



TITLE: **THE GRADUATION SPEECH**

BOOK: **Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul on Tough Stuff**

PAGE: **212**

TIME TO READ: **7 minutes**

TOPICS: **Tough Stuff—Suicide**  
Tough stuff—taunting  
Acceptance and belonging  
Living and learning

AGE LEVEL: **Grades 10-12**

SYNOPSIS: **In rhyming verse, Jesse, the senior president, speaks of the death of a classmate—the valedictorian, who was endlessly taunted and teased. Now his dreams will never be attained, and the silence of his would-be speech is convincingly loud.**

**NOTES TO TEACHER:**

It is recommended that you practice this one aloud, to get the proper rhythm to carry it through to its powerful and surprising ending.

## *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul on Tough Stuff,* The Graduation Speech

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### HIGH SCHOOL:

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#### PRE-QUESTIONS:

Have you ever taunted or teased someone?

- About what?
- How did you feel doing it?

Have you been on the receiving end of such teasing?

- How did that feel?

Have you ever witnessed taunting or teasing, and not done anything to stop it?

- How did that feel?

Taunting or teasing seems like such an elementary-school kind of thing—is it?

- Discuss this concept, and cite examples without using any names.

### Read Story

#### POST-QUESTIONS:

Imagine being a senior at graduation and hearing Jesse’s speech, followed by Charlie’s “silence.”

- Write your thoughts, feelings, and impressions as if you were there.
- Discuss these in dyads or *Circle Talk groups* (Appendix, page 311).

To capture some of your feelings about suicide, do the worksheet found in the Appendix, on page 358.

#### STUDENT ACTIVITIES:

Write a poem or short story as seen through Charlie’s eyes.

Write Charlie’s valedictory speech, as if he had been alive to present it.

Research the mass murders at Columbine or Virginia Tech where teasing and/or isolation seemed to play a role in the minds of the murderers.

- Design a “prevention program” that could be implemented at your school.

## The Graduation Speech

Jesse was well liked by everyone, so everybody anticipated what he had to say  
As he walked up to the microphone, on graduation day.  
For a moment he remained silent, as he peered at the faces from his senior class,  
And then Jesse leaned into the microphone, and finally spoke at last:

“As your class president, I’m here to speak to you today.  
I was up most of the night, considering what words that I should say.  
I reminisced on school days, and all the many things I’ve done,  
So many memories came to mind, but my thoughts kept me focusing on one.”

And then Jesse held up a photo, and he moved it all around,  
As everyone leaned to view it, and silence was the only sound.  
You could have heard a pin drop, as Jesse placed the picture in full view,  
And began talking of a classmate, that no one really knew.

“Charlie’s life seemed meaningless, compared to yours and mine,  
Because none of us understood him, we never took the time.  
We saw only what we wanted to, that Charlie was not cool,  
He was far from being popular, the butt of all our jokes in school.

“That’s what we knew of Charlie, that much we decided on our own,  
He simply wasn’t worth our time, he was an outsider who deserved to be alone.  
But you see Charlie had a passion, deep within he had a dream,  
It was his one desire, to play for our soccer team.

“And of course that was ludicrous, it was totally absurd,  
Charlie was no athlete, he was the senior nerd.  
In gym class he was never captain, he was always chosen last,  
He was the poster child for unpopular, he preferred history, science, and math.

“And so some of us took it upon ourselves to keep Charlie from wanting to play,  
For weeks we taunted him with insults, day after day after day.  
We made sure that he wasn’t welcomed, by anyone else on the team,  
For whatever foolish reasons, we were set on destroying his dream.

“And I’m here now to tell you, as your class president, I was wrong  
I’m here to speak for Charlie, who couldn’t be here, because you see he’s gone.”  
Jesse paused just for a moment, to give time for his words to sink in,  
As he looked about at the faces, of parents, teachers and friends.

“I’m not sure if all of you know it, I’m not sure if anyone cares,  
But the reason Charlie isn’t with us is a reason I feel I must share.  
Cruel words, they are definitely weapons, they destroyed Charlie’s body and soul,  
For all of the taunting and teasing left Charlie feeling out of control.

“And Charlie alone in a battle, gathered his weapons to fight.  
He purchased some drugs from a dealer, his mother found his body last night.  
Maybe it was only an accident, maybe Charlie wanted to die,  
But no matter how it happened, we as his classmates know why.

“For who in their lives hasn’t been teased, or made to feel unbearable shame,  
I’m certain that everyone in this room has endured some heartache and pain.  
And maybe boys will be boys and girls will be girls, and we each have our battles to fight,  
But no matter our justification, hurting Charlie was never right.”

And then Jesse took Charlie’s picture and held it firm in his hand,  
And spoke to the photo before him, words unrehearsed and unplanned.  
“If only I’d helped somehow, given you guidance to conquer your dream,  
If only a teacher, a classmate, if someone would have just intervened.

“But I know I can never go back, I can never undo what has been,  
For you will never receive your diploma, or ever play soccer again.  
But deep in my heart I wonder, I can’t help asking what if . . .  
I would have reached out to you Charlie,  
Would your school years have ended like this?”

Jesse stood lost in his thoughts of a life that was ended too soon,  
Until muffled coughs caught his attention, and nervous whispers began filling the room.  
And then Jesse turned with a smile, before retreating back to his chair,  
Teaching a valuable lesson, with his final words filling the air:

“I would like to introduce our valedictorian, he will be speaking today,  
Please give him your full attention, please hear all that he has to say.”  
And then Jesse set Charlie’s picture down, on the podium facing the crowd,  
As the silence told Charlie’s story, a message quite convincingly loud.

*Cheryl Costello-Forshey*