

Lane Wallace, *Core Strength* session handout

A B+ is Just Fine

by Anne Lamott

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I gave the commencement address this year at University High School, a private school in San Francisco where most if not all the kids go on to excellent colleges and all the parents are dressed to the nines and arrive in fabulous cars and look like they're doing exquisitely well.

But I wasn't born yesterday; and I know that probably half the gorgeous people in both the graduating class and audience were so confused and frustrated that it was a miracle that they could still dress themselves. So I decided just to show up and tell everyone the one thing I've figured out for sure since my own graduation from a private high school in San Francisco, oh, it's got to be going on ten years now...

Look, I've got to be honest here. I don't think I'm the right person to be giving this address. I know I'm a last minute replacement for someone who had to cancel—and I'm sure John Du Pont would have had all sorts of exhilarating things to say about staying focused on your goals, striving for excellence, not giving up.

But I've just got to say, I just don't buy it, even when someone fabulous is delivering the same message. Because I just don't think that what you do and achieve out there, after you leave this place, is going to be good enough, no matter how well you do.

See, I was 35 years old when I finally got that B+'s are a good grade.

I always did very well in school, except that along with a whole lot of A's and A-'s, I also brought home a number of B+'s. And they—I'm not going to name names here, let me just say they were a couple of the older people who lived at the house with my brothers and me, when we were young—would look at my report cards and say, "Honey, we don't mean this as a criticism, but if you could get a B+, how much harder would it have been to get an A-?"

And I never once looked back at them and thought, Jeez, What a crock. I always scratched my head and thought, Yeah, yeah, that's right, that's right.

So I tried to do better. I tried very hard and I did very well and everyone loved me because I was addicted to people-pleasing, and I tried even harder and graduated from high school and got some fabulous award at graduation for my black belt co-dependence; and then I wrote all these books and mostly they did really well, except for this one that got something like 35 straight bad reviews, which is sort of exhilarating in its own way. But in general, I did very well, and all these people loved me, and well, okay, maybe there was this tiny, tiny problem with drugs and alcohol along the way—hardly worth mentioning. Except to say that even with all this success, it was only after I'd slammed down a dozen or so social drinks that I'd start to feel like I was doing well enough. That I was good enough. That I was—way deep down—okay.

Because the thing is, no one remembered to tell me that I wasn't going to be able to do well enough. They somehow forgot to tell me that it—the fullness, the feelings I was longing for—wasn't out there.

I mean, please, look at me, I'm Exhibit A. I'm semi-famous. I own a Jeep. I have airbags. And I still can't get that stuff to work. It's not enough. It keeps wearing off. And if I owned a Lamborghini and made more money than God or Terry McMillan, it still wouldn't be enough. I just hate that.

We're all yearning for something, for connection and meaning and peace of mind and a sense that life sort of makes sense and that love is real and powerful and that we are good people. And it's not out there. Or at any rate, there are only little hits of it out there. And those little hits wear off, and then you need a bigger hit.

Now believe me, I have been addicted to everything, to most substances and almost all compulsive patterns of behavior except gambling. But with all the things I did use, the hit wore off. The drug stopped working—and then I needed more, and I needed it more frequently and I discovered how empty and crazy you can get on the inside while you've burnished your outsides to a beautiful luster. While everyone thinks you're doing beautifully, because you're semi-famous. And you own a jeep.

So that's my message: More is never enough. Do you think Nancy Kerrigan walks around filled with a childlike sense of wonder and pride after taking home the silver? No. Forget it. She's totally bitter. Trust me on this. She thinks she got a B+; she thinks she got ripped off by the weepy little orphan. She's enraged.

That's the terrible news of this commencement address. There's no amount of power, prestige, possessions that will be big enough to fill the hole inside of you. That will grant you entrance to some wonderful metaphoric meadow that only a select few get to hang out in, where the air is always balmy and sweet and you never have to feel afraid or lost again.

There's no meadow out there. I am really sorry to have to tell you, but there really isn't. It's a hologram. And I hate to get denominational here, because I'm actually going out of my way not to sound like John the Baptist, but the kingdom is inside. Isn't that awful? I hate that. I have worked so hard and done so well and performed at such a high level. And what did it get me? Well, it got me the jeep. For about a month I got to drive around feeling like Norman Schwarzkopf. I mean, I have air bags.

Did I mention that already? The airbags? Please, I thought, in a stunning display of hubris—hit me with your best shot. Two days later I got smashed into at a red light by this young woman who was not paying attention.

This happens over and over again—every time you think you’ve arrived, every time you think you’ve finally got things lined up, perfectly in place, the cosmic banana peel is going to turn up right beneath your feet again.

And you are going to step on a number of cosmic banana peels in the coming years. Bank on it. We all do: welcome to the monkey house. On top of this, you will probably land right on your butts, and people may be watching. Let’s assume people will be watching. I can actually promise you people will be watching. And all I can offer by way of consolation is to tell you something my son Sam said to me last year, when he fell down quite hard while roller skating. He let me help him up, smiled bravely, and said, “Mom? You can’t let it bother you when you fall down. You’ve just gotta get right back up on your hind legs, and try again.”

So what’s the alternative, what’s the solution? Give up. That’s the solution; give up on trying to chase down the world’s A’s and A-’s. Focus instead on learning to slow down. There used to be a banner over one of the kindergarten classrooms in Oakland that said, “Start off slow, and taper off.” This is what us older folks—those of us in extremely late youth—are learning to do. I heard a farmer from the Midwest say the other day on the radio that the reason he doesn’t hurry like he used to when he was young is that he finally figured out that he was missing out on a lot more than he was catching up to.

Focus instead on trying to take care of each other: this will feed you. I promise you that. If you want to have loving feelings, you have to do loving things. It’s that simple. There’s no other way.

And that’s why we’re here. To take care of each other, and to feel reverence. There’s a beautiful line in one of Ferlinghetti’s old poems that says, “I am awaiting the rebirth of wonder.” And this sense of wonder will be the campfire you can warm your hands around when it’s cold: this commitment to taking care of your brothers and sisters will bring you the cool drink of water for which you thirst. Wonder and service will give you the food your soul craves.

So give ‘em hell, Harry. Get some rest. I know you’ve all been working really hard and you deserve it.

And I just want to tell you one last thing. A B+ is a wonderful grade.... It’s a wonderful grade.

God bless you all.