



**2009 Albany High School Graduation
Valedictory by Rachel Barnas
University at Albany SEFCU Arena
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When I first sat down to write this speech, I didn't really know where to start. So, I did what anyone would do in this day and age: surf the Internet for tips.

At first they didn't seem too useful. I mean, how am I supposed to sum up everything this entire class has learned and shared over the last four years? I may be valedictorian, but unlike my physics class alter-ego River Tam, I'm not psychic.

After several fruitless attempts, though, it started to dawn on me that this problem itself was significant.

The problem is that it is absolutely absurd to try to speak for each and every one of you. But that's the beauty of our school and of the Class of 2009. Every one of us comes from different backgrounds and holds different values dear. We all have to deal with different challenges, too.

I am sure you all have doubted whether you'll make it through high school with your sanity. From language barriers to troubles at home, from long work hours to challenging coursework, every one of you has pulled off some remarkable victories in order to graduate today. You all deserve more recognition for overcoming these obstacles than I could ever possibly give you.

Fortunately, the immense variety of this group is a greatly underappreciated gift. Sure, it can be a little overwhelming. At times, the hallways can seem like they're full of strangers, and it's easy to feel like you have a bar code stamped on your forehead. But it's only a matter of time until you come across someone who shares something with you.

What's even better is that no matter how much you have in common with these friends, it's almost certain that you will have your differences, too. Simply put, no one person in this school is the same.



This is a great thing for so many reasons.

For one thing, in such a diverse class, you can find friends who fit who you are – instead of trying to fit yourself to your friends a la “Mean Girls.” For another, it’s a taste of reality. Whether you’re headed off to college, work, or the military – and I salute those of you following that path – you’ll be starting to enter the real, adult world.

This world is a place where you will encounter a vast variety of ideas, stories and personalities. There will be people you like, people you hate and some you really couldn’t care less about. But after four years at Albany High, you have the ability to treat all people, no matter how different they are from yourself, with the respect each and every person deserves.

The wonderful teachers here at Albany High are the ones who taught us this great lesson. I cannot possibly name everyone who deserves recognition, for there are just too many people to thank, and I haven’t had the privilege of having you all as teachers. But I know that your tireless efforts, from explaining bizarre academic concepts to simply caring about how we’re doing, have set this class’ roots for so much future growth.

Much the same can be said of all our parents and families. We owe it to you to capitalize on all that you’ve done for us. So, families – stop crying for a moment and pat yourselves on the back. And students – be sure to thank them, and maybe even help clean up after your graduation party. These adults have helped us to grow into the unique individuals you see today.

Now, when you put all these people so close together for so long a time, you can’t help but create a giant intellectual blender of sorts. When everyone has different stories, they’re going to have different interests and ideas. And strange though it may seem, it is this lush variety in the people surrounding you that helps you discover a completely separate and unique identity for yourself.

Every one of you has inspired me to think about what I want, what I value and who I am. I hope each of you does the same when you consider those around you. Look at what everyone here loves. Then do a little comparing and contrasting, just like English class, and think about what it is you love.

Finding what you love may mean discovering what people are dear to you, what ideas are important, or what work makes you fulfilled. Whatever it means to you, though, it’s probably an ongoing process. Just like high school, the search may sometimes be hard, and yet other times be absolutely the greatest.

But no matter what happens as you head out into the world, I hope that you will keep your eyes focused on this goal. After all, it is this goal – finding your values and finding your place – that will ultimately be at the heart of your story.

So, keep your eyes and heart open, and don’t let your head ever stop thinking about what it is you see, feel, and think. Because that’s how you keep developing your potential. Every

single one of you has a vast, untapped potential, each different from the next. So don't waste all the works and ideas that you and only you can create by drawing on your thoughts and experiences.

I can't tell you how, as that would rather defeat the point. All you can do is take inspiration from those around you as you figure out that first step you're about to make. Don't give up, no matter how tough the odds may be, and no matter who tells you otherwise – that's all I ask of each of you.

After all, while you may have gotten this far, there is so much more than just high school graduation in each of your reaches. And if that all sounds too serious, remember to always look on the bright side of life.

And to all of you musical theater fans out there, as tempting as it is, no, I'm not going to sing any "Spamalot," or "Rent," or "Chicago." Not even any "Sweeney Todd," I promise.

Just remember, "You'll never walk alone."