

Graduation Speech, June 2010

Note: This speech was given by me at the 503rd Convocation at the University of Chicago. There were ~10,000 people there. You can imagine that I was pretty nervous. I went a little too fast and totally fumbled the "large carnivorous mammals" joke, but overall it went pretty well.

Hello, my name's Aaron and welcome to graduation! In preparation for this speech, I decided to do what every writer has been doing for the past 300 years or so; I stole from Shakespeare. I pored over tragedies, comedies, and romances, looking for some quote that would resonate with you all, something that would inspire you to greatness, or at least make me look profound. Unfortunately for us, all I could find was this: "Exit, pursued by a bear."

This line, a stage direction from *The Winter's Tale*, probably inspires more confusion than greatness. The reason that I've chosen to share this passage in particular with you all is not because it's going to help us make sense of our college careers. Actually, I chose this passage because I can't make any sort of sense of it at all.

When I first read the *Winter's Tale*, I was in Hume, first year. It instantaneously became stuck in my head. I walked out of class thinking about it, I spent that entire day thinking about it, and even now, at the very end, this bear will not leave me alone.

And I can pretty much guarantee that every person that you'll see walk across this stage is exiting pursued by their own bear. In my classes we call these "textual irritants," but that's just fancy-talk. I think that math has it right on this one; they just call them "problems," and I don't think it's unreasonable to assume that the U of C prides itself on giving undergrads problems. Every quarter we're chased from class to class and, ultimately, to the library until 4 AM. By finals week, the campus is overrun by large carnivorous mammals, and we, the students, are all very tired.

But, take heart, grads, because our trial is finally over! The pressure is off! The bears are still there, but they're a much less aggressive when they don't have due dates attached. Now, instead of seeing where these ideas take us, we can forget about them, because no one is telling us not to. And it's tempting, because bears, as we all know, are scary. We all have the freedom now to focus on what is easy and normal instead of what is difficult and weird.

But this is the U of C. "Difficult and weird" is what we do. Which is why I feel like I'm preaching to the choir when I say that these bears are our best friends. We are overcome by these ideas because we don't understand them. But what we do understand is that there's something more to know, and that we want to know it. Post graduation, our job gets harder. We have to make our own problems. The prey must become the predator; we have to start pursuing those bears ourselves. The biggest mistake we can make now is getting complacent, or losing our confidence. We've been wrestling full grown bears every day for four years; we have nothing to fear.

So next time you see a bear, don't just exit stage left. Chase that thing down and give it big hug. Unless it's a real bear, in which case, play dead! I hear that helps.

