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Grad Speech

A wise man once told me, never start a speech with a quote. Well I defy you, author of *Speechwriting for Dummies*, because I think Oscar Wilde has some very fitting words for the occasion: “This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.” I think most of us on these bleachers can identify with the sentiment. In our chain of formal education, we’ve always known what the next link will be. Not, necessarily, what it will hold, but we rest assured knowing that it will be there. After Pre-school, we have Kindergarten. Good. Got it. Kindergarten, off to Elementary School. Bring it on. Middle School. High School. College. For some, the chain continues from here, but for most, this is our final link. The anticipation has been building for years, waiting for the day when essay prompts and project deadlines no longer dominate our planners. Yet, it seems our desire to escape this cycle is offset only by the urge to preserve it. I think we’ve all found a certain comfort in the structure formal education lends to our lives. We know what is asked of us. We know what to do.

As we move beyond U.C.S.C., Seniors, *we* assume that responsibility. *We* have to be the ones asking ourselves to do, to learn, to complete, to apply. No more syllabi delineating what the next ten weeks will hold. It’s intimidating! I get it. Boy do I get it. But take comfort in knowing that **we are prepared**. For UCSC has taught us not what to think, but *how* to think—critically and intelligently. Stevenson’s Core Course is a testament to what the Greek historian Plutarch argued: “The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled.” Look at that reading list: The Bible, The Koran, The Tao,

Plato, Freud, Marx, Sartre, Machiavelli, Gandhi. These aren't collections of facts and statistics; they're dynamic works, compiled in an endeavor to understand our world. These are texts that facilitate interpretation, challenge reasoning, spur conflict; some tackle life's unanswerable questions; some leave them for you to figure out for yourself. I take pride in how this University has taught us to think. To question the information presented to us, to recognize the biases embedded in our variant upbringings, to breach boundaries and close gaps. We have the tools to do this. And we have the tools to succeed.

The people here at UC Santa Cruz are insightful, passionate, quirky individuals, and I speak for all of us when I say it will be a challenge to carry on day to day without them in close reach. Knowing this, I turn to a favorite of mine, Kurt Vonnegut, for encouragement: "It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever." Graduation doesn't mark an end for us, but simply a milestone. And regardless of distance, your friendships will stay with you. Because in shaping you, they have become you, with you always.

Now I've been to a few graduations, and I tend to see the same thing over and over: graduation speakers, my age, dispensing life advice, urging their peers to travel while they have the chance, to disavow consumerism, or work towards the greater good. Look, Seniors. I am in no position to give advice. I have a podium and a microphone, and that's about all I'm sure of right now. I stand in solidarity with you, not above, not below, but alongside. And while I'm not going to tell you what to do, I have no qualms

in telling you what *not* to do. ***Don't*** listen to your parents' friends. Let me clarify. Don't listen to your parents' friends who say, "Stay in school as long as you can." To the ones who say, "There's no jobs out here," or "These are the best years of your life!" These words disguise themselves as well-meaning advice, but they're disheartening and erroneous. We're graduating. For those of you in denial, look around. Draped in gowns, topped with caps, we're here. And that's right where we should be. And while I'm on the subject of telling people what not to do, family, friends. I beg of you. If we Seniors had a nickel for every time one of you asked us, "What's your plan after college?" or "Are you scared?" there would *be* no budget crisis. So give us a couple weeks. Wait 'til we move back in, eat all your food, and *then* you can start pestering us.

Seniors, do you remember the first essay you wrote for this University? I do. I remember 'cause the first thing I did after reading the prompt was look up what the hell *existentialism* was. Our first assignment was to interpret Sartre's assertion that all humans are "**condemned to be free.**" Sure, it's a condemnation, in the sense that it's inescapable. But this freedom—the inability to refuse choice or action—is also a gift. We're free, seniors. Recognize that freedom. Make your own meaning. Stay young. Stay curious. Serve your soul. And congratulate yourselves, 'cause you have a zero-page paper due never!