

Five *on* Friday

Musings on Mental Health

Mortarboards Fly High

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June 25, 2021

It's that time of year! And this graduation devotee is over the moon. Two of my nieces and a nephew graduated this year: Lauren from Auburn University. War Eagle! Adam and Allison from high school. Cap and gown. Pomp and circumstance. I get choked up when the processional begins. I enthusiastically applaud as students become alumni. I stay till the last diploma is distributed.



In between, there are the graduation speeches. Filled with reflections and wisdom, graduation speakers strive to punctuate this developmental milestone and share something that will help set graduates on a future course that is bright and meaningful. To my delight, I recently discovered one of the greatest commencement speeches ever. Funny thing is, it was never actually given.

1. Wear Sunscreen. The first line of this 1997 graduation speech begins, “Ladies and gentlemen of the class of 1997: wear sunscreen.” The urban legend has it that this is the opening of Kurt Vonnegut’s commencement speech at MIT. The fact that MIT’s actual commencement speaker that year was the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan did not stop this purported speech from becoming a viral sensation.

2. Who is the actual author? “Wear Sunscreen” was written by Chicago Tribune journalist Mary Schmich who, on June 1, 1997, [published a column](#) entitled “Advice, like youth, probably just wasted on the young.” In her introduction to the column, she described it as the commencement speech she would give to the class of 1997 if she had been asked to give one. Which she wasn’t. But thanks to Baz Luhrman’s movie video of “Wear Sunscreen” available for viewing on Youtube with over 19 million views, her sentiments have indeed reached more than a few graduates.

3. What else does Schmich offer? Beyond the sage advice to wear sunscreen, Schmich offers many other tidbits of wisdom, including, “Don’t worry about the future. Or worry, but know that worrying is as effective as trying to solve an algebra equation by chewing bubble gum.” She entreats graduates to sing, dance, and stay away from beauty magazines. She urges graduates to “do one thing every day that scares you” and reminds them to respect their elders. It’s chock full of advice (relevant to mental health). The original column can be found [here](#).

4. What does Schmich’s column from 1997 offer graduates like Lauren, Allison, and Adam? Schmich says the advice to wear sunscreen is based on science; the rest “has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience.” Beyond all the pragmatic advice dispensed in her column, perhaps Schmich’s most profound gift to graduates and all of us is to pay careful attention to how we come to know something. Personal experience is a central form of knowing. Science is another. Each teaches us. Each has its own wisdom. Sometimes they align. Sometimes they conflict. When we are cognizant of how we came to believe something and are willing to test the veracity of what we know against the science and test the science against our personal experience, opportunities for real growth and learning are born.

5. This is Water. Not to worry, David Foster Wallace’s 2005 “This is Water” Kenyon commencement speech really did happen and is available for viewing on Youtube. One of the greatest commencement speeches of all time. It is about mindset. It is a glorious treatise on the importance of understanding how our thinking filters our experiences, delivered by a brilliant man who suffered from depression and ultimately died by suicide. Mindset, science, experience: they shape our world and our mental health. In previous Five on Fridays ([2016](#), [2018](#), [2020](#)), I have written about the wisdom shared by commencement speakers. Although topics and style vary widely - from [David Foster Wallace](#) to social justice activist [Bryan Stevenson](#) to all-star athlete [Eli Manning](#) - it is quite extraordinary to witness the common seriousness of stewardship that commencement speakers bring to the podium with the one mission in mind of helping to launch the next generation.

Lauren, Allison, and Adam, please heed Mary Schmich’s advice to wear sunscreen. Please consider the rest of her advice and that of others with an open mindset coupled with critical thinking. Weigh such advice against available science and your personal experience. Remember that both will continue to evolve over your lifetime if you are lucky. Seek out trusted sources of information, especially when the science and your personal experience conflict. Celebrate when you can. Remember you have a very large extended family ready to mark life’s milestones with you. As you know, I am ready for commencements of all types if you invite me. Congratulations on this round of milestones. Toss your mortarboards high to the sky!