

Lighten up, graduates!

GARRISON KEILLOR
Garrison Keillor is the author, most recently, of The Book of Guys.

EXHAUSTED Faculty, Anxious Graduates, Worry Parents, and Angry Taxpayers. It's a great privilege to be your commencement speaker, but nevertheless I will be brief.

First, my congratulations. I wish you a good career and a wonderful life.

In fact, life is pretty good in America today — except for the fact that there is more self-pity than ever before, but that is the fault of my generation, a glum bunch to be sure.

We are counting on you graduates to do better.

My generation felt that we were sensitive idealists compared to our folks, the earnest materialists who had hauled up out of the Dirty Thirties and built the suburbs and freeways.

We were going to live genuine lives and not be phonies. We were going to be poets. Instead, we became patients.

Pulling the sickroom shades

Absorbed in our own childhood, we turned mad as we aged, and we shifted the focus of public life away from the celebration of American culture and toward confessional therapy.


Somebody pulled the sickroom shades in America — and now America feels dysfunctional, abused, addicted, dependent, in pain, trying to come to terms with it.

Now fat people are considered disabled, there are programs for owiness, and everyone who leaves the house in the morning carries a note from his Inner Mom saying: "Be gentle to my boy, he has Been Through a Lot."

All in all, there is more self-pity available to swallow in now than there was during the Great Depression, when your grandparents lived in grimy little houses with newspaper stuffed in the cracks and worked so hard that their bodies hurt at night.

Complaining was against their religion, though. They believed that if you smile, you'll feel better.

And so they were big on throwing parties. People back then liked to stand around a piano



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and sing. People danced at parties, and they told jokes that made each other laugh.

Today, when people try to give a party, we sit slumped in a circle and talk about sexual harassment and child abuse and people weep and uncover painful memories and some guy says that he doesn't understand what all the fuss is about.

Then other people throw up their arms and screech at him and at each other, and someone makes a little joke and other people glare at him — how can you? — and finally when everyone is hummed out or livid with anger, we go home and write in our journals about how awful everyone was.

I'm sorry, but this is not civilized. It isn't even nice.

As your commencement speaker, I ought to be crating about America's role in the world or about the value of hard work.

America is a great country, and its role in the world is to stand up for democracy and the freedom of the human spirit while waging hardheaded diplomacy.

Louis Armstrong and Fred Astaire

Work is a necessity and a privilege — and if you do your job and do it well, you can look anybody straight in the eye.

But I am less worried about our vision and our industry than I am about our lack of humor.

The greatness of America is that it produces exuberant geniuses such as Louis Armstrong and Fred Astaire and John Updike and Leonid Brezhnev. We are meant to be a jazy people who talk big talk and jump up on the table and dance. We aren't supposed to be duncy and glum and brood over old injuries.

Laughter is what proves our humanity, and the ability to give a terrific party is a sign of true class.

When Moses came down from the mountain with the ten tablets, he said: "Folks, I was able to talk Him down to 10. Unfortunately, we had to leave Astaire in there, but you will notice that Solemnity was taken out."

And that night, the families killed the fatted calf and drank wine and told Bible jokes in celebration.

Throw yourself a party

So I call on this class of 1994 to throw itself a party. Sit in the moonlight and drink champagne or put beans up your nose and tell limericks — do what needs to be done. Just be sure not to spend much money or drink if you're going to drive, and don't invite me, I'd only slow you down.

Get together in a comfortable place with people you like a lot, dance, be romantic, be silly, and see if you can get each other laughing by making fun of your elders.

Satire, kids, is your sacred duty as Americans.

Be funny. Poke them coves and make them mess.

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