

Follow Your Stream

Convocation Speech at Graduation

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Graduation is always joyful. For the students, a lot of hard work has paid off. And for many parents, a lot of hard paying off has worked.

As an ocean ecologist who has earned 3 degrees, working toward a degree has always seemed to me like being a salmon swimming up a river: Full of energy and enthusiasm you enter the flow. You really don't know what's coming but something is telling you that this is what you should be doing. So you enter, *excited!* Immediately you encounter a strong current demanding that you constantly struggle against it to make headway. But, determined, you keep swimming, always working hard, leaping over falls, passing exams... At times it's *so* hard, you consider quitting. But the salmon part of your brain is providing the urge to continue by giving you some vague, wordless notion that at some point in all this there must be some sex. And anyway, you're already pretty far into it so you stick with it. Then one day that hard current eases and you realize: you've arrived! But almost immediately you also realize that nature has played the same cruel joke on you that it plays on *all* the salmon: for all that work, there's actually only a *little* sex—and then the whole thing is suddenly over.

And here you are.

But unlike a salmon, you have your degree in hand—salmon don't *have* hands—and instead of being eaten by a bear, *you* enter the next hopeful phase of life.

I have been lucky enough to watch my life proceed from being that hopeful, hopeless graduate, so uncertain of my own worth, so unconvinced of my talent, to the man you see before you now—so uncertain of my own talent, so unconvinced of my worth.

It is from this wellspring of insecurity, but with a resume since graduating that satisfies my mother, that I offer ten simple steps to succeeding and becoming important:

Step 1. Be very lucky. Success depends mainly on luck. So remember this: luck is too important to leave to chance. Don't wait for luck. *Make luck happen*. I'm talking about the luck that you engineer. Like the luck of winning a competition you've trained hard for. Self-made luck is rooted in hard work, skill exerted, odds tipped slightly in your favor by your own insight and muscle. Work and thought create luck. Generosity and compassion create luck. Kindness—creates luck.

Step 2. Never grow up. The most successful people remain playful. Be wildly idealistic. Take reasonable risks. Every so often take an *unreasonable* risk. And once you've imagined a better world, pick one part of that world you envision, then roll up your sleeves and dream up a plan to make it happen. Dream—then get there. Henry David Thoreau, the American who invented the idea of civil disobedience later wielded by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, said: "If you have built sand castles in the air... there is where they should be. Now put foundations under them." The best idealists are also very pragmatic.

Step 3. The best pragmatists are *curious*. Always be curious. To be interesting, *be interested*.

Step 4. Fail. If you're not occasionally failing, you're probably being too timid. People who succeed are the people who, *after* failing—after being rejected or passed over—pick themselves up and keep at it. Every great achiever has known failure. Never let fear of failing prevent you from attempting something that could be the best thing you ever do.

Step 5. Never give up. Be patient. It's too easy to think, "What's the use?" or "This is no good," or, "I can't." Just stay patiently in the game. When things seem so bleak that you can't see the way out, simply wait. Dawn will come. Better, take just a small step. Life can be like walking with a flashlight on a dark night. You might not be able to see your

destination, but each small step illuminates the next few steps—and you can make the whole trip that way.

Step 6. Take yourself seriously. We are constantly bombarded by messages from people who want to trivialize us, so they can control us. They make us think, “I’m not good enough.” Ignore those thoughts. Yes, the world is beyond your control. But that’s only partly true. A lot of your life will actually be up to you. So have faith in yourself. Immediately reject *anyone* seeking to discourage you. Especially if that person—is you. The great thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts.” Cherish your own ideas. Honor them with energy. Work on them and make them grow. Embrace encouragement—and encourage others.

Step 7. While taking yourself seriously, never take yourself *too* seriously. No one upon their death bed ever said, “I wish I had spent more time in the office.” Busyness destroys relationships. Pay *attention* to love. Love *is* all you need.

Step 8. If you seek power—and perhaps you should, because this world can prey on the weak—seek *not* the power to control others. Seek instead the kind of power that prevents others from controlling you. Then you will have true power: the power to help others.

Step 9. Never chase money. You are not the product of four billion years of evolution just so you can own a cluttered garage. The human mind is the most complex thing in the known universe. Use yours. Never strive to prove anything to anyone—except yourself. Never talk yourself into anything that someone else is talking you into. Never make excuses against your own heart. Always pursue integrity. Always do the *right thing*. Be true. Rise above. Set your own goals, your own measures of success—even if they differ from the norm. You will make yourself someone rare and valuable. Then instead of chasing money, money will chase *you*. Then you will be running your own race, not the rat race—and along will come satisfactions that cannot be bought at any price.

Step 10. Realize this: the world is on fire. As Winston Churchill said, “We make a living

by what we get; we make a life by what we give.” The most satisfying thing the human mind can experience is to serve a worthy cause. Seek to help heal the world. A life of *service* will make you both the most satisfied, and most *important*, person you can hope to be.

Now in just a little while, you will go—and you will begin to make your own luck. You *know* how; after all, that’s what’s already gotten you this far.

So take the credit for having earned a little faith in yourself.

Congratulations, and best of making your own luck!

It’s important—and so are you.