



WHAT EVERY GRADUATE SHOULD KNOW

DENNIS PRAGER

My dear college graduates. You have hopefully acquired a great deal of knowledge here over these past years. But in life, knowledge is considerably less important than wisdom.

Here then are five ideas for your life.

1. The greatest struggle in your life should not be – and, in fact, is not – with society. It is with yourself. This idea – taught by every great religion – is not taught today. Instead we are taught that we have to battle society – its sexism, racism, prejudices and its other flaws. The overwhelming temptation is therefore to see whatever problems you have as coming from society, not from within yourself. But in a free and decent society such as ours, it is our own flawed human nature – not a flawed society – that is our biggest problem.

2. Use your common sense. For example, when you hear the words “studies show” – outside of the natural sciences – and you find that these studies show the opposite of what common sense suggests, be very skeptical. I don’t recall ever coming across a valid study that contravened common sense. For example, I was told when I was in college that “studies show” that boys and girls are not inherently different; that they differ only because parents raise them in a sexist manner. This was nonsense then, and it is even more nonsensical now since we have brain scans that show how different the male and female brains are.

3. Race is unimportant. You’ve been taught that it is very important, but it isn’t. The color of people’s skin is as trivial as the color of their hair. Be guided by the idea of Viktor Frankl, the Jewish psychiatrist who suffered the horrors of a Nazi death camp and whose family was gassed. After the Holocaust, he was asked, “Do you hate the German race?” “No,” he replied, “I don’t, there are only two races, the decent and the indecent.” Remember that truism, and you can never be a racist.

4. Beware of good intentions. The 20th century was the bloodiest and cruelest century on record. Why? Not because so many more people were bad, but because so many people believed in bad ideas. Most Nazis and Communists in their time and Islamic terrorists in our time were not/are not necessarily sadists; they were normal people who believed in bad ideas. So here’s a quick way to measure if an idea is good. Do not – I repeat, do NOT – ask if it feels good or if it has good intentions. Ask will it DO good? Will it make people kinder and more ethical? Will it encourage responsible behavior? Has it been tried before and if so, what were the results? What matters is how you act. If you do something bad, it is not important that you “meant well.” And if you do something good, it doesn’t matter if you did it for “selfish” reasons. So spend much less time monitoring your motives and far more time monitoring your actions.

5. Judeo-Christian values are the real counterculture today. Many people think that dressing weird or having their body tattooed or pierced is a statement of individuality or strength or rebellion against the dominant culture. Not true. The ultimate statement of counterculture and individual strength in America today is to take the God of Judaism and Christianity seriously. If you want to be an individual and to be strong, affirm a higher value system that enables you to say no to the prevailing culture. When you know to whom you are accountable and when you march to the beat of that Higher Drummer, you will lead a more peaceful, happy and good life. Good luck to all of you.

I'm Dennis Prager.