

Gateway College Preparatory School Commencement Address
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May 30, 2015

Before I impart all my years of wisdom on you I would like to first introduce my posse. To my immediate left is Caylyn. Caylyn is scheduled to fight UFC Champ Ronda Rousey in October. To my far left is Jacob. Jacob wrestles bulls. I have my posse here with me today because I understand the graduates had plans to “punk” the commencement speaker. Well, I’m on to you. Not going to happen! I have my back-ups!

This leads right into my first words of advice to you graduates; always have back-up, and always have a back-up plan.

Thank you Caylyn. Thank you Jacob. You know what to do if anyone starts any trouble.

The importance of back-up was illustrated a few years ago when my son was a senior here at Gateway Prep. My son Chase was goofing off with his friends at a Gateway girls’ volleyball match. This was played at the other schools’ gym. I was also in attendance. Chase’s friends had painted their bodies green and orange, and my son is wearing “short shorts”, a referee’s stripped shirt, and a whistle. My son stands 6’2” but barely 130 lbs soaking wet. Get the picture? They looked ridiculous. They are having some fun cheering for our girls, but also dishing out some friendly banter to the other school, and the officials. It started during the first match and escalated as the match wore on. I could see it was really starting to agitate our opposition. Sure enough a couple of the big football players on the other side of the gym took offence to some of their anticsand as this 240 lb kid in a varsity letter jacket starts walking over to murder my son..... my son comes up to me and asks, “Dad, you’ve got my back right?” I turned and said, “Son, you should have arranged that before you insulted Brutus over there”.

1. Always have back-up, and always have a back-up plan.

Before I sprinkle some more wisdom on you graduates let me stop for a moment and address all the people that helped you arrive at this place in time..... your teachers, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, probation officers..... to all of you that assisted this group of graduates. I know you did most of the heavy lifting for I have graduated two children myself. You gave them life, food, clothing, and money for skittles. You certainly deserve a lot of the credit for getting them this far. Good job Dad. Good job Mom.

There is something really special about graduation as you reflect on all that went into this accomplishment. The joy and the pain. The ups and the downs. As a parent here is what I learned on graduation day. I learned how much I loved my kids. Before we have children it’s mostly about us. As we grow older, and have children, it becomes less about us and more about them. I become less and they became more..... until I received their first college tuition billand then I focus on me again..... “Yikes! My kids are costing me a fortune!”

Want to make your parents happy? Graduate from college in four years or less. Please!

So graduates, this is where some really old guy (or girl) is supposed to give you some words of advice you will have no recollection of by tomorrow morning. Here we go.....My second morsel of wisdom is.....

2. Always have a good pair of shades handy because you never know when you're going to be exposed to the glare of nonsense. Nonsense can blind you.

Here is the most common lunacy that is coming your way.

Lunacy # 1. In order to be successful you must have a certain score

We are flooded with numbers. We measure everything these days.

As a public school student you have been tested and measured practically to death. You have a STAAR score, class rank, SAT score, and grade point average. You even have a "hot score". For you young people, the scoring scale goes from 1 to 10. 10 = "He's hot". 1 = "He's a loser". The one good thing about getting older is that by the time you reach my age the scoring only goes from 1 – 3. It's a lot less pressure. I work out and watch what I eat because I'm just trying to be a 3. You score a 3 at my age; 3 = "he's lukewarm", 2 = "not bad", and 1 = "he's alive". From all of these measurements come statistics where by people place odds on you. Your odds or chances for success in your endeavors. Gatekeepers do this; college admission staff, employers, even people you want to date. The messages we receive are that in order to be successful we must have a certain score.

No. Even Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan had average scores when they were teenagers. They were late bloomers. I've learned there are two better predictors for success.

1. The determination to outwork others
2. Living with a driving passion

Just take me for an example. I wasn't a great student. I played football but ran the 40-yard dash in 4.8 seconds. Not fast enough to play in the NFL. I had a funny name, Richard Rickey. I just got by. I graduated from high school in Michigan. I was the oldest child of four and so I was the first to graduate. When I did my goal was to get as far away from my family as possible, so I moved out and went to a small college in Boston. I would have gone even farther, but there was an ocean that stopped me.

I'm two years at college taking my core courses and I had no idea what I was going to be, or do for a living. Not only did I not have a back-up plan, I didn't have a plan at all. I had one thing working in my favor. I was a hard worker. As a teenager I did a lot of odd jobs. I was a janitor and I worked construction. The most difficult job I ever had was as a roofer one hot summer in Oklahoma. I have a lot of respect for guys that put food on the table by roofing for a living. For a time, I was employed at a machine shop. One of the proud moments of my life is when my Dad told me that the owner of the machine shop said I was his hardest worker, and that he would hold a full-time job for me after college if I wanted it. My Dad was proud. I felt good.

But I still lacked a passion and a plan. That is not uncommon for young people. I know Dad. You're wondering; "When is it going to kick in?" Be patient. Sometimes it takes a while. You might be surprised when and where passion gets lit.

Here is how it happened for me. So I'm finishing up my second year of college and have completed most of my required core classes. I needed some elective credits. I see an elective course called "Systematic Theology" that worked with my schedule. I wasn't sure what that was about but I heard the professor was pretty good. We didn't have Google back then. Back in the old days when you didn't know something you went to the library and grabbed a dictionary. Flipping through the dictionary I found the word "theology". Aristotle says it's "the study of the divine". Being a typical 20-year-old dude I'm thinking anything divine must have something to do with beautiful women. I want that class. So I go to the registrar's office. I ask, "How much for the course on Theology?" The clerk looks at me bewildered and says; "Are you sure you want to take that?" "Yep, it's the study of the divine", I say. "That will be \$200", she says. College was affordable back then. I write a check. The clerk goes back for my receipt; and I can imagine now, all these years later, that the clerk went to the back and said to the other clerks; "How did that dude get admitted".

I show up for class and look over the syllabus. There is no mention of the beautiful Rachel Welch, or the "perfect 10" Bo Derek. You can imagine my disappointment. I learn instead that the course is a seminar on the study of God with Professor Edward Dexter. I'm required to read books and articles by some really dead guys named Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, & Tillich. For the next three months I was to receive a systematic study of the concepts of Gods such as:

The Unmoved Mover
Ground of Reality
First Cause

So I've been sitting through these lectures.... and I'm in to about week seven.... and one day it happened. Prof. Dexter has outlined these elaborate theories of how various religions understand and worship God on a 20 X 6-foot chalk board (we didn't have dry erase boards back then). He had chalk all over the board, his hands and suit. He looks at his masterpiece. He's all excited and he just stops. Stops!! "Look", he said, "this whole thing about understanding the mystery of God and the purpose of life is like a trapeze act. There is the catcher and the flyer. God is the catcher. You are the flyer. Put yourself in the position to be caught".

That idea changed me.

Lunacy # 2. That you can unlock the mysteries of life with reason and science alone. Professor Dexter taught me that is not true.

What worries me about you kids going off to college is the cynicism, hedonism and relativism that is taught and practiced in most of our universities today. Today's faith is in humanism and self-sufficiency, numbers, data and statistics. We moderns are stripping the world of its natural revelations..... of nature itself. I see an uncritical worship of everything new, modern and different. I worry what you will be fed, intellectually, morally, and spiritually over the next several years as you continue your learning.

I say leave room for mystery and take the time for spiritual development. Don't neglect to feed your spirit and soul. Sing, dance, go to church/synagogue/mosque, paint, pray, keep all your love letters (throw away your bank statements), fish, ride a see saw with a friend. Volunteer at a children's hospital. Like the Scotts Lawn commercial I say, "Feed your soul! Feed it!!"

So there I was. My scores were not all that great coming out of high school, but I worked hard. Now finally, I had a spark for learning, thanks especially to Professor Dexter. I obtained a bachelor's degree at my small liberal arts college in Boston, and went on to get a couple of Master's Degrees. Some opportunities came along and I took advantage of those. Eventually I landed a job with Hospital Corporation of America. I worked my way up the corporate ladder as Hospital CEO, making a decent salary, got married, moved into a bigger house, nice car, a couple of kids and a dog. By most standards that is when you are classified a success. This is about the time you come to the third set of nonsense.

Lunacy # 3 The purpose, meaning, essence of life is to be successful.

I'm not saying success is bad. It is sure better than being a miserable failure. I hope all of you experience some success, make millions and donate some of that to Gateway Prep so we can finish another phase of construction. If so, we will name a building after you. You will become immortal.

The purpose, and goal of life is not to be successfulThe purpose, meaning and absolute essence of life it is to be significant

My last story. Ted Gianoulas was a college kid that needed a job. He was hanging out with his college buddies when a radio station rep came around looking for volunteers to hand out Easter eggs to children at the zoo. There was one catch. You had to wear a chicken costume. The pay was \$2 per hour. Ted volunteers and because he was a short guy, fit the suit best, so he was chosen. "Why a chicken costume" he asked. "Why not a bunny or monkey?" "I don't know", the rep said, "because there is just something inherently funny about a chicken". He puts on the chicken suit and goes to the zoo and passes out Easter eggs all day. The gig is over. The San Diego Padres have an opening day baseball game coming up in a few days. Ted gets an idea. This is where Ted takes flight like the trapeze act Prof. Dexter talked about. He buys a ticket and goes to the game wearing that same chicken costume. He did some silly things in that costume; a soft shoe dance, a little voodoo, put some little babies head in between his chicken beak. The crowd loved him. The radio station liked the free publicity and the Padres owner hired him on the spot to come in costume and entertain the crowd at every game for the remainder of the season.

Ted became the famous San Diego Chicken for 40 years and created the concept of game entertainment in between innings and at half-times. He never missed a day of work or a single gig because of illness or injury for some 8,000 scheduled game appearances, and over 17,000 total appearances including parades and other parties. Sporting News named the San Diego Chicken one of the Top 100 Most Powerful People in Sports of the 20th Century. More impressive, after each game and performance, when all the young kids would come up to him to get his autograph, he would always sit and sign absolutely every autograph request at no charge before he went home.

Maybe Ted was just lucky? I think Ted put himself in a position to be caught, used a little creativity, showed up for work every day, and had a passion.

So I say to you graduates, don't go off just to be a success. Success is like a wave that keeps moving away from you as you try to ride it. The danger is that "succeeding" will take up too much of your whole life while feeding your soul and your passions get neglected.

And one last thing..... if you come to visit me in 25 years, and I'm walking around this campus with no teeth and a walking cane, and you are not living a life of significance I will be so disappointed. I won't want to know how big your house is. I'll ask, "How did you do in your relationships? Are you giving back? Who have you been significant for?"

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for listening. Graduates, thank you for not "punking" the commencement speaker. Congratulations and Godspeed!