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THE GRADUATION SPEECH

“ . . . peculiar travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God ”

- Kurt Vonnegut, American author – from the novel “Cat’s Cradle”

This week, apropos of absolutely nothing, I would like to share something with you written by someone far more talented than I. The speech that follows is, I believe, about travel. But it is a generic kind of travel, the kind we all began just after leaving school, as we cautiously trod the unprotected path that led us to and through the forest of self-dependence.

A friend sent me a copy of the commencement address alleged to have been made by the writer Kurt Vonnegut to the graduating class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in June of 1997. It was a very short commencement speech, but I hope that you will find, as I did, enough truisms to justify sharing it with those who are yet to graduate. (By the way, the speech was not made by Vonnegut – but the message still stands on its own).

“Ladies and gentlemen of the class of 97.

Wear sunscreen.

If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it. The long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proved by scientists, whereas the rest of my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience. I will dispense this advice now.

Enjoy the power and the beauty of your youth. Oh, never mind. You will not understand the power and the beauty of your youth until they’ve faded. But trust me, in 2- years, you’ll look back at photos of yourself and recall in a way you can’t grasp now how much possibility lay before you and how fabulous you really looked.

You are not as fat as you imagine. Don’t worry about the future. Oh worry, but know that worrying is as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum. The real troubles in your life are apt to be things that never crossed your worried mind, the kind that blindsides you at 4:00 pm. on some idle Tuesday.

Do one thing every day that scares you.

Sing.

Don’t be reckless with other people’s hearts. Don’t put up with people who are reckless with yours.

Floss.

Don’t waste your time on jealousy. Sometimes you’re ahead, sometimes you’re behind. The race is long and, in the end, it’s only with

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yourself. Remember compliments you receive. Forget the insults, If you succeed in doing this, tell me how.

Keep your old love letters. Throw away your old bank statements.

Stretch.

Don't feel guilty if you don't know what you want to do with your life. The most interesting people I know didn't know at 22 what they wanted to do with their lives. Some of the most interesting 40-year-olds I know still don't.

Get plenty of calcium. Be kind to your knees. You'll miss them when they're gone.

Maybe you'll marry, maybe you won't. Maybe you'll have children, maybe you won't. Maybe you'll divorce t forty, maybe you'll dance the funky chicken on your 75th wedding anniversary. Whatever you do, don't congratulate yourself too much or berate yourself either. Your choices are half chance. So are everybody else's.

Enjoy your body. Use it every way you can. Don't be afraid of it or what other people think of it. It's the greatest instrument you'll ever own. Dance, even if you have nowhere to do it but your living room.

Read the directions, even if you don't follow them. Do not read beauty magazines. They will only make you feel ugly.

Get to know your parents. You never know when they'll be gone for good. Be nice to your siblings. They're your best link to your past and the people most likely to stick with you in the future, Understand that friends come and go, but with a precious few you should hold on. Work hard to bridge the gaps in geography and lifestyle, because the older you get, the more you need the people who knew you when you were young.

Live in New York City once, but leave before it makes you hard. Live in Northern California once, but leave before it makes you soft.

Travel.

Accept certain inalienable truths: Prices will rise. Politicians will philander. You, too, will get old. And when you do, you'll fantasize that when you were young, prices were reasonable, politicians were noble, and children respected their elders.

Don't expect anyone else to support you. Maybe you have a trust fund. Maybe you'll have a wealthy spouse. But you never know when either one might run out.

Don't mess too much with your hair or by the time you're 40 it will look 85. Be careful whose advice you buy but be patient with those who supply it. Advice is a form of nostalgia. Dispensing it is a way of fishing the past from the disposal, wiping it off, painting over the ugly parts and recycling it for more than it's worth.

But trust me on the sunscreen"

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