

A Generation of Visigoths: Neil Postman's Graduation Speech 30 Years Later

Neil Postman (1931- 2003) was one of the most prolific and influential American intellectuals of the 20th century.

A longtime educator at NYU, Postman authored 18 books and more than 200 articles in the nation's top magazines and newspapers, such as *The Atlantic*, *Time* magazine, and *Harper's Magazine*.

Part of Postman's immense popularity, I've long believed, stemmed from his unusual breed of intellectualism. He was, if I can coin a term, a Humanist Pessimist.

Humanism, arguably the modern world's most influential philosophy, is generally characterized by optimism and its faith in human progress. But Postman's brand of humanism was a bit different. His writings tended to focus on all the things that were *not* working in modern culture: the misuse of [the English language](#) (a favorite topic of George Orwell), the need for [educational reform](#), and, most famously, all the ways he saw [technology making our species dumber](#).

What seemed to bother Postman was a nagging suspicion that modern humans were taking civilization for granted. This sentiment was more clearly expressed in one of Postman's less-known literary works, his 1988 essay titled "[My Graduation Speech](#)."

In his speech, Postman discusses two historic civilizations familiar to most people today—Athenians and Visigoths. One group, the Athenians, thrived about 2,300 years ago. The other, the Visigoths, made their mark about 1,700 years ago. But these civilizations were separated by much more than time,

Postman explained.

The Athenians gave birth to a cultural enlightenment whose fruits are still visible today—in our art, education, language, literary works, and architecture. The Visigoths, on the other hand, are notable mostly for the destruction of civilization.

Postman mentions these peoples because, he argued, they still survive today. Here is what he wrote:

“I do not mean, of course, that our modern-day Athenians roam abstractedly through the streets reciting poetry and philosophy, or that the modern-day Visigoths are killers. I mean that to be an Athenian or a Visigoth is to organize your life around a set of values. An Athenian is an idea. And a Visigoth is an idea.”

But what ideas? What values? Postman explains:

“To be an Athenian is to hold knowledge and, especially the quest for knowledge in high esteem. To contemplate, to reason, to experiment, to question—these are, to an Athenian, the most exalted activities a person can perform. To a Visigoth, the quest for knowledge is useless unless it can help you to earn money or to gain power over other people.

To be an Athenian is to cherish language because you believe it to be humankind’s most precious gift. In their use of language, Athenians strive for grace, precision, and variety. And they admire those who can achieve such skill. To a Visigoth, one word is as good as another, one sentence indistinguishable from another. A Visigoth’s language aspires to nothing higher than the cliché.

To be an Athenian is to understand that the thread which holds civilized society together is thin and vulnerable; therefore, Athenians place great value on tradition, social

restraint, and continuity. To an Athenian, bad manners are acts of violence against the social order. The modern Visigoth cares very little about any of this. The Visigoths think of themselves as the center of the universe. Tradition exists for their own convenience, good manners are an affectation and a burden, and history is merely what is in yesterday's newspaper.

*To be an Athenian is to take an interest in public affairs and the improvement of public behavior. Indeed, the ancient Athenians had a word for people who did not. The word was *idiotes*, from which we get our word 'idiot.' A modern Visigoth is interested only in his own affairs and has no sense of the meaning of community."*

Postman said all people must choose whether to be an Athenian or a Visigoth. But how does one tell one from the other? One might be tempted to think that education is the proper path to becoming an Athenian. Alas, Postman argued that this was not the case.

"I must tell you that you do not become an Athenian merely by attending school or accumulating academic degrees. My father-in-law was one of the most committed Athenians I have ever known, and he spent his entire adult life working as a dress cutter on Seventh Avenue in New York City. On the other hand, I know physicians, lawyers, and engineers who are Visigoths of unmistakable persuasion. And I must also tell you, as much in sorrow as in shame, that at some of our great universities, perhaps even this one, there are professors of whom we may fairly say they are closet Visigoths."

Postman concluded his speech by expressing his wish that the student body to which he was speaking would graduate more Athenians than Visigoths.

Perhaps it did. But if one looks at universities today, the

picture is less encouraging.

If the marks of the Athenian truly are social restraint, good manners, continuity, grace and precision in speech, contemplation, and reason, our university system is hardly a garden of Athenians.

Instead, we student bodies who [suppress speech](#), [abuse language](#), [exhibit revolting manners](#), exhibit generally [infantile behavior](#), and seem [more interested in protesting](#) that intellectual pursuit. As one former university professor [recently said](#), after she was protested by about 100 students who (mistakenly) believed she opposed transgender rights, “[It’s] impossible not to leave with a renewed sense of just how f*cked up campuses are right now.”

In short, we see many students who “think of themselves as the center of the universe.”

This, it should be pointed out, is hardly the sole fault of young people themselves. An honest assessment of the modern university system would suggest that educators [have little interest](#) in teaching young people to become prudent, responsible Athenians.

My advice to students who participated in “March for Our Lives” or similar protests at universities across the country is this: *Ask yourself, do you want to be an Athenian or a Visigoth?*

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