

**Greenfield High School  
1996  
Commencement Address**

**By**

**Senator Stan Rosenberg**

Thank you, members of the Class of '96, for inviting me to share this wonderful occasion with you.

High school graduations are intensely emotional events. Everyone here tonight has a reason to feel proud, anxious, excited, overjoyed, even a little sad, perhaps relieved most of all. Between the emotions, and the ceremony itself, there's a lot happening, inside and out. And it's all happening at the same time. It's hard to grasp all of what a graduation ceremony symbolizes, to understand it and perhaps learn something from it. It's almost as if the emotional range of an entire lifetime is being condensed into a single hour, or maybe two, depending on how wound up I get.

I must confess that when I thought about what I would say tonight, I found myself getting tangled up in a lot of seemingly unrelated threads. When there are so many nerves to tap, so many potential topics to explore, it's a challenge to know which are the most appropriate, the most important to share. So I turned to the most important people here, the graduates themselves, for help.

I sent you a little survey -- five questions -- hoping to get some insight into what you were thinking about as graduation day approached.

I asked you what adjective should best describe your graduation ceremony. Some of you said "memorable." I like that, and I hope it is. A few hoped the ceremony would be "enlightening" and "fulfilling." The pressure's building now. But one graduate was so hopeful about today that one adjective wouldn't do. This graduate wants a ceremony that's "exciting and very short," with short underlined twice.

That reminds me of some advice a dear friend gave me when I first entered politics. "A good speech," he said, "should have a good beginning and a good ending. Preferably as close together as possible." So, moving right along. . .

I asked you about your individual accomplishments and what was important about them. A lot of you were pleased with your grades, with the chance to attend Greenfield Community College as part

of the dual enrollment program, and with your ability to handle the pressures of being seniors. One of you noted that your most important achievement was being able to look back and see how much you had changed. And another graduate mentioned that being a captain of the soccer team was a good experience because it allowed you to be a leader. I hope you will always be a leader. I hope you all will be leaders and role models.

I asked you to name something about your graduating class as a whole that made you proud, and most of you replied that the class, over the years, had become like a family -- a group of individuals working together and getting along. One graduate described it this way: "We are united in a special, secret way that we are not aware of."

And I also asked you to think about life beyond graduation and to tell me what you are most excited about, and what you are most afraid of. Not surprisingly, the prospect of going to college generated the most excitement. As for the post-graduation fears, many of you were anxious about leaving your friends and the safe familiarity of home and Greenfield High School. Many of you expressed a general concern about failing, about letting your families, friends and teachers down, about not finding an enjoyable and meaningful job. Fear of responsibility was another frequent response. But one of you cut right to heart of the matter. You said you were afraid of bills.

That was the same graduate who wants the "exciting and very short" ceremony.

What struck me most as I read your responses is how the feelings, the hopes and anxieties, expressed in that survey are the stuff of day-to-day living in what we call, for lack of anything better, the real world. You are about to join us in the real world, and you will quickly learn that we are all, no matter what our age or profession, we are all searching to discover who we are, what we want to be, and how to relate to our families, our communities and our world. We are on a lifelong search for identity, for a personally meaningful philosophy of living, for our own personal truths, and for our own place in the real world. What I once thought were tangled emotions are really the unifying expressions of this search.

Graduation day is truly an exciting point in this lifelong journey. Today marks the beginning of the most serious, most rewarding and most enjoyable aspect of your search for identity. Throughout your lives, your parents, friends and teachers have helped shape the person you are today. They have, through their patience and persistence, provided the compass for your journey. But as you know, a compass can only show direction, it cannot dictate what path to take. Once you accept your diploma,

you become the navigator. It will be up to you to chart your own course toward perhaps the most important destination of all -- the person you are to become. You have never been more responsible for yourself than you are right now.

That's pretty scary stuff. But as frightening as this may seem, it's good to know that you are never entirely alone on your search. Remember that the values you learned from your parents and teachers and friends are always with you to help guide your decisions. I am sure that in the years to come they will welcome the opportunity to offer some friendly advice when times are especially tough. Don't forget to think of them and to draw on their wisdom.

You should also remember that there is another great source of wisdom at your disposal, that of the founders of this country. They were some of the greatest seekers of truth the world has ever known and they have given you a powerful protection against forces that would thwart your search for personal truth.

I'm talking about nothing less than the First Amendment to the Constitution. Its guarantee of freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion allows us to read widely, to think critically, and to speak forcefully in our efforts to define ourselves and our communities. There is no more potent tool in the entire world when it comes to seeking truth than the First Amendment.

But you should bear in mind that the First Amendment is not something passive, and the truths it encourages you to seek not clearly defined like the points on a map. The First Amendment is like a muscle. The freedoms it guarantees need vigorous exercise for growth and vitality. Otherwise, those freedoms will wither until they are vague, useless memories.

I remember hearing a few years ago about a high school principal who said, "If something is controversial, why not eliminate it?" It wasn't Ms. Gilfether, by the way. Well, if everything controversial were eliminated, what would be left to read, or talk about or listen to? If the advocates of censorship had been victorious, we might still think the Earth flat and that the Sun and planets revolve around it; we might not be able to read the story of Robin Hood because of its subversive ideas about the redistribution of wealth; and we might not be able to listen to Elvis or The Beatles or Snoop Doggy Dog because, as everybody knows, rock and roll and gangsta rap will destroy the moral fiber of American youth. The point is, when there is talk of eliminating controversy, there must be someone, some group, willing to define controversial. Freedom and the search for identity and personal truths are about deciding for yourselves what's important, not allowing someone else to do it for you.

When I talk about this search for identity and personal truths I am also talking about the development of a civic identity, of a sense of citizenship, and the responsibilities that entails.

Because we are all engaged in some sort of search, we are all asking questions, looking for answers. Raising questions, debating opinions and voicing criticism -- all of which are protected by the First Amendment -- are essential elements in the search for personal and civic identity. They are also some of the very building blocks of our democracy, and we have the right, indeed the responsibility, to continue those practices. But it's easy to forget that. When we're working hard to pass tests and pay bills, eliminating controversy has a certain appeal. Our lives are noisy, with many voices competing for our limited attention. Who has time to develop a civic identity when day-to-day living takes so much energy? It's tough, I know. But we have to make the time because our civic life, our democracy, cannot take care of itself.

I saw a survey recently that said that 20 percent of Americans believe anyone criticizing the president should be arrested. It's a good thing there are 80 percent of us who don't, or this crowd would be much smaller. It's funny to think about serving jail time for criticizing the president. But without vigilance, and dedication to developing a strong civic identity, our society could collapse into something that's not very funny at all.

As a state legislator elected to represent the disparate views of a diverse community, I understand, and appreciate, the value of criticism, of debate, especially when conducted in a civil manner. Whether we actually like an idea is less important than whether we believe that we are of sufficient character to join the debate, and join it in a thoughtful way. Joining the debate, participating in your government, in the civic life of your community, these are among the important ways you can channel the strength you will gain from your personal searches for truth into the kind of action that will enrich your community and our democracy. We, as a society, are in desperate need of a revival of community spirit. We need you, members of the Class of '96, to help with this revival.

Robert Putnam, a professor of international affairs at Harvard University, theorizes that the vigor of civic life is a predictor of the performance of democratic government. Said another way, the more citizens are involved in community groups -- in coaching Little League, participating in Parent-Teacher Organizations and that sort of thing -- the more likely they are to participate in government, to vote, to, in effect, become a part of solving our social problems.

In his research, Professor Putnam found that PTO membership nationwide has fallen from 12

million in 1964 to 7 million today; that membership in the Boy Scouts is down by 26 percent since 1970 and down 61 percent for the Red Cross in the same time period. These are just a few examples of what Professor Putnam believes is a broad pattern of civic disengagement, which may contribute to low voter turnout, apathy, loss of faith in government.

But perhaps the most startling statistic of all concerns America's bowling habits. That's right, bowling. Professor Putnam found that from 1980 to 1993, the total number of bowlers in America increased 10 percent. But during that same time, membership in organized leagues plunged by 40 percent.

Let's think about that for a second. More Americans are bowling, but fewer are participating in what might be called the community of bowlers.

This is bad news for bowling alley owners because they make their money selling pizza and soda, and statistics show that league bowlers eat and drink three times as much as non-league bowlers. It's also bad news for our democracy, according to Professor Putnam, because it further illustrates that our talents and energies are being spent on solitary pursuits instead of being directed toward the common good. With his tongue not entirely in his cheek, Professor Putnam says the fate of American democracy hangs on the fact that Americans are bowling alone.

The lesson, no, the warning, in Professor Putnam's research is that we cannot live in a cocoon, isolated from our fellows and our communities, and expect to be a strong society of quality individuals. When we are disengaged from civic life we are in danger of falling into the traps of fear, apathy, and, worst of all, cynicism. Living in a society as stormy as ours it's sometimes easier to retreat to these relatively safe harbors than it is to lend a hand, to vote, to volunteer for community service, to stand up and say "I am going to help. I am going to make a positive difference."

Searching for your identity, your personal truths, and participating in the civic life of your community -- these are risky propositions. Failure is always a possibility, as it is with any worthwhile endeavor. But success is more likely if you meet the challenges ahead with courage.

During your years at Greenfield High School you have witnessed a great many changes in the world. You have watched peace struggle, fail and struggle again to calm the ancient animosities afflicting the Middle East and Northern Ireland. You have seen genocide in Bosnia, the likes of which the world swore 50 years ago would never be allowed to happen again. You have seen terrorism in Oklahoma City,

the worst ever committed on American soil. You have seen thousands of adults, even thousands of children, die by guns, by AIDS, by cancer. You have seen people lose their jobs, their homes, their faith. You have seen tragedies of mind-boggling proportions. You know all too well that you have good reason to be afraid of the real world.

But, in the midst of all that, you have also seen people display great courage, to show the power of persistence and the capacity of hope.

Do you remember the man in Sarajevo, the one who would bring his cello to the public square on Saturdays and play because that's what he always did before the war? Do you remember the picture of the firefighter carrying the injured baby from the rubble of the federal building in Oklahoma City and how he called her "my baby?" Do you remember the people who wash your clothes, who loan you the car, who help with your homework, who give you a few extra dollars because they know you're going out on a date, who work a second job to help pay your college tuition, who listen to your problems? I hope you do. I hope you remember all of them. These are people of uncommon courage who, with grace and dignity, have made and continue to make a positive difference in the world. They remind us that the human spirit can throw off the weight of tragedy, that good intentions can push cynicism aside and clear a fresh path for future generations. They stand for something, and they should inspire all of us to do likewise.

I heard a story once, I like to think it's true, about a woman no one would listen to. Anna was her name. People ignored Anna because she was poor, uneducated, and because she had never been anything other than what she was -- a decent person trying to make her way in the world. Her desire to express herself was so powerful, and her opportunities so limited, that when she planted her garden, she arranged the cabbages so that when they grew they would spell out her name. That was her way of telling the world who she was.

Now it's your turn to start finding out for yourselves who you are and finding your own way to tell the world. Greenfield High School has prepared you well for your journey. I hope you make the best of it and become the person you want to be. We are all proud of your accomplishments. As you get ready to go into the real world as the Class of '96, as a family, together, when you get there, please don't end up bowling alone.