

Last week Dr Van Barneveld asked me if I'd be comfortable speaking in front of the group at this event, I said no I wouldn't be comfortable at all. Then she asked if I was going to do it anyways and I said yes. We weren't really given much instruction as to what we were expected to speak about, so hoping to generate some ideas, I did some searching around for definitions of humanities and valedictorian to get a clearer sense as to what these words really mean.

My search on the humanities was pretty straight forward and fruitful and I found this quote referring to the topic that I enjoyed which I'd like to share with you:

“Through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental question: What does it mean to be human? The humanities offers clues but never complete answers. They reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual and intellectual sense of a world where irrationality, despair, loneliness and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope and reason.”

The results that I got for valedictorian weren't quite as easy for me. What a valedictorian does is deliver the valediction, it's a formal goodbye. It's the stuff that you see at the bottom of a letter: yours truly, your humble servant etc., that's a valediction; the formal goodbye or closing. In the context of a graduation ceremony, it's also the institution's way of sending you off when

you graduate, a kind of ceremonial version of “you don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here”.

Something about that idea of saying goodbye bothered me. I thought about what it was that was bothering me for a while and it was this idea of saying goodbye to the humanities class, it doesn’t really seem to fit the occasion. It doesn’t seem to fit with what Humanities 101 is all about in several crucial ways.

For one thing; the community of people who get involved with the Humanities program, they don’t really seem to go away or say goodbye at all. Our class was always full of alumni from the program, acting as volunteers and mentors, helping to set things up for us new students, giving reassurances and describing how things generally work in the program.

I’ll take this opportunity say thanks to Ryly and Vanessa and Nadeen and John and Rayla who were there pretty much every week, getting everything set up for our class, and participating with us in the lectures and group activities.

Another group of participants in the program who seem to stick around are the professors who delivered our lectures every week. They were always introduced to us as having been involved with the program for many years, in many cases all the way back to the beginning of the course.

I'd like to thank all of the professors individually, but Dr. Van Barneveld did a pretty thorough job of that in her initial comments tonight. I will take the opportunity to single out a couple of individuals - Dr. Gerald Walton and Dr. Kristy Holmes, who have both been extremely kind and generous towards me personally with their time and also with the encouragement they've given me to continue with my education.

Another great resource that the humanities program has going for it are its numerous other past graduates and the referring social workers, who might not get acknowledged very often at events like this. Though not formal volunteers or mentors with the program, they definitely act as ambassadors for the course. They were very helpful to me when I was feeling fear or stress about coming back into school. They assured me that I would get more and more comfortable with things as the course went along. My own fear wouldn't let me believe them at the time, but eventually their obvious sincerity and uniform admiration for the program convinced me that things were going to be alright if I just stick with it. I think they were right.

I'm thankful also to the director and the staff running the Humanities class for the access we had to the resources of this university. I mention it specifically because there were some bugs to work out in the beginning but the behind the scenes volunteers really worked hard to make sure that we had access to the gym and to the libraries on campus as well as to the other benefits that come with being a student here. I don't know if everyone got to use these great options, but speaking for myself, I know that being able to go to the gym and use the libraries and access other resources with my student card made a huge difference in my comfort level and

confidence in being here at the university. I really started to feel more like I did belong on campus when I used them.

I promised myself that if I got stuck or in trouble in some way up here, that I could always talk about the food. I think that the meals we ate together before our lectures went a long way in making me more relaxed and able to participate in the classes, by giving a bit more of an informal, or community feel to the whole set up. Thanks again for all of the effort that went into pulling that off every week.

So Humanities wasn't my first time at this University. I've been here before. I was eighteen, a very sick, very scared young kid the first time I tried to make it in here. I had applied and got accepted and I even attended the first orientation lecture for new students which took place, if I recall correctly in this very building, in one of the lecture theatres right outside this room. After that lecture, we were supposed to go and register for the classes we were going to take, but I never made it that far. I was feeling very low and very alone, and I ended up walking right passed the line up to register and out the doors, where I wandered around outside, alone, trying to clear my head of all the fear and sadness and loneliness. That was twenty years ago.

This brings me back, I think, to why I had a problem with the idea of presenting some sort of farewell and goodbye here this evening. It seems to me that this program is much more about welcoming and inviting people to consider coming into this environment of learning and education, rather than sending them off. I was thinking about the scared, totally hopeless kid that

I was twenty years ago when I was trying to think of what I could say to you all here tonight.

And I can't say goodbye to him, or to you. So instead I'll say welcome, and invite you all to come on back in. Maybe this place can be your home and your source of hope for a little while.