

AN APOLOGY TO THE GRADUATES

BY ANNA QUINDLEN, MAY 14, 2004

Members of the class of 2004:

I'm so sorry.

I look at all of you and realize that, for many, life has been a relentless treadmill since you entered preschool at the age of 2. Sometimes, as though I am narrating a fairy story, I tell my children of a time when the SAT was taken only once and a tutor was a character in an English novel, when I could manage to pay my own college tuition with summer wages and find both a good job and a decent apartment when I graduated.

Now cottage industries have grown up around the impossibility of any of that: specialized learning centers to supplement schools, special loan programs at usurious rates to supplement college grants, companies that will throw up instant walls to turn a one-bedroom apartment into a place where three people can coexist.

There's an honorable tradition of starving students; it's just that, between the out-sourcing of jobs and a boom market in real estate, your generation envisions becoming starving adults. Caught in our peculiar modern nexus of prosperity and insolvency, easy credit and epidemic bankruptcy, you also get toxic messages from the culture about what achievement means. It is no longer enough to make it' you must make it BIG. Television has turned everything into a contest, from courtship to adoption. In a voyeuristic world, fame becomes a ubiquitous career goal.

You all will live longer than any generation in history, yet you were kicked into high gear earlier as well. How exhausted you must be. Your college applications look like the resumes for midlevel executives. We boomer moms and dads had high expectations, ratcheted up by what the more honest of us must admit was something akin to competitive parenting. Soccer leagues. Language programs. Even summer camps that concentrate on college prep instead of sailing.

Your grandparents surely think that it was more stressful to join the service after Pearl Harbor, and at some level they're right. But the mission was clear then, the goal straightforward and honorable, the endgame a good life and a healthy family. What is it now? Public buildings were once names after war heroes, philanthropists and presidents, but in New Jersey one school has managed to keep its gym spiffy by taking money from the local supermarket and putting up a big sign: THE SHOPRITE OF BROOKLAWN CENTER. Cash is the point. Who wants to be a millionaire? Everyone. Although a million doesn't buy what it once did. Just look at the bottom line on your college loans.

Who can blame you if you were not all creating Campus Coalitions for Peace or People for the Ethical Treatment of People? It was not marches or leafleting that drove the political process as you grew up, but soft money and PACs. It now costs so much to run a race for public office that the contribution of any individual may seem puny and irrelevant....

One professor at the University of Maryland, who was at the college during the '60s and remembers thousands gathering to protest the Vietnam War, told the Baltimore Sun the activist days are gone forever: "They're interested in their grades and then getting a good job when they get out." It's easy to translate this transformation into vacuous careerism, but it's something more complex than that. Here is a remarkably incisive summation from Lillian Mongeau, who will graduate from Barnard College later this month:

"When telling my family history I proudly tell how each generation sacrificed so that the next could achieve more—more education, more money, more prestige. But how can I achieve more than my

parents? They are living the American dream. Now if I don't achieve as much as they did I will have failed, but to achieve more than they did is virtually impossible. To this is the added pressure that there is no excuse for failure. I have had the best of everything ... if I mess up it will be entirely my fault.

"I feel that I just need some time," she adds. "I just want everything to stop moving for a while so that I can think."

To the members of the class of 2004: putting a stop to this treadmill is like disarmament. Who dares to go first? A generation ago your parents, as a group, were known for wanting to give peace a chance in the world. Somehow we have raised a group that wants only a little peace in their own frantic lives. But peace is not what you see in the immediate future, for the world, for this nation or for yourselves. Instead, what stretches before you looks like a version of "Survivor" in street clothes. Find the job. Find the mate. Scale the leader. Have the baby. Make the deal. Make the birthday cake. The gym, the Gap, the lover, the décor, the cuisine. Who will win the contest? Perhaps it will be those of you brave enough to stop moving.