

## Valedictory Speech

Thank you President Blair and thank all you all for being here today.

When I was a sophomore in high school, a teacher casually said something during class that would stick with me to this very day. I would like to start off by sharing what He said. He said “If you could know every detail of a person’s life, you could not help but love them.”

When I first heard this I was skeptical. How could I love, let alone like, let alone tolerate some of the people in my life that were so fundamentally different than myself. Those who lie, those who cheat, those who steal, those with different political views than my own, those who drive the speed limit, those who enjoy eating olives, and the list goes on.

Despite my skepticism, this quote followed me. It would replay in my head whenever I would think negatively about another person.

I could be late for class, rushing out the door, cereal bowl in hand, and as I would be driving I would conveniently get stuck behind someone going 25, in a, you guessed it... 25. As I would harshly judge the character of the person ahead of me while angrily eating my frosted mini wheats, this quote would run through my mind.

“Zach, if you could know every detail of that person’s life ahead of you, you could not help but love them” So, I would calm down, start chewing at a more appropriate rate, and concede that maybe this person was elderly, maybe they had a child in the back seat, and maybe, just maybe they weren’t running late like I was.

For me, it was the Bryn Athyn College that helped bring these words to life and it was the people I met, my classmates, that gave them meaning. The college created an environment where my classmates and I could be ourselves.

As an institution that celebrates love, kindness, and diversity, our quirks were something to be proud of. One guy even wore crocs with socks practically every day his senior year.

But while our differences broadened our understanding of the world around us, it was ultimately our similarities that taught us our biggest lesson. As we got to know more and more of the details of each other’s lives, we found that we actually had much more in common than we originally thought.

We learned that many of us are here today so that we can go out into the world and help other people. Whether it's through nursing, teaching, counseling, rehabilitating, or business-ing, we're a class that wants to make a difference in other people's lives.

On the soccer team, and through our other sports, we learned to put our differences aside and rally behind the idea that we were all there to simply play the games that we love.

We also learned that we all have families we adore, talents we're proud of, dreams for the future, but also... hardships, traumas, and shortcomings.

In other words, we learned that when it really comes down to it, we are all human and there is much more that unites us than divides us. And by unravelling these details about each other, we have learned that we're all actually pretty easy to love.

Now, we're all living in a very strange and difficult time marked by a pandemic, political divide, and social reform. Also, we are all 6 feet apart. It has been harder than ever to connect with both the people we love most, and the people we don't know well enough to love.

For these reasons, it is more important than ever to truly make an effort to really understand one another and to see the human behind every mask.

While we all can't have an environment like the Bryn Athyn college to help bring us together, there are a few ways we can help shrink the distance between us. Metaphorically of course.

From the American poet Walt Whitman, "Be curious, not judgmental." We all need to do our best to be curious enough to seek to truly understand one another, especially during a disagreement.

We need to be curious enough to ask the right questions, and curious enough to listen to understand, not just wait to respond. And when we do respond, it's important to be vulnerable, admit to our own faults and biases, and finally, speak our own truths.

Without first finding mutual understanding through curiosity, we have no hope of teaching or learning something new. No one is right all of the time. Everyone has their biases, their shortcomings, their bad days, their bad years even, so it is important to always be kind and to approach people with curiosity, we never know what battle someone could be facing.

Further advice comes from author and shame researcher, Dr. Brene Brown. She says, “People are hard to hate up close – move in”. Again, metaphorically.

Now this makes sense, if we are distant from people, we need to move in and close that distance. And while we can’t do that physically, we can make an effort to move in and connect with people in other ways.

There’s the tried and true wave of the hand, the double wave, the increasingly popular elbow touch, the friendly text, “hey Zach you look very handsome today” There’s also the extra squinty smile, and a personal favorite of mine, the finger pistols.

However, while it certainly helps, moving in goes deeper than just a pair of friendly finger guns and an extra squinty smile. Moving in means pushing past our assumptions of other people and allowing our true self to connect with another person’s true self.

In short, one way we can learn to better love the people around us is to approach them with a curious mind - free of judgement, seek to understand, and move in.

(pause)

To my class. Looking around, this is not the graduation we expected. Instead of May 30th, it's November 14<sup>th</sup>, instead of a packed field house, it's the great outdoors, instead of our fancy red lip gloss that would have conveniently matched our graduation robes, it's a Kn-95 face mask. Much is different than we expected.

However, despite these differences, we are still the same class full of the same extraordinary people. Not only did we complete our degrees and earn the right to walk across this stage today, we did so in unprecedented fashion. The class of 2020 is one of the few classes in history to have earned their degrees while weathering a pandemic. Let's be proud of our accomplishment.

However, we were nowhere near alone in this endeavor. Let's use this time to connect with and thank our friends, family, teachers and faculty who have helped us get here.

Life is short and times are difficult so I encourage us all, to be curious, move in, be kind, and remember "if you could know every detail of a person's life, you could not help but love them." Thank you.