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Keillor's advice to Macalester grads: Fail well

By Nolan Zavoral
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Macalester College's graduating class has Garrison Keillor's permission to flop.

"Have interesting failures," Keillor (University of Minnesota, '66) told the 396 graduates Sunday on the lawn outside Old Main in St. Paul.

"If you need to have a personal crisis, have it now. Don't wait until midlife, when it will take longer to resolve."

Keillor — the host of public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" — also encouraged his audience to "get free of us, your parents," and to "experience what we have not arranged for you."

Keillor built much of his 17-minute talk upon his trademark humor. He warned at the beginning that he wasn't about to follow the example of other commencement speakers and trumpet the "nobility of marching to a different drummer."

Not for Keillor the lonely writer's life.

"I don't advocate loneliness of any kind," said Keillor, who has written short stories, essays and books. "I didn't become a writer in

The Class of '02 found the humorist's insight characteristically off-center, but sage.

pursuit of excellence.

"I became a writer because as a kid I found friends in books, and I felt writers were my friends."

Keillor, wearing a suit, white shirt and bold red tie, leaned into his words, delivered in his loping, graceful style.

"Be cheerful," he told the graduates. "Don't pity yourselves. Lighten up. Seek people with a sense of humor."

"Avoid humorless people — and do not marry one, for God's sake."

A couple of more warnings, and then: "Be competent. Do not have a \$10 haircut on a 59-cent head."

Reading from a poem he wrote for the occasion, Keillor instructed graduates to:

*Forget about excellence
and think about courage,
and let the audacious side of you emerge.*

A few in the graduating class were way ahead of him. One graduate wore a blue Frisbee atop his mortarboard; another had on a slouch hat and no mortarboard; still another wore a garland of dan-

delions without robe or cap.

Keillor's remarks balanced occasional somber moments. Macalester President Michael McPherson, in his charge to the graduates, said that the class would forever be tied to the "year of 9/11," and he mentioned 1982 Macalester graduate Tim Haviland, who died in the collapse of the World Trade Center.

Professor honored

Near the speakers' platform, the flag flew at half-staff, honoring Macalester English Prof. John Bernstein, who died Saturday at age 66. He was also mentioned in the Rev. Lucy Forster-Smith's invocation.

Two men — Stephen Lewis Jr., the president of Northfield's Carleton College, and Juan Williams, an author and commentator — received honorary degrees.

Departing from his prepared text, McPherson described his longtime friend Lewis as "president of the best liberal arts college" — a two-beat pause — "in rural Minnesota."

Williams came forward when his son, Antonio, received his degree, and hugged him.

After the ceremony, Keillor volunteered that Macalester registrar Jayne Niemi had the toughest job of all: pronouncing, almost flawlessly, the names of all 396 graduates, representing 36 foreign countries, 42 states and the District of Columbia.

Following the bagpipe band off the grounds, Keillor found his progress slowed by parents and graduates who wanted his autograph and to pose with him. He did it all with a smile — not far from the campus building where, in 1974, he began broadcasting a variety show that grew into "A Prairie Home Companion."

Amanda Penn, a sociology major from Lincoln, Neb., called Keillor's talk a balm.

"He was great to have, particularly for this year," she said. "A lot of us are fairly nervous about what we're going to do now."

"He just reaffirmed that we didn't have to find out right now — right this second."

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David Brewster/Star Tribune

"If you need to have a personal crisis, have it now. Don't wait until midlife, when it will take longer to resolve," Garrison Keillor said Sunday in St. Paul.