

The Brick Tower

— a speech by Justin Hudson

Ladies and gentlemen, family, faculty and my fellow classmates of the class of 2010, before I begin I would like to thank those teachers who chose this modest speech among the outstanding collection of speeches written by my highly competent peers. I would also like to thank all the people who have expressed their support for me and their anticipation for this speech. To be told “You are the best person in the grade to give this speech”, or some variation of that statement, more than once is truly humbling, and you all are either the most polite people I know, or the kindest people I know. It is a great honor to give this address, and I promise I do not take it lightly. I have chosen every word quite carefully because I am fully aware of the responsibility you all have bestowed upon me.

Today, I stand before you as a personification of conflictedness. I find myself on this podium experiencing numerous warring emotions, and I am certain many of you here empathize with me on that point. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, I am filled with a great sense of happiness and accomplishment. My peers and I have put much effort for the last six years—a third of our lives thus far—into being able to stand here today and say that we’ve earned the right to stand here. It was by no means easy, and there were many times when I thought I would not reach this finish line. But those struggles have only made this moment sweeter. The people who are on this stage survived four years of Latin, or 8th grade swim class, or English with Ms. D’Amico, or BC Calculus, or the 25% rule, and I think all of us can take some pride in that.

Yet, my ambivalence on this day stems from the very fact that this ceremony is the end of an arduous journey. While I am ready to continue my academic endeavors, knowing that Hunter

has thoroughly prepared me for them, I am also filled with a deep sense of anxiety and sadness. Hunter has been my second home for the last six years, and it has bordered on becoming my first home. Between my time diligently taking notes in the classroom, playing Chinese Poker in the hallway, taking a nap in the G.O. office, frantically rehearsing for a cultural show or theater production in the auditorium, cheering for an undefeated basketball team in the gymnasium, or simply sitting outside on the senior steps, listening to a boom box and enjoying nice weather in the courtyard, Hunter has truly become a sanctuary for me. My life has revolved around the four-story brick building that stands on East 94th Street and Park Avenue, and Hunter's intimate class size means that I have become as connected to the people of this school as I have to the building itself. It may sound disingenuous to say that I will miss each and every one of you, but all of you in some small way have shaped me into the person I am today, so I thank you all for that.

Of course, the comfort that I have attained at Hunter makes this departure a rather anxious one, but with anxiety comes excitement, and the end of this journey signifies the start of a brand new one. As I leave behind the warmth that I have experienced at Hunter to enter a vastly new and quite frightening terrain, I can only help but think back to the last time I was in this situation, as a fresh-faced, wide-eyed twelve-year old entering the foreboding, windowless Brick Prison for the first time. Every aspect of my life since that point has been overwhelmingly positive, so all my fears about what lies ahead are slightly tamed by the idea that I will at least come close to experiencing in my future what I have already experienced at Hunter.

However, ladies and gentlemen, more than happiness, relief, fear or sadness, I feel a very strong emotion that I cannot ignore today. More than anything else, today I feel guilty.

I feel guilty because I don't deserve any of this. And neither do any of you. We received an outstanding education at no charge based solely on our performance on a test we took when

we were eleven year olds, or four year olds. We received superior teachers and additional resources based on our status as “gifted”, while kids who naturally needed those resources much more than us wallowed in the mire of a broken system. And now, we stand on the precipice of our lives, in control of our lives, based purely and simply on luck and circumstance. If you truly believe that the demographics of Hunter represent the distribution of intelligence in this city, then you must believe that the Upper West Side, Bayside and Flushing are intrinsically more intelligent than the South Bronx, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Washington Heights, and I refuse to accept that. It is certainly not Hunter’s fault that socioeconomic factors inhibit the educational opportunities of some children from birth, and in some ways I forgive colleges and universities that are forced to review eighteen year-olds, the end results of a broken system. But, we are talking about eleven year-olds. Four year-olds. We are deciding children’s fates before they even had a chance. We are playing God, and we are losing. Kids are losing the opportunity to go to college or obtain a career, because no one taught them long division or colors. Hunter is perpetuating a system in which children, who contain unbridled and untapped intellect and creativity, are discarded like refuse. And we have the audacity to say they deserved it, because we’re smarter than them.

As students, we throw around empty platitudes like “deserve” and “earn”, most likely because it makes us feel better about ourselves. However, it simply isn’t the case. I know for a fact that I did not work as hard as I possibly could have, and I think the same is true for everyone on this stage. Nevertheless, people who work much harder than we ever could imagine will never have the opportunities that lie in front of us.

I apologize if this is not the speech you wanted to hear, but you will have the rest of your lives to celebrate your accomplishments. I apologize if I have not inspired you, or uplifted you,

but we have failed to inspire and uplift an entire generation of children. That being said, let me make it very clear that I am not giving anyone here a moral lecture, for I am as complicit in the system we are a part of as anyone else in this room. If anything, I only make these remarks to further emphasize how much Hunter has meant to me, because I am acutely aware of where I would be now without it. As recipients of fortune, we more than anyone else should be able to understand and respect what our high school experience has meant to us, and has done for us.

My guilt ultimately stems from my awareness of the academic, social, emotional and psychological tools that Hunter has blessed us with. Therefore, I believe the best way to assuage this guilt is to use those fortuitous tools to not only better myself, but also improve the society that surrounds us outside these oh, so narrow walls. I do not know the capacity in which I will be able to make this world a better and more just place, but I strongly believe that education is the most effective means of creating social improvement, which is precisely why this is a battle we cannot concede.

My experiences at Hunter have left me with one final emotion; the last sentiment I will share with you today is hope. I hope that I will use the tools that Hunter has given me as a means to provide opportunities to others, not out of a sense of paternalistic philanthropy, but out of a sense of duty to give to other people what Hunter has given to me. I also hope that you all will do the same, in whatever way you see fit. Even more so, I hope that in the near future, education itself will not be a privilege for the few in this world. I hope that a quality education will not be a privilege for the few in this country. I hope that the Hunter community will descend from its ivory tower made of brick, and distribute its tools evenly to the mass of humanity that is the City of New York. I hope that, despite its problems, Hunter can prove to be the rule, and not the exception, to what can exist as a school. Finally, I hope from the bottom of my heart that

someday a class speaker can stand on this podium and look into an audience of his closest and dearest friends whom he never would have met without Hunter and whom he'll never forget, an audience of faculty members he has a deep respect and admiration for, an audience of family members who have supported him throughout his entire life without asking for anything in return. I hope this child can stand on this very stage, look at the most important people in his life, and feel happy, sad, relieved, scared, accomplished or whatever his heart desires, without feeling guilty about a damn thing. Thank you for your time.