

(Not So) Fond Farewells

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The sun begins to dim. It sits right behind the bleachers in an almost perfect position; a Kodak moment, some would say. The weather is just right, and for some strange reason, the gnats and mosquitoes have found some other party to invade. All the proud parents, eager aunts and uncles, friends, and administration can sit back and enjoy commencement.

For some, it represents years of hard work, a culmination of all their effort packed into one special night. For others, it represents the end of what they dreaded most: school. Despite what feelings students have going into it, the overwhelming consensus is that this day is supposed to be special. Consequently, some go to great lengths to ensure a spectacular ceremony: there's the week of rehearsals, with countless hours of preparation spent in sweltering heat, the gowns, tassels, and all other adornments, the dry-cleaner, the hairstylist, and the grandparents who flew all the way from Kentucky. And then, there are the speeches.

In some schools, a competition is set up for students who wish to share their reflective thoughts at graduation. However, most schools employ the traditional speech requirements: valedictorian and salutatorian. Most students set out to write the perfect speech, whether it be about freshman English class, their years spent on the football team, their best friends, or about what they have learned throughout the past four years. The idea of composing a perfect speech leaves most speakers baffled, worried, and extremely reflective. After all, it is their last shot to make a lasting impression.

The graduation speaker has a unique and prized opportunity to address the crowd with a message of his or her choice. However, every privilege comes with a string attached, and there is only so much pulling the administration will allow. In one California school district, a

valedictorian was not allowed to present his speech because he planned to talk to the crowd about “God's love” and “Jesus' life.” He was barred from speaking at graduation and was ruled against in the federal court. The separation of church and state is an obvious tenet of the U.S. Constitution, but so is freedom of speech.

For one suburban school, graduation took an unexpected turn when class valedictorian, Kareem Elnahal, said that his education at Mainland was "entirely hollow." It was unexpected for two reasons: his speech had to be approved a week before graduation and those two words would have never made it past the censoring eyes of Mainland's English department and also because Mainland is considered one of the best schools in New Jersey. In fact, Mainland was ranked seventh in the nation in 2002. In his graceful manner of speech, Kareem pierced the crowd with two powerful words. Before continuing, he gave a lengthy pause, which was enough for everyone to digest what had just been said.

One school administrator commented in *The Washington Post*, “Sometimes the valedictorian has the highest GPA, but they don't always have the finger on the pulse of the class.” As true as this may ring for many schools across the country, on that “perfect” day, it was as if Kareem put a stethoscope to all 410 students at Mainland Regional High School. The principal, Dr. Robert Blake, went up to the podium to persuade him to finish but was silenced and embarrassed by the roars of almost every student there. Shouts could even be heard in the crowd: “Let him finish!” “This is America ... Freedom of speech!”

Kareem did finish his speech but did not receive his diploma that day. He walked off the football field to the backdrop of cheers in the crowd and a standing ovation in the student section. For almost a month after his fiery rhetoric, people wrote to newspapers debating the controversy. Kareem's mom picked up his diploma towards the end of the summer, and Kareem

has yet to speak with any of the administration since graduation, despite numerous pleas from Dr. Blake.

People say that Kareem, who is of Egyptian descent, looks like former Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, but it is his manner of speech that draws the most attraction. He is extremely eloquent and sophisticated, yet his words are not obtuse and his sentences are considerably short. Kareem is very soft spoken, never bitter or harsh in tone, but he is also semi-rebellious, in the sense that his questions tend to catch people off guard. He is extremely likable yet he holds strong opinions.

“I really didn't like high school,” Kareem stated bluntly. “I didn't understand the structure of the education system. Education is answering questions, and they didn't ask the right questions.”

His discourse on why he wrote the speech was quite compelling. Essentially, Kareem was disappointed and felt that there needed to be change. “I couldn't have lived with myself if I went up there and wrote a generic speech.” he said. “This was something that I felt was right inside.”

Tiffany Schley, the valedictorian of Brooklyn's High School of Legal Studies in 2004, was in a very similar situation. She had “trashed” the school in her graduation speech, although for different reasons, and the school's chancellor, Joel Klein, refused to hand over her diploma. After a public outcry, Klein apologized for the incident but refused to personally give her the diploma.

Dr. Blake and other school administrators, along with numerous parents and some students, felt that Kareem's speech ruined the students' graduation. Dr. Blake admitted in the newspaper that Kareem highlighted many important issues that the school would take into serious consideration but that it was the wrong time for him to address them. After all, his speech

was unauthorized, which potentially speaks to his integrity. But Kareem didn't have any reservations about whether or not this was the "right" forum. "I felt very strongly about this," he said, "and I wanted to get my feelings across to a large audience that I was disillusioned with my education. I didn't see anywhere else where it would work better."

If it was conversation that Kareem was looking for, then he was as successful as Bill Clinton in the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The controversy ruminated for weeks and people from different cities commented on his bravery and agreed with the need for change. More and more issues were being brought up in the newspapers. People were adamant about change and the failing American education system. On the other side of the spectrum, people were severely upset with Kareem's lash against American education.

But what happens when a school curbs the individuality of the speaker, and the desire to speak the truth in an original, heartfelt address? The valedictorian of the California school was robbed of his right in that sense. He refused to alter the speech despite being given the opportunity to do so. Kareem knew that the school would not allow him to "speak his mind," but how would he really know if he never tried? What the question boils down to is where one draws the line in graduation speeches: Censorship or originality? Force or truth?