Sophie’s Valedictorian Speech

Because I’m an ardent fan of Dr. Seuss, but hate clichés, let me tell you about a book other than *Oh the Places You’ll Go*. That's probably illegal at a grad ceremony, but I'll attempt it. One of Dr. Seuss’s less well known books, but my favorite, is *Did I ever tell you how lucky you are?*

It begins with this young lad, who approaches a man sitting on a cactus (luckily not Pip). He’s singing about unlucky people (whose problems all seem to rhyme…) and, more importantly, the fortune you have to not be in their shoes.

Though none of us own a throm-dim-bu-lator or work on Bunglebung bridge, we are also lucky. We live in an area that has water available - clean and easy to get - where we don’t fear bombs from past wars blowing us up on our way home from school. We have a chance to enter the workforce or go to college - and we’re not forced one way or the other.

You have received a free education, taught by teachers who care. And - you got this regardless of what you look like or where you came from. I got it, even though I’m a girl. Not everyone is that lucky. But this moment memorializes so much more than a free, sterile education. My aunt and her family recently traveled back to India, where her husband is from. While there, they visited her husband's elementary school - the blackboards and desks were the same as when he was there, and the walls were blank. There was no cafeteria or gym, no bulletin boards with bright art projects. For their elementary school kids, it was eye opening - this school looked nothing like their own in Illinois. We’re lucky because CHS offers theatre and the arts, music classes and athletics, reading and writing and knitting clubs. With extracurriculars, and new classes close by in the brand new ATEC building, it’s not only an education, but an experience that we need to be thankful for.

I'm lucky even beyond this building, having a close knit, supportive family. Thanks to my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and family friends who had a hand in raising me. Mama and Papi especially - thank you. Abe and John, thank you for not raising me. To the teachers who’ve lived at the school for their students - especially Ms. Wang, who’s also graduating Central this year. To my friends, who’ve also made this an experience, and not just an education.

My friends, and actually everyone, also patiently listened to my obsessive rants on the pangolin. In case you’re not in the lucky percentile who’ve been informed, the pangolin is the world’s only scaly mammal - and also the most heavily poached mammal in the world. People don’t put a lot of conservation efforts into the housecat-sized pinecone looking creature because it’s very unknown, but that lack of publicity is exactly why millions can continue to be poached. I found my voice, and advocate for them whenever I can - I’ll use whatever mic, or giant graduation audience I come across as another way to spread the word about pangolins. I was lucky that speech and debate helped me learn to speak and find super obscure passions, but it’s only through using that new ability that I can make any difference to pangolins.

The same is true for all of us - only by using the gifts and chances that we’ve been granted can you change the world, or appreciate what you’ve been given. You each have a life, an education, a voice. You are lucky. Go use it.