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Disinhibited Thoughts #14

Today is October 20, 2001. On this day my status as a doctor will be officially conferred. Right now I sit with another 14 about-to-be-Ph.D's in the 2nd row of the tightly packed gymnasium at the University of Waterloo and listen to our convocation address. It is entitled "Making A Difference". Ever since my first year of undergraduate studies at McMaster University, after having just carefully (and illicitly) printed "*Ph.D. Countdown: Z Minus 9 Years*" in black magic marker on the corkboard above my cot in room 505 of Woodstock Hall Residence, I have wondered what this day would look like. It dawned as a day of deep reflection. The time spent. The MONEY spent! The people, and the experiences. The changes in what I know and, consequently, in whom I am. The personal sacrifices. I found myself thinking about my grandfather: gone now for over 3 years, I wonder if perhaps the only essential difference between us was a fortuitous Ann Landers article at the age of 18. I was, by dumb luck, granted freedom from MY life of symptom internalization and confusion, misperception, and depression. What inconceivable strength to live such a full 87 years bereft of explanations or help. What a brave man.

At one time in my life I declared with wry pessimism that, should I actually make it to my doctoral convocation, a piano would likely fall on me as I cross the platform to at long last claim my prize. As the day loomed close, however, my thoughts instead strayed to something decidedly less ominous – whether or not I would suppress my tics as I accepted the degree. 'Understandable reactions' be damned – I didn't want to get laughed at. Not today. Not when my family sits in the audience and shares in the experience with me. Not when I've worked so hard for so long – shouldn't there be some kind of atonement? A collective unspoken attempt at reparation (partial as it may be) offered by attendees who recognize my right to dignity in this hour? My grandfather cried when he saw my first tentative public tics. At the time (so long ago now), lost in my own turmoil, I assumed the reaction to be borne of dismay and embarrassment of me. Now I understand he may have felt consumed with undeserved guilt.

Then I remembered one of the reasons why I tic so openly now on a daily basis. To make people think. To challenge preconceptions. To educate others in TS and, in so doing, ensure that they spend their knee-jerk, often unflattering (to all concerned) reactions on me instead of on another. To ease the lives of others as a result. To Make A Difference.

I felt chagrin for faltering enough to spend any time dwelling on this decision. When my name was called I strode across the stage in the same way that I live my life, and as the same person who achieved this distinction. Disinhibited. I vocally ticced as the doctoral hood was positioned on my shoulders. I stuck my tongue out at the Chancellor, who stood to meet me and shake my hand. My newly donned cap and tassel wobbled precariously on my jerking head. And everyone applauded. Tears stung my eyes, but not in embarrassment or dismay. In pride. The woman sitting next to me throughout the ceremony made obvious efforts to avert her eyes from me, and turned her back to me during the ritual shaking of hands and sharing of congratulations among graduands. I didn't care. Today is for you, grandpa.

Until next time, my friends! Duncan October, 2001

Note: in this installment of Disinhibited Thoughts I make reference to an Ann Landers article featuring Tourette Syndrome. I had not read this column in years, and only recently dug it out of storage during the filming of a documentary on my life and work in order to see it through changed eyes. To my utter astonishment and delight I found that a member of the Tourette Syndrome Foundation of Canada (a parent of a child with TS) wrote the letter that prompted and largely comprised the article. The article appeared in the London Free Press in approximately April of 1992. I hope the author of that letter is reading this, and will contact me. I owe this individual tremendously.

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