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LISTEN TO ME, LAERTES!

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Soon it will be Spring and commencement speeches will bloom along with the flowers, spraying gratuitous advice from one generation to the next. Before there were such speeches, there were poems written to advise youth how to conduct themselves. I have a collection of such poems, probably familiar to most of you, to get you in shape for this annual ritual.

I. William Shakespeare

The first is from the Bard, assuming that there really was a Shakespeare writing plays in 1603. This is the famous speech Lord Polonius made to his son Laertes in Hamlet, Act I, Scene 3. Laertes has returned from his studies in France to Denmark for the coronation of King Claudius and is about to board the ship for the return trip, when his father stops him with this timeless advice:

Yet here, Laertes! aboard, aboard, for shame!
The wind sits in the shoulder of your sail,
And you are stay'd for. There; my blessing with thee!
And these few precepts in thy memory
See thou character. Give thy thoughts no tongue,
Nor any unproportioned thought his act.
Be thou familiar, but by no means vulgar.
Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel;
But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
Of each new-hatch'd, unfledged comrade. Beware
Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
Bear't that the opposed may beware of thee.
Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;
Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy,

But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy;
For the apparel oft proclaims the man,
And they in France of the best rank and station
Are of a most select and generous chief in that.
Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.
This above all: to thine ownself be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell: my blessing season this in thee!

Well, a lot of good it did both of them. Polonius, apparently not expecting his advice to have impact, sends spies to report on Laertes' reported gambling and wenching. Soon after Laertes ships out, Hamlet kills Polonius and the daughter of Polonius, Ophelia, does herself in by drowning. Laertes returns to avenge the death of his father and the derangement of his sister. After challenging Hamlet to a duel, he stabs him with a sword he has dipped in poison. In the heat of the duel, swords are exchanged and Laertes himself receives a fatal stab. Shakespeare must have loved death. It was his favorite tool for clearing the stage.. Over the centuries, Polonius has often been played as a fool, but in modern times he is often portrayed as a Machiavellian, dark and deeply involved in the murder of Hamlet's father.

T.S. Eliot seems to be speaking of Lord Polonius in this passage from the

“Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock”

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

II. Rudyard Kipling

The next poem is from the jingomaster of the British Empire, Rudyard Kipling.

Its hopeful title "If" is from the first word of this didactic poem which sets out the qualities that a young male should have to become a man.

It is tempting to believe that the poem was written for his son, Jack. However, Jack would not be born until 1897, two years after the poem was written.

In his autobiography, Kipling writes that he was inspired to write the poem by the actions of Dr. Leander Jameson, the leader of the Jameson Raid. That raid in late 1895 and early 1896 was an attempt to stir up rebellion against the Boers and was a precursor to the Second Boer War. The raid failed and Jameson was captured and turned over to the British. He was tried and convicted in London with a resulting sentence of fifteen months imprisonment. Nevertheless, in a swell of anti-Boer sentiment, he was celebrated in the British press and in society and in 1904, Jameson became Prime Minister of the Cape Colony and one of the founders of the Union of South Africa.

IF

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise.

If you can dream---and not make dreams your master;
If you can think---and not make thoughts your aim,

If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same,
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings,
And never breathe a word about your loss:
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings---nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And---which is more---you'll be a Man, my son!

Rudyard and Carrie Kipling's son John (who was called Jack by his parents) turned 16 when Great Britain entered the War to End All Wars. Full of patriotism, he had tried to enlist on his own, but was rejected because of his poor eyesight. His parents were also eager that he do his part for Olde England and Rudyard used his influence with the Irish Guards to get him a commission as a Lieutenant. In September, 1915, he was sent into the Battle of Loos and died on his first day of combat at the age of 17. In this war, the first to be heavily industrialized, the Brits out-numbered the Germans two to one, but experienced twice as many casualties due to shortages in artillery and ammunition. The battle was the first in which Great Britain used poison gas. Unfortunately, some of the gas drifted back into the British trenches, killing a few young patriots and incapacitating

many.

Fifty thousand Brits died in this horrible battle and twenty thousand were buried in unmarked graves. Jack's comrades saw him go down, but his body was not identified until 1992. His parents refused to accept his death until long after hostilities ceased. They spent much of their time supporting efforts to locate and rebury the fallen. Rudyard did not do any serious writing ever again, with the exception of a history of the Irish Guards, in which Jack received barely a mention. His frustration was expressed in the call and answer poem "My Boy Jack".

"Have you news of my boy Jack?"
Not this tide.
"When d'you think that he'll come back?"
Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.

"Has any one else had word of him?"
Not this tide.
For what is sunk will hardly swim,
Not with this wind blowing, and this tide.

"Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?"
None this tide,
Nor any tide,
Except he did not shame his kind —
Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.

Then hold your head up all the more,
This tide,
And every tide;
Because he was the son you bore,
And gave to that wind blowing and that tide.

Rudyard Kipling's bitter summary of the Great War was this: "If any question why

we died, tell them, because our fathers lied”.

III. Max Ehrmann

The next poem will take a little longer to set up as it concerns our forgotten Hoosier Poet, Max Erhmann of Terre Haute. Max was an other worldly sort. He had grown up poor in a respectable German family. His oldest brother, Emil, had some commercial success through owning a coal mine and operating a factory that manufactured overalls. Emil put Max through DePauw University (they were German Methodists) where he received a degree in English Literature. His generous brother then sent him to Harvard for two years where he studied a lot of philosophy and a little bit of law. Upon his return to Terre Haute in 1898 he became a deputy prosecutor for Vigo County for two years and was successful enough to have been offered his party's nomination for Prosecutor. Max declined, as he found the people he had to deal with in criminal law disgusting.

Terre Haute was a rip-roaring town in the early 20th Century, sporting an estimated 50 brothels and 500 ladies of the evening. That tradition continued, though much diminished, until 1969 when Mayor Leland Larrison ran for re-election on a platform that included legalization of prostitution or, at least leaving the 12 remaining brothels untouched. The President of Indiana State University, one block east of the bordello district, had demanded the houses be shut down. Mayor Larrison responded, “If the college will get rid of the beatniks, kooks, and hippies over there, I'll shut down the

houses". The Vigo County Sheriff stepped in to raid the brothels and Terre Haute has been a dull town ever since. Max spent the rest of his short legal career working for his brother's overall company, sending letters threatening legal action to debtors and doing other small tasks to support the enterprise. He retired in 1912 at the age of forty and spent the rest of his life in the economically unrewarding pursuit of literature, particularly poetry of the inspirational variety.

Max maintained a small apartment on North Sixth Street and had a habit of walking thirty blocks east to Deming Park every day. He was always dressed formally with derby and gold-knobbed cane and was the epitome of courtesy, tipping his derby to all whom he encountered. On weekends, he had an open car and would pick up his girlfriend, a teacher named Bertha King. In good weather they would go picnicking together. After decades of courting, Max married Bertha a few months before his death in 1945 at the age 72.

She devoted the rest of her life to publishing his poetry and his other works. The city of Terre Haute was important to Ehrmann and he gave tribute to the city in this poem, cleverly called "Terre Haute".

What various aspirations man pursues!
It matters not what visions lure,
Here may ambition all its talents use;
Here is the world in miniature.

A chilling thought to those of us intimately acquainted with Terre Haute.

Max might have made more of a name for himself if he had settled in New York or Chicago, but he was perfectly content to live out his life in Terre Haute. He was president of the Terre Haute Literary Club and was registered as a speaker

with the Central Lyceum Bureau in Indianapolis. Max had a casual friendship with James Whitcomb Riley, and like Riley, he signed up for lecture tours and would travel about reading his poetry to whomever would pay him for the privilege of listening. The poem for which he is best remembered did not become popular until long after he had died and because of questions about its provenance, he initially did not even get credit for writing it. As Max had no issue, he could not address this poem to his children. However, the flower children of the 1960's seemed to find a great message in his plea for complacency. The poem, which is entitled "Desiderata" was plastered on posters, t-shirts, and aprons. It was often set to music and there are numerous musical renditions available on YouTube. Ehrmann was a Harvard lawyer who did not forget to copyright his work. "Desiderata" was copyrighted in 1927 but was probably written years earlier.

DESIDERATA

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.
As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit.
If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter;
for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.
Keep interested in your career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery.
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals;
and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself.
Especially, do not feign affection.
Neither be critical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.
Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself
with imaginings.

Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle
with yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars;
you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be,
and whatever your labors and aspirations,
in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful.
Strive to be happy.

© Max Ehrmann 1927

Robert L. Bell, d/b/a Crescendo Publishing Company (Copyright forfeited 976)

The poem's route to popularity was unusual. In the 1960's, the rector of Old St. Paul's Anglican Church in Baltimore, copied the poem, with attribution to Max Ehrmann, and placed the poem in the church's hymnals. The sheets on which the poem was copied also bore an inscription which included the founding date of the church: "St Paul's Church, Baltimore, 1692." Members of the congregation forwarded the poem to their friends and it soon became widely distributed, often with the notation "Found in St Paul's Church, Baltimore, 1692". When Adlai Stevenson died in a London Hotel in 1965, a copy of the poem was found by his bedside. An article in the New York Times speculated that he intended to include the poem with his Christmas cards. After the poem became a pop sensation and was commercially exploited by poster companies and their ilk, a Boston publisher who had purchased all of Ehrmann's intellectual property attempted to enforce the copyright. A federal district court ruled that the

copyright had been forfeited because the copyright holder had waited too long to make his claim.

If there were to be an epigraph for all of Ehrmann's work, it might be these lines from his poem "Worldly Wisdom," in which gentlemen of a certain age can find comfort:

"If you have gathered nothing in the time of youth,
Your later years can be lonely, sad, uncouth.
Experience is the crown of age.
How comely to gray hair is truth".

IV. Mary Schmich

The fourth poem (actually a prose poem) which will conclude this exercise was written in 1997 by Mary Schmich, a lady much younger than most of us here tonight. Schmich is a columnist in the Chicago Tribune and is better known as the creator of the comic strip Brenda Starr. Schmich wrote this article as a parody of commencement speeches but it rang so true that a legend arose on the internet that it was actually delivered by Kurt Vonnegut. It does have those qualities that we admire in Vonnegut: sarcasm, cynicism, and zany humor. Schmich's column has been abbreviated so I can make fair use of it here.

Wear Sunscreen

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.

.....

Don't worry about the future. Or 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 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 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.

.....

Enjoy your body. Use it every way you can. Don't be afraid of it or of 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.

.....

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.

Respect your 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."

Author: Mary Schmich (USA)

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V. Kurt Vonnegut

About a month after this column appeared in the Tribune, a prankster copied it and attributed it to Kurt Vonnegut who supposedly gave this speech at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology commencement ceremony in 1997. Schmich was able to get another column out of this confusion. She had called Kurt Vonnegut and was surprised when he answered his own phone. He was aware of the story and complimented her on her wit, noting that it wasn't quite the same as his wit.

So, I started this talk with Shakespeare and I am ending it with Vonnegut. Isn't that a nice transition? We know little about Shakespeare and too much, perhaps, about Kurt Vonnegut. His sparkling wit notwithstanding, Vonnegut was seen by many as a crabby cynic who had a very dark view of the future. The road he took to fame and fortune was not easy.

His once wealthy parents might have survived the great depression had they not squandered their inheritances. In 1944, his mother committed suicide on Mother's Day

just as Vonnegut had returned to Indianapolis on military leave prior to shipping out with the U.S. Army for duty in Europe. His writing is haunted by her suicide. The family had been disappointed that the Army had taken him as an enlisted man and not an officer. He arrived in France after D-Day and was promptly captured in the Battle of the Bulge. As a POW, he was sent by the Germans to a work detail in Dresden which was soon to undergo massive fire bombing by the British and the Americans in which an estimated 100,000 Germans perished. Vonnegut, who was working deep underground in a slaughter house, escaped death but was put into service extricating bodies and heaping them on a pile so that flame throwers could complete their incineration. Those of you who have been exposed to burning human flesh know what a unique experience that can be.

After the War, Vonnegut cobbled together enough college credits to be admitted to a graduate program in anthropology at the University of Chicago. He left after the faculty rejected three proposed master's theses. Years later, in 1971, the University relented and accepted his break-through novel "Cat's Cradle" as a substitute for his thesis and awarded him a Master's degree in Anthropology.

Vonnegut had no commercial success with his writing until he reached middle age and never received much respect from critics who wrote him off as a mere author of science fiction. What's more, he had two lousy marriages and was often estranged from his children. At times he was suicidal.

During his life, Vonnegut gave five commencement addresses and none of them were cynical; rather they were humble and emphasized pleasure in simple things. In his

last two speeches he spoke of his favorite uncle, Alex Vonnegut, who would in summer take to the shade of a tree back in Indianapolis and offer to share his lemonade. “If this isn’t nice, what is,” Uncle Alex would always say.

Vonnegut’s advice to the new graduates was to be kind and to honor the teacher who had taught them the most. Easy listening. Could anything be nicer?

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