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Tony Wilson is mad about great speeches and not just those classical, we will fight them on the beaches kind of speeches. All the magnificence and uplifting and tear inducing, nation building, heart-swelling words that are said during awards ceremonies and funerals and during university graduations and to near-empty houses of parliament by people who were very used to making speeches, but also by those who've never made a speech in their lives. Tony Wilson is an author and a public speaker, you might remember him, from when he won the second series of a delightful ABC TV documentary competition series called Race Around the World quite a while back. Tony has collected many of the world's great speeches, both the famous ones and lesser known on his website that's called Speak Ola. It's one of the world's most comprehensive collections of speeches of all kinds and the whole project began when Tony had to give the most difficult speech of his life. Hi Tony. Hi Richard. How did your site Speak Ola come to be?

Well it was started about five years ago and I remember unfortunately in 2013 my best man died. He committed suicide and it was a terrible and traumatic time and it meant that I delivered a eulogy and I actually started thinking I think I might have even delivered the set of speeches. I've done, you know, best man speeches, wedding groom speech, birthday speeches for 50th and I've done an acceptance speech that you might remember, Richard, for Race Around the World where I forgot to thank the other contestants so I felt as though speaking with something I was really interested in and I was actually, I did a lot of corporate speaking and MC work as well so it was a genuine passion and I found that every year I'd be visiting speeches I loved by masters, you know, I'd go and watch the I Have a Dream speech and I'd watch, I love this speech by David Foster Wallace called This is Water and every year I'd be visiting on YouTube my favorite speeches and I started thinking where's the home? Like I know quotes have got a place called wiki quotes where if you want to quickly find a famous quote by a famous person you can look up wiki quote and it always comes up and I was thinking there's not really a hub for speeches. There's not a place where all the great speeches live or at least where someone's attempted to curate,

you know, a collection of great speeches and so that's what I embarked upon.

Tell me about the man that you wrote the eulogy for.

He was a, he was a mercurial figure. I mean, I guess in retrospect you start thinking of things like manic depression and certainly when he died he cited depression. He didn't say he had manic depression but he was so funny and so creative and he was really the light of my life.

You know, we would speak probably for half an hour on the phone every day and he did sort of quite eccentric and full-on things like, you know, for our dream team league he created jumpers and he created theme songs and made a website himself so that for our fantasy football league we could go on and, you know, he had news releases and everything was sort of to an extreme degree with DAF and he made me laugh so much and when it happened this sort of disaster of him taking his own life I was broad-sided but at the same time as I sort of tried to clue things back into place retrospectively I did kind of get a sense, you know, that there was different behaviour I guess to other people I knew and that's what made him so compelling and four of us friends delivered a eulogy and actually one of the nice things that's come out of his death is that we get together once a month and have drinks together at the Wesleyan and it's a hotel here in Melbourne and I actually feel as though, you know, I just wish he had been there for those, you know, because I think he drove a lot of the friendship with all of us and I feel

that he would have really enjoyed us making some of the running.

There's a certain kind of friendship dynamic Tony. I've had this in my own life as well where you have a friendship that's based on stable friend and wild friend. Was it like that for you with DAF? It was a very selfless friend. He actually didn't give us much of a window into his self. He didn't ever speak about his depression at all and that's a real regret. Didn't understand how much, you know, medical help he was getting, for example, but he was very caring as a friend. So he was always thinking of me. So there were things like, you know, when my son got diagnosed with cerebral palsy, when he was three weeks old, you know, I was just in a massive trough and DAF was the one, you know, he went away and read a book on cerebral palsy. You know, and he said,

I've read this book and this is what might happen and this might happen and it's interesting if you heard of these treatments and he kind of went into that mode and so I sort of,

I always think of that, you know, just how much he, on the day of my first daughter was born, he made a box of things that were of her city on that day. So he went around the streets and took photos of Melbourne of what the city looked like on the day she was born so that she could open up that up one day and he kind of collected the newspaper from that day. He sort of had that extreme giving empathetic personality and I guess there were extreme behaviours as well that we sort of found out about later but it's just a real tragedy. Some of the stars that burn the brightest find living difficult. And yet reading your eulogy, it seems a very large part of your friendship was based on remorseless, relentless, practical jokes. So he was really funny, you know, and he was very competitive and we went on a five-week trip together around Europe

and, you know, and I catalogued a few of the memories of that time. You know, he used to play a game, he used to play a game called Bonsoir or Bon Snub on the streets of Paris. You had to bowl up to a Parisian with a big Bonsoir and if they said Bonsoir back, you scored a Bonsoir and if they gave you a nose in the air, walk straight past, who are you, crazy person, then that was a Bon Snub. And then he would keep count of who got the most Bonsoirs and who got the most Bon Snubs. But that's the sort of thing where he invented the game and, you know, he was just so naturally funny. He wrote a novel called A Girl or Smock and a Simple Plan which was about his crush in grade six. It was about primary school life and he's crushed in grade six and he wrote it over three or four years and he was, he was consumed by that book. He wanted it to be perfect.

You know, I think he was very ambitious for his own writing and his own comic voice and it actually, you know, was one of those things where any of us who have written a novel know that it's a pretty difficult game out there in Australian publishing world and, you know, I think he ended up being, you know, in some ways defeated by his writing. You know, he found it very hard to cope with, I may be feelings of failure, but I mean, I think getting a book published is a huge achievement on any front, but I don't think Daph felt that way in the end. He sounds like a person who had a roaring complex and wonderful personality. What was the eulogy writing process like for you? I think anyone who's written a eulogy for someone that they just really loved, there's a, there's a sort of a pressure that descends on you. My goodness, this has to be good. And I went down to my office at the Abbotson Convent and sealed myself away and I, I actually, I had my start because he was, he was such a wonderful person. And we had a meeting that was, you know, how if you want a movie and you want something dramatic to happen in the first seconds of, of the couple

meeting, well, this happened with Daph and I, we were at an article Clark's drinks and he actually keeled over and fainted. So there's 50 people in the room and he's fainted in the middle of the room and you think, oh no, this poor person and everyone's huddled in, you know, like, oh, is he okay? And his eyes flick open and he threw his hand up and he said, hi, Chris Daffy. So he introduced himself to the surrounding circle, had the sort of presence and quickness of mind to make a joke of his own position. Wow, what a way to walk into your life. It is such a dramatic entry moment. And so that was a way of, of starting the eulogy. And I could describe that day. And I guess, you know, one thing I've learned over the curating of the site is that the, the, the compiling anecdotes and collecting stories about the relationship or what ends up, you know, increasing the power of the speech. And so I actually wrote it over about a two or three or four hour period. And I actually just remember when I started talking about that box that he made for, for my daughter, I just was, I was just sobbing into the keyboard, one of those, because you, you shattered anyway, it's always in the days after this events happened. And I just remember, you know, losing it pretty much. But I also knew it was really good. So it was a point of, as a writer, I kind of thought, you know, that's about as good as I can do. And probably read the speech a hundred times. So sometimes it's the way I reconnect with, with that time and that relationship. The word eulogy means to heap praise on someone. We don't do that so much anymore, do we? We don't just heap praise on the dead person. I think that's absolutely right. And I also think it's been a moving art form. So in the old days, there was a sense that you cataloged, you said they were born at this time in this hospital. And then they went to this school and then they went to university. And it was kind of a distant obituary type feel, almost the newspaper piece that was done from the podium. But I think maybe people have become more comfortable with emotion. And if you give yourself over to the emotion and the stories of the relationship, then that's actually what the audience wants. They want to probably have a bit of a cry and a laugh in that all-important 10 minutes or 20 minutes that have been given to the life. And for someone like me who's now been collecting them for five years, you know, I just love them. It doesn't matter really, doesn't matter how good the speaker is almost. It's the act of love, of remembering your family member or friend is just always powerful. So I mean, there are some eulogies that are, you know, that go into the stratosphere because of the ability either of the wordsmith or the speaker. But really, one thing I tried to do on Speakola was to say, let's not just make it famous speeches. Let's have the average person just giving their eulogy for their mum or their dad and sending that into me. And I've got dozens of those eulogies up now. One of the best devices I've seen at the beginning of any kind of speech is some small thing that the speaker should do right at the outset that just brings us into the moments. Like later on, we're going to hear from Robert De Niro who blows his nose at the start of his speech. But it does what's required, which is to bring everyone into the moment, into the here and now. Do you try and do that when you give a speech right at the outset? Yeah, absolutely. I always say that if you can refer to the surroundings or the trip in, like even one time as a corporate emcee, I sat on bubblegum on the train on the way to the event. And just to turn around and show the bubblegum on the back of your pants and say, everything's been going well so far. Let's hope it's a great day. And that sort of icebreaker immediately says, oh, he's not just buried in his notes. He's not doing the same speech he give to any audience. He's thinking about the bubblegum on the seat of his pants. And that's our special connection with him because he is bubblegum pants for the rest of the night.

They're very useful. Anything that refers to the room, anything that refers to the surroundings. I'm about to have a speak all podcast. And Damien Kallen and the comedian is the first cab off the rank. And he's talking about putting humor into eulogies. And one thing he did, he's a comedian and has a massive amount of experience at this. And he started with, Mum always said that if her time came, she wanted to be in a room where there was a scepter, where there was a purple cloth draped over in this and some fake armor and a scepter in the church. And he'd been there the day before. And he basically just picked out this weird collection of items that were in the church and pretended that that had been his mother's wishes. And so that sort of ability to disarm and to immediately give the signal that the speaker is in command. And that ice breakers do that. By and large, I think Australians are pretty poor at making speeches. And we see this in the really low quality of political speech in this country. What's your view on this, Tony? Are Australian leaders particularly terrible at speech making? No, it's possible Australians feel more self conscious, perhaps, than Americans at giving speeches. You look at the tradition of the commencement or something like that. And that's certainly a much more entrenched tradition in America. And maybe on the political speech front, they have such a long primary season and a long electoral cycle that the kind of campaign stump often is a beautiful thing in American politics. But it's not like we don't have great speeches in Australia. I mean, I immediately think of the Redfern speech or the speech for the unknown soldier that Don Watson and Paul Keating collaborated on, and Paul Keating delivered, and they're just beautiful speeches. Tim Minchin gave a great commencement speech over in WA. There are great examples of Australian speeches. Julia Gillard's misogyny speech. It's possible in recent times, we haven't seen soaring political speech making. It feels as though we're in a little bit of an era where the every person is the target. And anyone who goes for kind of soaring oratory immediately looks like a smarty pants or something. And so I find that really disheartening. One of the things that's required after a moment of national horror or catastrophes for political leaders to step up and make a speech to come ruffled nerves, to help us grieve, to help us find some sense of community after what's happened. And a fine example of that is a speech from the New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern who is addressing the New Zealand Parliament following the Christchurch massacre in 2019. Peace be upon you and peace be upon all of us. Mr Speaker, the 15th of March will now be forever a day etched in our collective memories. On a quiet Friday afternoon, a man stormed into a peaceful worship and took away the lives of 50 people. That quiet Friday afternoon has become our darkest of days. But for the families, it was more than that. It was the day that the simple act of prayer, of practicing their Muslim faith and religion, led to the loss of their loved one's lives. Those loved ones were brothers, daughters, fathers and children. They were New Zealanders. They are us. And because they are us, we as a nation, we mourn them. We feel a huge duty of care to them. And Mr Speaker, we have so much, we have feel the need to say and to do. And in this role, I wanted to speak directly to the families. We cannot know your grief, but we can walk with you at every stage. We can and we will surround you with Aroha, Minakitanga and all that makes us us. Our heart but our spirit is strong. That's New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern addressing the New Zealand Parliament

following the Christchurch massacre in 2019. Tony, what do you think she's doing right there in that speech? Well, she's a very clear communicator. She has the mood of the moment. So it's a very somber voice. It's a very clearly articulated voice. She speaks with a kind of an empathy for the moment, but also a certainty of purpose. So she says what the government is going to do. And she does use the kind of military language we have upped the security levels of to so and so. And we are closing this airport and she speaks like a leader should in a terrorist situation. And she also offers the strongest condemnation to the act. And she uses beautiful words to do it. And so within two or three minutes, she basically constructs a government visible. Yes, she's speaking for me. Yes, she's under control. Yes, she's not going to put up with this. And it's just it's just a fantastic few minutes of speech making. And she deserves to be elevated up with, you know, FDR speech in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, a day that will live in infamy. And, you know, these are moments that need to be reflected upon and they end up defining the leadership of the person. And, you know, I think Jacinda Ardán, no matter what happens over the months and years to come, she's had a few occasions and that includes COVID-19, where she's really defined herself and spoken brilliantly. You know, she uses the British tradition of the parliamentary speech is the Arabic Muslim greeting piece be upon you, which is really is just the kind of right thing for the moment and ends up with Maori words. So within that context, she's bringing in Arabic and Muslim words and Maori words, which are all designed to bind up the community and hold bring everyone a bit closer together. And that's where great speech writing and research and thought and it's probably a team effort. So there's people in her office who are putting these ideas across short rather than long, Arabic and Maori. And then, you know, and it also goes to show that a great speech can be read as well. I mean, she's reading that statement. I think sometimes people feel as though great speechmaking is the ability to control words while standing on your feet. But so many remember our scripted speeches and being a good reader, slowing down, getting the right level of gravity and tone and lengths of sentences and all these things play together to produce something wonderful. The next speech is from John Stuart, former host of The Daily Show, The Comedy Show and Comedy Central in the United States. This speech is John Stuart with a group of even first responders, as they're called, appearing in front of a congressional committee in the United States. But hardly any members of Congress are actually sitting there to hear their stories. Tony, can you just fill in a bit of the background as to what's going on here? So the first responders are the people who were the people who first responded to 9-11. They're the firefighters and the police force and the emergency workers. And they're the people who rushed into the buildings and so many of them lost their lives. The New Yorkers referred to the pile, basically the rubble of 9-11, which smoked and emitted fumes and debris in the months that followed. And a lot of them got sick. So a lot of them had the cancers and lung diseases and it's a horrible situation. And as these people have got sicker, they have had their medical claims. And as we know in America, it's not as simple as here in Australia in terms of what's covered medically. And so they've had to fight for their medical rights. And the funding came initially. And then as the length of time becomes longer and the amounts of money are significant, they've struggled to get the support through Congress. And John Stewart

has been their long-term advocate and supporter. And he took it to Congress. And as you say, he spoke to a near empty chamber. And he's disdain and scorn for the Congress that wouldn't turn up to hear from the first responders who responded in five seconds to an attack on America is just something to behold. It's sort of, you don't need to be close to this issue to watch this speech and go, I'm seeing something perfect. And in fact, when I made a list last year of the greatest speeches of 2019, I put it at number one. As I sit here today, I can't help but think what an incredible metaphor this room is for the entire process that getting healthcare and benefits for 9-11 first responders has come to. Behind me, a filled room of 9-11 first responders. And in front of me, a nearly empty Congress.

Sick and dying, they brought themselves down here to speak to no one.

Shameful. It's an embarrassment to the country and it is disdain on this institution.

And you should be ashamed of yourselves for those that aren't here, but you won't be.

Because accountability doesn't appear to be something that occurs in this chamber.

We don't want to be here. Luda doesn't want to be here. None of these people want to be here.

But they are, and they're not here for themselves. They're here to continue fighting for what's right.

The official FDNY response time to 9-11 was five seconds. Five seconds. That's how long it took to respond to an urgent need from the public. Five seconds. And I'm sorry if I sound angry and undiplomatic, but I'm angry. And you should be too. And they're all angry as well.

And they have every justification to be that way.

There is not a person here. There is not an empty chair on that stage that didn't tweet out, never forget the heroes of 9-11. Never forget their bravery. Never forget what they did, what they gave to this country. Well, here they are. And where are they? Your indifference costs these men and women their most valuable commodity. Time.

That's John Stewart speaking to a near empty congressional chamber about the fate of the September 11 first responders in 2019. Tony, when you hear that speech, you feel this powerful sense of outrage. And John Stewart's trying to make you feel that outrage on behalf of the people he's representing who just can't get health care. But if you see the video footage, the 9-11 first responders sitting behind John Stewart, they have a different reaction.

The fact that John Stewart is saying these things that need to be said at that moment seems to have this soothing effect on them. But did it work? What effect did the speech have?

It's one of the rare occasions where he takes Congress apart for not doing their jobs. And within two months, a bill was signed. I think it was two or three months that President Trump was signing the first responders bill, which basically guaranteed \$10.2 billion to the first responders for the next decade and further billions to provide for their health care until the year 2090. So basically, every first responder who is sick and suffering as a result of 9-11 is catered to some extent until 2090. So he immediately opened the purse of Congress, and they were shamed. So it's one of those speeches where not only is it oratory at its finest, it produced a near immediate result.

This is Conversations with Richard Fidler.

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Or go to abc.news.au or flash conversations. Can you just explain exactly what that is?

Well, I think the word commencement speech comes from the idea that you commence life when you leave uni. It's all practice up till then. I don't know how accurate that is.

So it's a graduation speech, in other words.

It's a graduation speech. So at the end of college, they have these enormous events.

I think, you know, in Australia, it's almost a cringe event where you think, well, I go and be part of the A to Z who trudge up on the stage and grab our degree. And there's always some crust person in your field who gives a pretty uninspiring speech about,

I think ours was about water, even though I was a law student.

But in America, it's this huge thing. They often go to college out of town.

And so families are shipped in and it's a two or three day kind of build up to the big event itself. And they're often held in football stadiums or college stadiums with 20,000 people.

And they've just got bigger and bigger. I mean, I've been collecting the commencement speech, which is the kind of the feature, the keynote, the main person that you'd put on the invite.

And 40 years ago in 1980, Alan Alder gave a very famous one.

And I've looked through the 80s at the different great commencements. And yes, there are some.

But nowadays, there's 40 speeches a year by major celebrities that get shared around the internet.

But everyone's looking for that, that kind of original kernel of wisdom.

The Robert's Nero speech, which begins by him tapping about his nose.

It lets the audience know he's not frightened of them, doesn't it?

Well, that's right. And as we're talking about ice breakers, as soon as someone does something as personal as that, it says a lot of things, doesn't it? One is that he's got a kind of a sense of humor. He knows how to relax a crowd, because keep in mind, these are thousands and thousands of people he's speaking to. And it's got a sort of a strut to it as well.

So here it is, Robert De Niro giving some very candid advice in his commencement speech for graduates of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Thank you for inviting me to celebrate with you today. Tisch graduates, you made it.

And you're f***ed.

Think about that. The graduates from the College of Nursing, they all have jobs.

The graduates from the College of Dentistry, fully employed.

The Leonard N. Stern School of Business graduates, they're covered.

The School of Medicine graduates, each one will get a job.

The proud graduates of the NY School of Law, they're covered.

And if they're not, who cares? They're lawyers.

The English majors are not a factor.

They'll be home writing their novels. Teachers, they'll all be working.

Shitty jobs, lousy pay, yeah, but still working.

The graduates in accounting, they all have jobs.

Where does that leave you? Envious of those accountants? I doubt it.

They had a choice. Maybe they were passionate about accounting, but I think it's more likely that they used reason and logic and common sense to reach for a career that could give them the expectation of success and stability.

Reason, logic, common sense at the Tisch School of Arts? Are you kidding me?

But you didn't have that choice, did you? You discovered a talent, developed an ambition, and recognized your passion. When you feel that, you can't fight it. You just go with it.

When it comes to the arts, passion should always trump common sense.

You aren't just following dreams, you're reaching for your destiny.

You're a dancer, a singer, a choreographer, a musician, a filmmaker, a writer, a photographer, a director, a producer, an actor, an artist. Yeah, you're fine.

The good news is that that's not a bad place to start.

Now that you've made your choice or rather succumbed to it, your path is clear.

Not easy, but clear. You have to keep working. It's that simple. You got through Tisch, that's a big deal, or to put it another way, if you got through Tisch, big deal.

Well, it's a start. On this day of triumphantly graduating, a new door is opening for you.

A door to a lifetime of rejection. It's inevitable. It's what graduates call the real world.

You'll experience it or auditioning for a part or a place in a company.

It'll happen to you when you're looking for backers for a project.

You'll feel it when doors close on you while you're trying to get attention for something you've written and when you're looking for a directing or a choreography job.

How do you cope with it? I hear that Valium and Vicodin work.

Well, I don't know. Treasure the associations and friendships and working relationships with the people in your classes and your early work. You never know what might come from it.

There could be a major creative shift or a small detail that can make a major impression.

In Taxi Driver, Marty and I wanted Travis Bickle to cut his hair into a mohawk, an important character detail. But I couldn't do it because I needed long hair for the last tycoon that was starting right after Taxi Driver, and we knew a false mohawk would look, well, false.

So we were kicking it around one day at lunch and decided to give it one shot with the very best makeup artist at the time, Dick Smith. If you saw the movie, you know that it worked.

And by the way, now you know it wasn't real.

Friendships, good working relationships, collaboration. You just never know what's going to happen when you get together with your creative friends.

You're here to pause and celebrate your accomplishments so far as you move on to a rich and challenging future. And me, I'm here to hand out my pictures and resumes to the directing and producing graduates.

It's Robert De Niro giving the commencement speech to NYU graduates at the Tisch School of the Arts. What's to be said here about dropping the F-bomb right at the start? A risky strategy, Tony? Well, it's interesting, isn't it? I mean, I've always been really careful with that, and you must be careful about it as well. You know, when you're speaking to ABC audiences, there's sometimes a cringe factor to it, especially if it's not your shtick, if you're not the one where people expect it. But personally, I'm not really offended by swearing, and I often find swearing quite funny and effective. But there's sort of as a general rule, I think you assume that you don't want to put people offside in the speech. And so I've come to the conclusion some audiences, like for example, I do, I do the same footy lunch every year in Grand Final Week at the MCG. And I've veered into the territory of sometimes dropping a F-bomb. But usually, it would be in quotes. So if I'm swearing a lot more palatable, if it's not coming from me, but if I'm repeating what someone else has said, and then there's other speeches there where, you know, when it's Robert De Niro, he comes in and says, you've got your degree and now you're effed. Just the fact that his message is that this is a hard acting world. But he comes in with such a direct and it's a funny and confronting way of saying to the audience how difficult it is to be an actor and that they should have chosen a safer and more reliable undergraduate choice.

He says that and because it's Robert De Niro, because he's funny, because it's a shock, you laugh and it becomes a memorable speech. He absolutely gets away with the swearing and there would almost be no one in that audience who says, oh, I thought it was a bit crass from Robert to use the F-bomb. You know, they walk away going, that's unbelievable. Robert De Niro spoke to us. Yeah. Find out more about the Conversations podcast. Just head to [abc.net.au slash Conversations](http://abc.net.au/slash/Conversations). One of your favorite speeches is by the British author Zadie Smith. It's a commencement speech at an American university. Why do you like this one so much? Well, maybe I've got a bit of a crush on Zadie. That's possible. I loved her novel, *White Teeth*, which was a classic in the 90s, and she talks about the 90s, which is she is of my generation. She's probably a couple of years younger than me, I think. And she talks about us living through a golden era of the 90s. And she talks about individualism that it was promoted. We all thought we were special. We all thought we were talented. We all thought that the sky was the limit. And we thought that we didn't really need other people and that collectivism was almost a dirty word. And so this is a speech that is called *Many Hands*. And it's sort of Zadie learning the lesson of her parents and her grandparents, people that weren't steeped in individualism. So here she is, Zadie Smith giving the commencement address at New York's New School University to the students there. And she begins by comparing the ceremony with her own graduation from Cambridge University in the UK way back in the dim dark past of the 1990s. I should say first that some elements of the day were rather different. I wasn't in a stadium listening to a speech. I was in an 18th century hall kneeling before the dean who spoke Latin and held one of my fingers. Don't ask me why. Still the essential facts were the same. Like you, I was finally done with my degree and had made of myself a graduate. And like you, I now had two families, the old boring one that raised me and an exciting new one consisting of a bunch of freaks I'd made in college. But part of the delightful anxiety of graduation day was trying to find a way to blend these two tribes with their differing haircuts and political views and hygiene standards and taste in music. I felt like a character in two different movies. In short, the thing I wanted most in the world was to be an individual. I thought that's what my graduation signified that I had gone from being one of the many to one of the few to one of the ones who would have choices in life. After all, my father didn't have many choices. His father had none at all. Unlike them, I had gone to university. I was a special individual. When we graduate, though, things can get a little complicated. For how are we meant to think of this fabulous person? We've taken such care of creating. If university made me special, did that mean I was worth more than my father, more than his father for him? Did it mean I should expect more from life than them? Did I deserve more? What does it really mean to be one of the few? We'd been raised that way. Born in the 70s, we did not live through austerity, did not go to war like my father or his father. For the most part, we did not join large political or ideological movements. We simply inherited the advantages for which a previous generation had fought. And the thing so many of us feared was the idea of being subsumed back into the collective from which we'd come, of being returned to the world of the many, or doing any work at all in that world. In my case, this new attitude was particularly noticeable. My own mother was a social worker, and I had teachers in my rowdy state school who had themselves been educated at precisely the elite institution I would later join. But amongst my college friends,

I know of no one who made that choice. For the most part, we were uninterested in what we considered

to be unglamorous pursuits. You can thank my generation for the invention of the word supermodel and the popularization of celebrity and lifestyle often used in conjunction with each other.

Reality TV, that was us. And when the fussier amongst us detected in these visions of prestigious individuality, perhaps something a little crass and commercialized, our solution was to go in some ways further down the same road to out individuate the celebrated individuals. We became hipsters, defined by the ways we weren't like everybody else. One amusing much commented upon consequence of this was that we all ended up individuals of the same type. Not one of a kind, but one of a kind. But there was another aspect I now find melancholic. We isolated ourselves.

It took us the longest time to work out that we needed each other. You may have noticed that even now we seem somewhat stunned by quite ordinary human pursuits like having children or living in a neighborhood or getting ill. We're always writing lifestyle articles about such matters in the Sunday papers. That's because until very recently we thought we were going to get through this whole life thing purely on our own steam. Even if we were no fans of the ex-British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, we had unwittingly taken her most famous slogan and embedded it deep within our own lives. There is no such thing as society, she said. Unique individuals, what do we need with society? But then it turned out the things that have happened to everybody since the dawn of time also happened to us. Our parents got old and ill. Our children needed schools and somewhere to play. We wanted trains that ran on time. We needed each other. It turned out we were just human, like everybody. Now I may have this completely backward, but I get the sense

that something different is going on in your generation, something hopeful. You seem to be smarter sooner. Part of these smarts is surely born out of crisis. You have so many large collective tasks ahead and you know that. We had them too, but paid little attention.

The climate, the economy, the sick relationship between the individual prestige of the first world and the anonymity of the third. These are things only many hands can fix working together.

You are all individuals, but you're also part of a generation and generations are defined by the projects they take on together. Even at the level of slogan, you've decided to honor the concept of the many over the few, that now famous 99%. As far as slogans go, which is not very far, yours still sounds more thoughtful to me than the slogans of my youth, which were fatally infected by advertising. Be strong, be fast, be bold, be different, be you. Be you, that was always the takeaway. And when my peers grew up and went into advertising, they spread that message far and wide. Just be you screams the label on your shampoo bottle.

Just be you cries your deodorant, because you're worth it. You get about 50 commencement speeches a day and that's before you've even left the bathroom. I didn't think you'd want any more of that from me. Instead, I want to speak in favor of recognizing our place within the many, not only as a slogan, much less as a personal sacrifice, but rather as a potential source of joy in your life. Here is a perhaps silly example. I happened to be recently at my mother's birthday. Around midnight, it came time to divide up the rum cake. And I, one of life's volunteers, was pressed ganged into helping. A small circle of women surrounded me, dressed in West African wraps and headscarfs, in imitation of their ancestors. Many hands make short work, said one, and passed me a stack of paper plates. It was my job to take the plated slices through the crowd. Hardly any words passed between us as we went about. But each time we set a new

round upon

a tray, I detected a hum of deep satisfaction at our many hands, forming this useful human chain. Occasionally, as I gave out a slice of cake, an older person would look up a murmur, ah, your Ivan's daughter. But for the most part, it was the cake itself that received a greeting, a little nod or a smile. For it was the duty of the daughter to hand out cake, no further commentary. And it was while doing what I hadn't realized was my duty, that I felt what might be described as the exact opposite of the sensation I have standing in front of you now. Not puffed up with individual prestige, but immersed in the beauty of the crowd. Connected, if only in gesture, to an ancient line of practical women working in companionable silence in the service of their community. A tiny example of a collective action, and yet clearly still so rare in my own life, that even this minor instance of it struck me. Anyway, my point is it was a beautiful feeling. And it was over too soon. And when I tried to look for a way to put it into this speech, I was surprised how difficult it is to find the right words to describe it. So many of our colloquial terms for this work of many hands are sunk in human chain for starters. Cogging the machine, brick in the wall. In such phrases, we sense the long shadow of the 20th century with its brutal collective movements. We do not trust the collective, we've seen what submission to it can do. We believe instead in the individual. We fear that the work of many hands will obscure the beloved outline of our individual selves. But perhaps as self you've been treasured, is itself the work of many hands. Speaking personally, I owe so much to the hard work of my parents, to the educational and healthcare systems in my country, to the love and care of my friends. Throughout your adult life, you're going to have a daily choice to throw your lot in with one or the other. And a lot of people, most people, even people without the luxury of your choices, are going to suggest to you over and over that only an idiot chooses when he could be one of the few. Only an idiot chooses public over private, shared over gated, communal over unique. Mrs. Thatcher, who was such a genius at witty aphorism, once said, a man who beyond the age of 26 finds himself on a bus can count himself a failure. I've always been fascinated by that quote, by its dark assumption that even something as natural as sharing a journey represents a form of personal denigration. The best reply to what I know is that famous line of Terrence, the Roman playwright. I am a human being. I consider nothing that is human alien to me. Some people interpret it as a call to toleration. I find it stronger than that. I think it's a call to love. Now, full disclosure, most of the time, I don't find it easy to love my fellow humans. But the times I self and get involved at whatever level, what I'm trying to say is those have proved the most valuable moments of my life. And I never would have guessed that back in 1997. Oh, I would have paid lip service to it as a noble idea, but I wouldn't have believed it. And the thing is, it's not even a question of ethics or self-sacrifice or moral high ground. It's actually totally selfish. Being with people, doing for people, it's going to bring you joy. Unexpectedly, it just feels better. It feels good to give your unique and prestigious selves the slip every now and then and confess your membership in this unwieldy collective called the human race. For one thing, it's far less lonely. And for another, contra, Mrs. Thatcher, some of the best conversations you'll ever hear will be on public transport. Hold on to that desire for human connection. Don't let anyone scare you out of it. Walk down these crowded streets with a smile on your face. Be thankful you get to walk so close to other humans. It's a privilege. Thank you. Well, there you go. That's pretty short. That's Zadie Smith. The message is get over yourself,

hand out the cake, be a person. Tony Wilson, it's been lovely going through all these fabulous speeches, many of which I've never heard before with you. Thank you so much, Tony.

Thanks, Richard.

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