

My High School Address As a Returning Famous Alumni

by [Carl Nelson](#) (February 2023)



Audience in the Gallery, Honore Daumier

I've fantasized ever since high school about returning as a famous and/or accomplished alumni and delivering an address to

the assembled senior class. I doubt that I am alone in this dream. Also I am not alone, I'm fairly sure, in not being asked to speak. But, being in the arts, I am well used to this. And perhaps we have trained to handle this better than many in the other professions. Artists, and especially I would think poets, know that life burgeons yet without audience. And for example, a fish or a flower, prophets and maybe even a poet, actually do better without all the trampling, discordant rabble. Poets continue to thrive like weeds, and to produce poems like dandelion seeds, even in those arid and lonely locales. In short, I am warning you that I plan to deliver this high school address nevertheless. Not only because I feel I have something to say, but more importantly, because I want to. Poets know that what you want is surely the most compelling reason for anything. And that life is so complex that the only rational course of action to secure what you want is to simply start trying: more important than sex, fame or money—or perhaps one and the same. It's like the urge to breathe.

Dear Seniors:

I am limiting my remarks to two nuggets of advice I would offer the young person heading out into the world.

This first nugget is not something I came up with myself. Most of the best advice you won't come up with yourself, just like the best words or phrases, or the tools you loan to a friend. You loan them because you've found them to be handy. So it is with this first bit of advice on contentment: *Don't try to get more out of something than there is in it.*

I have seen this bit of advice violated all of the time and have done so on many occasions myself. Right off the top of my head, the first subject under this heading to discuss would be

marriage. But since you're graduating seniors I will start with something I had to learn which is much closer to home: your parents. Stories of parents who pressure their children to either be like them, or to achieve better than them, or to find some destiny denied to them, or simply to continue 'being' them after the parents' own best years pass are legion. And almost as legion are stories of parents, especially fathers, who do all they can to prevent their offspring from usurping their glory, or even imagined glory. You all must know what I am speaking of. You know it's wrong. They may or may not know. But what it amounts to is trying to get more (or less) out of their children than is offered. What hadn't occurred to me for many years was that the maxim turns counterclockwise also. Children often stubbornly demand that their parents offer more than is available: more love, more support, more understanding, more assistance, even more understanding, more knowledge or experience, or even more support. I wanted mine to be an artist—or at least to value art. The list is even longer than the squalling. Right away, whether you are the parent or the child in this drama, you can halve your frustration *immediately* by simply giving up. Or as one of Arthur Miller's characters says in a play, "The secret to wisdom is to stop. Whatever you are doing, stop it."

Marriages are ruined, tarnished, and impoverished all of the time by a failure to acknowledge this maxim. Your partner cannot make you successful. They cannot keep you from failure, work, or illness, or any of "the thousand Natural shocks. That Flesh is heir to ..." or supply you with discipline or character. Don't expect it. Don't demand it. Things will go better.

My second nugget of observation would be that humans are natural problem solvers, and that this world is rife with problems. We're a natural fit. So when you go out into the world wondering what you should do, what you should become – ask yourself what problems there are which you enjoy

working on? It's said that the best boss is the one who wants to hear your problems. The best physician wants to hear what's wrong. The best actor asks, "What causes this character to move?" The best inventor wonders how we could do this easier? What is it you like to work on?

No one hires someone to enjoy the salary, or the perks, or the status or the adulation. Everyone is paid to solve a problem. What problems do you like to solve?

Start solving them. You are writing your ticket.

1967 Alumni, Carl Nelson

Air Mattress

My friend called, wondering if this
were a good time to talk?
I told her my retirement
is like floating on an air mattress,
playing with little rubber ducks.
But I'm taking calls. What is it? I asked.

The day spins about me like blue sky.
It is impossible to say where death lies,
but I don't smell its earthy breath.
Just chlorine and lotion. I am very calm.

While my retired friends always remark on two things:
One, how busy they are!
And two, how did they once get it all done?

Traditional California pictures my retired situation,
like a perfect wave stretching from horizon to projection.
So, like I said, "What is it?" I asked.

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Carl Nelson has just finished a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled Become Remarkable. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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