

Convocation Address, June 5, 2018

Chancellor Romanow, President Stoicheff, graduates and their families, fellow honorees, good friends, ladies and gentlemen: I am staring at a smart crowd of young people who are currently making their families very proud. As of today, you graduates have the distinction of holding a degree in your field of study. The university has honoured me with the task of sending you into the world with one or two servings of wisdom.

I'm thinking of myself, today, as a sort of community elder, a man grown old enough to be sought out for his advice. I might very well be the oldest person in this assembly. And I'm not even sure what good old people are these days. Maybe loaning money to their kids.

My advice this afternoon comes from a long history of screw-ups, youthful vanity, and acts of beer-fuelled spontaneity that, only now, seem inconsiderate, insensitive, or ill-advised.

Here is an early example. When I was in elementary school, I had a friend named Kenny Benbow. He had poor coordination, and he walked with a stiff, awkward gate. He had trouble with his school work, but he was a wizard at the piano. He came from a family of working class Welsh immigrants, all of whom could sing "D'ye Ken John Peel with his Coat so Gay." Kenny and I would play among the

excavations and dirt mounds for new houses under construction. On the cold afternoons, his parents would call us in for tea.

One day when I was in grade four, my friends and I were spreading joy and understanding in the schoolyard. We had discovered that if one of us distracted a kid while the other went down on all fours behind him, the first guy could push him and he would crash to the ground. Ha ha ha, we would say. We were such wondrous little marvels.

On that day I pulled this trick on Kenny Benbow. Kenny went flying to the ground, and then he glared up at me as though I were like all the other bullies in the schoolyard who had pushed and taunted him. It took me about a week to apologize to Kenny, but the damage had been done. I would forever be the boy who pushed Kenny Benbow because it would be such a funny trick. My son Will, like Kenny Benbow, is autistic. And like Kenny Benbow, he is a whiz on the piano. And like Kenny, he too was bullied in the schoolyard.

I'm a writer by vocation. We are very good at remembering all the dumb things we did when we were younger, all the thoughtless little cruelties we committed for a laugh, in the cause of thoughtless pleasure. To this day, I regret pushing Kenny Benbow in the schoolyard. To this day, I regret my selfish lapses of awareness, my heedless dismissals of people I had no time for, my pathetic little abuses of power, my lapses of kindness and patience towards people who may have needed a gesture of good will from me, who needed me to be present.

I guess I must have acquired some good intentions as I grew up. When I was a young man in Edmonton, I came upon a couple having a drunken spat outside a

bar in a tough part of town. The man began to pummel his wife and I decided to step in. *Stop beating that woman*, I cried, with all the moral outrage I could muster. Predictably, the man went after me, but he was so drunk that he could hardly even see his target. Perhaps I was congratulating myself at my skill in evading his blows when, out of nowhere, something heavy collided with my head. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that it was the purse of the woman I was hoping to defend.

“Stop interfering!” she cried.

I retired from the field of battle at that moment, perhaps dimly aware that I had learned a lesson, that there are subtler ways of intervening in a fight between drunken lovers.

Later, when I was a grad student living in the States, I fell under the weight of a bad depression. Graduate school will do that to you. I wandered into a café, ordered coffee, and swam around for a while in my own gloom, little knowing that I looked as despairing as I was feeling. The waitress who had brought my coffee returned and touched me on the shoulder and said, *Are you okay?* I could have been a psychopath, a ne'er-do-well, an abusive raging drunk, but my waitress risked crossing that line between herself and a stranger, and said to me, *Are you okay?* Try and imagine how just that simple gesture helped to restore me on that night. In the good Samaritan department, I think she got it just right.

When you grow old, kindness comes easier, compassion comes more readily with the territory, and I wonder sometimes who that boy was who up-ended Kenny Benbow and laughed about it among his friends.

Perhaps I'm expected to cheer you on to successful careers, to tell you that nothing worthwhile in this life is achieved without back-breaking labour, to go out into the world and make your mark, to climb ladders and mountains to greater glory because the world is now, officially, your oyster.

But what I really want to say to you is take out your ear buds now and then and listen to people you've never met before. Listen to their stories. Not merely to feel sorry for them, but to find empathy and common cause with them. Wisdom and morality begin when you start to listen, when you see beyond the differences to the things that make us all human. Don't wait until you're as old as I am. As the celebrated writer George Saunders recently said to a gathering like this one, try to speed up the compassion campaign. And once in a while, dare to ask the question of a stranger in distress, *Are you okay?*

Thank you.

David Carpenter, D. Litt.