're somewhere between denial and despondency.

So yes, this sucks.

Many of you are not going to get to experience some of the critical life markers that every young person should have presented to them. Whether or not you care about things like prom or honors night or senior showcase or graduation, you should still be given the chance to accept or dismiss them, because the absence of them in your personal history will sometimes cause them to pop up even more.

That's just a fancy way of saying people love to ask about your prom and if you went and who you went with and if you didn't go, why not?

You are going to be called back to this time in your life a lot, and because this time is now coinciding with what will surely be a seminal time in American history, you'll probably be called back to it more than the rest of us, and trust me, I know what I'm talking about. The first year of my high school experience happened at the same time as Columbine and the last year began with 9/11, so I know all about growing up alongside history.

It is not the easiest thing to be adjacent to, but when I consider that some people at that time were in the *middle* of those experiences and not outside of them, I can't help but feel grateful to still be here writing this to you.

But now there is no more existing outside an experience.

We're all in it now, aren't we?

Some of you have told me you feel guilty being angry or upset that your senior year has been cut short.

Don't.

You can feel however you want to feel, and that's okay. You can send me a message and rant and rave and go on and on, and it'll stay with me. I would just recommend being extra-careful what you say publicly about anything that's happening right now, because while lots of things are getting lost in the shuffle, one day somebody will have the time to go back and read people's thoughts on what was

transpiring, and you don't want to be the person who has their comments taken out of context later on. If that sounds like I'm being paranoid, then fine, call me paranoid, but all the free passes you're getting now as not-quite-adults are about to become quite costly if they haven't already.

You'll notice that I'm not going to watch the way I talk to you here, because our relationship has, like most things, changed. As of now, I'm still your teacher, but I think we all know that's only true in a state of perception that we've created. Perception is having a hard time these days. When you drench the world in reality, marketing drowns first.

I'm not criticizing what we're doing. We're trying to put together a little bit of normalcy until we can get to the great educational disruption-

Summer.

There's a reason people assume things will all get better in July, and it's because we build invisible benchmarks in our life based around the seasons. There are many reasons to be concerned about global warming, but one minor problem that nobody talks about is the fact that places like New England are going to have an identity crisis when they realize they went from four seasons to two. We came unmoored long before the pandemic arrived, and now everything is fluid that used to be immovable.

We've all been unsettled.

I'm sure you've felt it.

Hell, you came up in it. You formed in it. You have developed amidst chaos. You're not the first generation to do so, and I guess you could make the argument that high school feels like chaos even in the best of circumstances, but I also know that I spent most of my freshman year worrying a gunman was going to show up at my school and my senior year included watching planes fly into buildings, and I'm still not sure I would trade those four years for the four you all just had.

That's not a comment on the tragedies I mentioned, but as I write this, if I'm being honest, I have to admit I'm terrified at the thought of going through any of that with social media at our disposal.

Please don't misunderstand me, I love social media. It's done a lot of good.

But it's also revealed deep divides that make every heartache feel isolated in a way that I never felt even when I was at my loneliest growing up.

The price of getting to prove your uniqueness with content and creativity is that many more people got to discover what all the dead, drunk authors learned when they were alive-

Being an individual means spending an ungodly amount of time feeling misunderstood.

This is why I won't tell you I understand who you all are or what you're going through.

I had a prom.

I had an honors night.

I had my graduation.

And it was pretty good, as far as graduations go.

I don't remember much of it.

Most of it is names and speeches.

But one line in one of the speeches has stuck with me for the rest of my life.

I have to paraphrase it, but it boiled down to-

*"We're very proud of those of you who have excelled and come out at the head of your class, but we're also proud of those of you who have struggled and still made it here today."*

A line like that as you're about to enter the world can really bolster you.

I don't know if you would have heard something like that at your graduation, so I'll say it to you now.

Be proud if excelling was easy for you, and be proud if you had to struggle.

In general, just be proud.

As you go through life, particularly now, people are going to have a hard time attacking you once you end up where you're meant to be, so usually, they attack how you got there.

For all the inspirational posters we've created over the years about how important the *journey* is, we have made a cottage industry out of judging people for what their journeys looked like.

It sucks.

See?

It's easier just to say that and then try to move on.

Earlier I said that a slow loss is harder to deal with than an abrupt one, but that doesn't mean the abrupt losses are easy.

Right now, you're dealing with the grief that accompanies a sudden change in an unfamiliar direction.

It's hard to write this and not resort to saying "*In life*" over and over again, but...*In life*...Just kidding.

You might notice that the national conversation right now is centered around fear and change, loss and grief.

We're starting to understand how we deal with fear in this country, but we have a long way to go.

We've never dealt with how we process change.

We're wildly uncomfortable with talking about loss.

Grief?

Forget it.

A lot of us, myself included, spend a lot of time trying to push all of that away from us. We worry that if we integrate them into our lives, we'll end up emotionally unstable.

We worry about how we'll be *perceived*.

The truth is, people who willingly live with loss and fear and change and grief tend to be much more well-adjusted than people like me who have spent a good deal of our lives pretending we're fearless while doing everything in our power to fend off change. I've devoted way too much energy trying to recover from loss as quick as possible, because I thought that's what grieving was. I thought it was the thing that happens five seconds after you lose something or somebody, and that the faster you dealt with it, the faster it would go away.

The point was to make it go away.

What else would you want to do with grief but get rid of it?

It never occurred to me that living with it could have benefits.

I won't tell you what those are, because they're personal and that means they won't be the same for you as they are for me, but trust me, there are benefits to understanding that if loss is a part of life, then grief is a part of living.

Over the past few weeks, I've heard people talking about the time we're in now as though it's a pause.

As if nothing that happens right now matters, and yes, there is something liberating about that idea, and maybe we needed to hear it for our own mental health, but the truth is, there are no pauses in life. Not collective ones anyway.

My dishwasher is currently broken.

I'm trying to find someone to fix it.

I've been told that the dishwasher can't be fixed because there's a pandemic.

I tell the people who can fix the dishwasher that I understand, but that pandemic might stick around for a few years, and I'd like to have a working dishwasher again.

While I can certainly live without one, the idea that there are problems we think we're no longer obligated to solve as long as this is going on makes me think of those people who don't return emails in February because "Ugh, Christmas was so crazy this year."

There are a significant number of people in this world who ricochet from one excuse to the next to stay immobile, and you do not want to be one of those people.

This isn't me lecturing you on productivity, it's me lecturing you on becoming someone who stops trying to make things better.

The way to wave at despair without running toward it is to decide that you will try to solve problems and you will not stop trying.

Most problems will be like a broken dishwasher — not in urgent need of solving, but people are at their best when they have something to focus on fixing.

I don't know if I'll ever get my dishwasher fixed, because I don't want to put somebody's life at risk when I can just wash by hand, but it feels good to have a small problem to worry about when there are so many big problems I'm in no position to even glance at.

Spending your time attempting to solve a small problem is, if you're someone like me, a form of self-care.

So are bath bombs and candles, and I recommend those as well, but lately I've heard a lot of people talk as if being productive is some kind of sin. Nobody should make you feel like you need to be productive, but nobody should make you feel like you don't have to be either.

Feel however you want to feel — and then feel like fixing something that's broken.

Change a light bulb.

Change the batteries in your smoke detector.

Change the oil in your car.

It'll thrill you.

Right now you might be feeling as though you've been thrust into the world.

That would be an understandable way to feel about it, but I'd like to offer you another way of looking at it.

Again — perception, marketing — I've been spinning narratives since before some of you were born.

Here's how I see it-

The world is ready for you now.

Was it ready before this?

Maybe.

But now you get to dive in headfirst.

I bet I know what you're thinking.

You're taking a look at the world and you're saying-

*Yeah, I'll pass.*

I understand.

But while I can't say this is a fun time to be alive, I'm also not sure there was ever a fun time to be alive. Maybe there was a time when nobody knew what the hell was going on, and so they were able to have some degree of fun, but once somebody invented the evening news, it was a hop, skip and a jump to *Do you believe this shit?*

See, I said *shit* in a letter to you, my students.

I told you our relationship had changed.

Now is a terrifying time to be alive, but it's also a fantastic time to solve problems.

It's a great time to contribute.

It's the perfect time to get your hands dirty.

It's an exemplary time to be of service.

It's time you met the world.

I'm sure your parents and your other teachers and a lot of other people in your lives would have preferred to keep you from meeting it for as long as possible, but all of us knew that wasn't feasible, and now here we are.

Luckily, and I say this with all sincerity, your generation is one of the most remarkable that's ever set foot on the face of the earth.

You are creators.

You are empaths.

You are tech-fearless.

You are linguistically acrobatic.

You are artistically prolific.

You are globally conscious in a way I could never have imagined being when I was your age.

And you're all just, you know, in general-

Pretty cool.

And I wish there was a way to celebrate you with all the usual methods of fanfare, but unfortunately, that's not going to be possible.

It sucks.

It really sucks.

But while you are not going to get to have a memory of walking across a stage to get a diploma or being named Prom King and Queen or driving with your friends one last time to a diner, the hour dangerously close to curfew, enjoying one more evening together before you all head off to college-

You should know that some people never recover from all that.

Even when those experiences are less than stellar, it's easy to get bogged down in them. After high school, major life events are few and far between, especially for those of us who don't want to get married, buy a house, have kids, or open a fusion restaurant in a trendy neighborhood.

We're pulled to big events. It's only natural.

But if those events aren't available to you in your past, it only stands to reason that you might gravitate forward rather than backward.

And would that be such a bad thing?

There is going to be more loss in your future, that's assured. More loss, more change, and many more broken dishwashers. (They're the most unreliable of all appliances.)

But there's also going to be so much to look forward to.

Pain is assertive, but so is progress.

You are about to enter an intimidating and invigorating chapter in your life.

It's a chapter where you can eat cookies for dinner and stay up as late as you want and make your own decisions and forge your own path and learn what a utility bill is and make money and spend money and lose money and make friends and lose friends and make bread and eat bread and think for yourself outside the parameters of personal essays and book reports-

And change the world.

Every crisis comes with opportunity, and it's possible that this crisis was the world's way of welcoming you to it so you could get to work on making it better.

Maybe it didn't want to wait any longer to see what you had up your sleeve.

It still sucks, but it's a nice thought.

I'm sorry about your graduation.

Mine was lovely, but if I'm being honest, I've had a lot of lovely occasions since then.

They weren't all nights of pomp and circumstance, but many of them didn't need to be.

Some of them were sitting in a friend's backyard listening to them tell a story.

Some were driving home from work remembering that I had leftover pizza in the fridge.

Some were a phone call with a friend I hadn't spoken to in a while.  
In fact, that's been happening a lot lately.

Sometimes when you're in-between the moments everyone tells you are going to be the biggest events of your life, you find smaller instances of joy that you later realize are closer to life not just in spite of their lack of ceremony, but *because* of it.

Life happens during the pauses, because there are no pauses.

Last year I set a world record for something pretty silly, and the next day my niece was born.

I couldn't tell you anything about the messages I received congratulating me on the record, but I could recite to you verbatim the text message my brother sent me letting me know I was an uncle.

There is so much to look forward to even at a time when it's so tough to try looking ahead.

It's time to start thinking about what comes next.

It's time for us all to graduate.

A graduation is a way of saying *"You're ready to move forward."*

But let's be honest, you don't need caps and gowns to tell you that.

You know you're ready.

And so does everybody else.

It's been a privilege teaching you how to write.

Go write yourself a story, and make it a good one.

Now, if you'll excuse me—

I have to teach myself how to fix a dishwasher.