David McCullough: My Turn on the ‘You’re Not Special’ Speech

After my commencement speech that stunned America.

by David McCullough Jr. | June 18, 2012 1:00 AM EDT

The other day, I found myself in a small glass room with an honest-to-goodness Nobel laureate. This came to pass because a week earlier I had told the members of the Wellesley High School class of 2012 that they are not special. While the well-meant attentions of their parents and the advantages they’ve enjoyed (or taken for granted) might have led them to think otherwise, none of them, I said, matters more than anyone else, because everyone is special, everyone matters—all 6.8 billion of us. Simple logic, really. Along the way I tried to give them a few laughs, some thoughts to ponder, and, at the end, an exhortation to make for themselves, and for the rest of us, extraordinary lives, abundant in energy and guided by a spirit of selflessness. It was a lovely ceremony, and the speech was well received.

But I did not know the electronic world was watching. Taking lines out of context, sensationalizers started a wildfire. Attention came my way from a million directions, nearly all of it, for one reason or another, enthusiastically positive. My email inbox exploded. My phone rang and rang. Radio, television, and newspapers from around the world wanted to speak with me. Bloggers, tweeters, talk-show hosts, and callers opinionized. Orioles fans wagged fingers at me. Religious people reminded me that all of God’s children are special. Limousines whisked me to interviews near and far. For a middle-aged high-school teacher and suburban dad, it has been a dizzying experience.

Enter the Nobel laureate: economist and New York Times columnist Paul Krugman. We spent half an hour sitting a few feet apart, each awaiting his turn on CBS This Morning. He was busy at his laptop. I was busy being nervous. We did not speak to one another. He is a smallish man, I can report, with a gray beard, a professorial mien, and sensible shoes. He is also, as we all know, powerfully smart, supremely accomplished, hugely influential.

And I’m willing to bet he never went to lacrosse camp.

Or to a four-day tourney of any kind in Orlando.

In fact, I’ll bet he never even went to economics camp or sat three afternoons a week at age 12 with an economics tutor. And, further, I suspect his wonderfulness was not celebrated when he had been something less than wonderful. I’ll guess neither his anxious mom nor a $100-an-hour tutor helped him with a lightly plagiarized 10th-grade Middlemarch paper; nor did his parents encourage him to pack his résumé with papier-mâché. He did not, I’ll bet, endure a six-week intensive SAT prep class or snort Adderall before sitting to take the test. Probably his parents did not hire a pricey consultant to shepherd him through the college-application process; nor did they lean on his teachers to let him retake tests on which he did poorly, or, better, to just change an unwelcome grade because the, um, cat died.

David McCullough tells Wellesley High School's graduating seniors that they are not special.

Rather, I’ll guess Krugman discovered an interest in economics at some point in school. Perhaps it came upon him when he was thinking about other things. Probably it ignited in tinder gathered from his observations of the world around him in his meanderings as a kid. Most likely he encountered struggles in a class or two and buckled down and persevered. Maybe someone challenged one of his suppositions, identified a flaw in his reasoning, a deficiency in his research. Likely someone offered, with little regard for his self-esteem, a criticism of something he had written. And I’m guessing he carried on because he enjoyed learning—and might have forged ahead anyway as a matter of principle had he not. Probably he worked hard for a long time with no sign of external reward. For none of this did he feel particularly heroic. Or special. And I’ll guess over time he came to realize the toil had become a pleasure, then a joy, then a way of life, perhaps even an inextricable part of his being.
I am a teacher. When I speak, a few dozen teenagers listen ... usually. With good reason I anticipate no Nobels—but I take unceasing delight in kids, I believe in them and in what we do together, and evidence suggests that after more than two decades I’m not so bad at it. But I chanced upon the job. No boyhood reverie or parental path-charting headed me in that direction. I’d had no formal training for it, had taken no classes aimed at it, no tutorials, no weekend seminars. I did not go to teacher camp. Instead, long ago I found myself in a city far from home (Honolulu) with a thin wallet and little cause to be picky. A good man at Punahou School took a chance on me. And in those first few years I was not especially terrific. This alone served to suggest to me the enterprise might be worthwhile. A few among the brass wondered if I had what it took. But they were patient, I stuck to it, paid attention, and learned. And today I prize what I do all the more because once upon a time it didn’t come easy.

Now I’m the father of four and find myself subject to the same impulses and cultural encouragements that influence other parents of means. I’ve taken a daughter to soccer tournaments across the country. I’ve dropped a son off for SAT tutoring. I’ve sweated college applications and paid significant money to hear the first 40 seconds of Clair de Lune coaxed from an obstinate upright again and again. And I too have struggled to decide what is best for my children, and have not always resisted the merely expedient. But I know when to stay out of the way—and when I don’t, I respect the right of my children to tell me so.

And while they’re special to me beyond expression, I recognize my kids—like my students—are no more or less important than anyone else’s, no more or less deserving of happy, productive lives, lives that shake a joyous fist at mortality, lives that matter beyond themselves. They know it, Nobels or no Nobels.

I wonder what Krugman might think. Probably I should have asked.