

# Kirtland Community College

## Commencement Speech

Most commencement speakers make two big mistakes.

First, they talk about abstracts, intangibles, things you can't see. They talk about ambition and aspirations and inspiration and perspiration and idealism and ideas and, well, nobody ever just tells a good story, that you can see in your head as it unfolds.

And the second mistake they make?

They talk too long.

I intend to make neither of those mistakes today. First, I am going to tell you a little story. Then I am going to say a very few words afterwards. Then I'm going to ask you for a few words. And then I'm going to stop.

Deal?

First, my story. My story is about one of the most important lessons I learned during my own college years, at Michigan State University, in the early 1970s. For some reason, I remember this lesson better than anything I earned in class.

I've carried this wisdom with me for 30 years, using it in my life as a journalist and as a full-time human being. It has encouraged me during many dark nights of the soul, and on the brink of many Christmases and in the middle of a few disappointing vacations.

It may help you, too.

In those days we typed our stories – which we called “copy” - on clunky, noisy manual typewriters and corrected them with fat black pencils like the ones kids use in kindergarten. Editors added more pencil marks, then rolled my copy and everyone else's together into bundles, securing them with rubber bands.

Somebody had to carry those bundles to a composing room a few blocks away, where the words were set in type, then pasted on a newspaper page along with headlines.

The carrying of story bundles to the composing room was called a "copy run," and the chore went to whoever wasn't busy with something else.

We were all thrilled when soon, on the copy run path, there appeared a new shop selling bagels of all varieties, spread with all sorts of cheeses and goops. Soon every copy run included a bagel run.

The runner would first circle the newsroom, taking orders, writing them on a scrap of paper. The runner would dash the few blocks to the composing room, then fetch the bagels on the way back.

One day, being the runner, I found myself in an exceedingly long line at the bagel shop, longer than I'd ever seen, spilling out onto the slushy sidewalk. Everyone in line was muttering. They had places to go! Things to do!

So did I!

As the line inched into the shop, I realized the problem: Only one guy was filling orders. Three other workers who would normally be up front too were instead loafing in the back room, visible to all of us, chatting it up and laughing and smoking and having a good old time.

Filling our orders and taking crap from everyone in line was a mousy fellow, frail, pale, with thin reddish hair. I would recognize him today.

He did not rush. He methodically split and buttered bagels, laying lox or spreading tuna on top, wrapping them in paper, hardly looking up from his tedium, never reacting to the rudeness of those who had to wait so long for their bagels.

Finally, I reached the front of the line. I couldn't help exploding at him, too -- not over my wait but over his passivity.

"How can you stand this?" I hollered. "Why do you put up with this? Here you are taking abuse from all of us while your coworkers refuse to do their jobs!"

Startled, he looked up from his work, a spatula filled with cream cheese in his hand.

Then he said these words, words I've said to myself time and again in the decades since, whenever I'm annoyed or anxious.

He shrugged and said: "What will it matter in 10,000 years?"

The moral of the story, like the morals of all good stories, can be summed up in a handful of words:

Do the best you can. Ignore the jerks around you. Maintain serenity. Keep things in perspective. Don't sweat the small stuff.

In fact, did you notice that all the morals for my story that I suggested a moment ago have five words or less?

You can say a lot in five words or less.

In fact, the themes of most commencement speeches can be summed up in five words or less. Some big-time universities pay speakers \$15,000 or more to say in 45 minutes what you or I could say in five words or less.

Here are some examples of favorite commencement speech themes:

Dream the impossible dream.

Be all you can be.

Challenge yourself.

Challenge authority.

Keep your chin up.

Money isn't everything.

This college isn't paying me \$15,000 – as far as I know, it's paying me nothing, although I did have a nice dinner with the

faculty. So, I am free to speak briefly, and in very short sentences.

I am also free to get help. From you.

I'm going to give you 30 seconds to think, then I'm going to ask for bits of wisdom from any of you – or all of you, for that matter – in five words or less. And if you can't come up with any, I'll have to turn to your parents in the back.

*(Here's where everybody said their thing, including "Get 'er done!" And "Don't fry bacon naked.")*

Thank you.

Next year, maybe Kirtland Community College will run with this idea. No commencement speech. Instead, five words or less from every graduate as he or she crosses the stage.

Some may squander their opportunity with something self-serving like "Go Wings!" or "Hillary for President" or "John loves Laura."

But as we've just proven, you can say a lot that's important  
in five words or less:

Seize the day.

Live and let live.

God Bless America.

Love one another.

Love is all there is.

And, finally:

My time is now up.