

“What Are You Going to Do with Your Life?”

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What a glorious day it is for you graduates and for all the people who have supported you to achieving this moment. Congratulations to all of you for this great accomplishment. What can I say to you in a few minutes to give you another touchstone before you venture forth into the next chapter of your life? I have been requested to be inspirational and to fill you with words wisdom as you go out into the real world.

Graduates, you have just completed the biggest expenditure of time and energy that you will probably ever do in your life – you have spent huge amounts of your time, energy and money to get to this point. Hardly anything else you will do after this will demand this kind of dedication.

So what have you gotten from this? - A degree or degrees certifying that you have some specific skills and knowledge that may serve as a ticket to a particular position or profession. But more importantly than that, what you have earned and learned is the ability to focus on a goal and to accomplish it despite many obstacles and distractions. And the ability to ask questions and seek answers to them; in other words to solve problems and to resolve issues that inevitably arise in life.

That, my friend, is the most important thing that you've gained from your years of hard toil and sweat in academia – the skill of productive inquiry. As you set forth from this trying and exhilarating experience: Remember this: you can do whatever you set your heart upon. You have already shown that you can do it. You've just done the hardest thing you will ever do and you have accomplished it with distinction. So what are you going to do next?

You are entering the world at a time of heightened fear and cascading bad news about the global economic situation, environmental degradation, political turmoil, social unrest and injustice. What is your role in this scenario? What is your passion? How are you going to make a difference in the world?

You have the opportunity and the responsibility to use the skills and knowledge you've gained to positively impact the world in which we live. Yes you do. Not only for the world, but for you. You will grow and benefit when you live from being world-centric instead of me-centric. Human beings are social animals and we are living on a planet and time when anything you do ultimately affects everyone else. I don't have to explain

that to you, you are the generation that grew up with the power of the internet, with global warming, with interlocking global economic consequences.

The United States of America is a great country. It is a country built upon ideals – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. What have you learned from living in and enjoying the privileges that these ideals give you? How can you use of what you've gained to improve others' lives and in the process your own?

I came here in my mid teens from Hong Kong, alone with my two suitcases and my teddy bear. I was determined to get the training and credentials so that I can help right many of the wrongs I've already witnessed and experienced. Issues that are common knowledge now – child labor, race, gender, religious and other forms of discrimination, environmental degradation and economic disparities, all these were causes I was burning to solve.

It was not easy being an awkward, shy foreign student in the 70's in Corvallis, Oregon. A young teenager, away from my tropical island for the first time, alone, speaking with an accent, a tomboy in a University which permitted women to wear trousers on campus just a few years before. Yes that meant skirts and dresses were the only acceptable attire for ladies before then. I was also obviously non-white in a small town University that recruited a few African American students from Southern California to add diversity. I was working 20 hours a week as a fry cook and dietary aide while taking 22 to 24 hours of classes a quarter so that I could finish my undergraduate and graduate work in the shortest time. Life was not easy, riding my bike in the cold sleety rain to and from work and school, smelling like greasy French fries.

I persisted because I knew why I was doing what I was doing. I was going to save the world. I was determined to change many of the injustices that I faced and knew about on both sides of the globe so that others didn't have to. When you have a life mission you can deal with the inevitable obstacles much better. You have a reason to keep going and an inner calm which keeps you steady while the outside world may look scary and threatening.

Fast forward a few decades now to the present. I've barely scratched the surface of making any difference in the global challenges I'm passionate about, but I know that I have done my best. The funny thing about doing my best in what I believe is the right thing, is that in the process I've also been blessed with what is considered traditional success – which is why I have the great privilege and honor of speaking to you today.

You too may have come from a background where you have witnessed and experienced injustice and inequities. Or you may be one of the privileged, insulated by wealth and connections from the inconveniences of dealing with urgent bills, getting

enough food to eat, dirty water, lack of warm shelter, and the lack of freedom to speak and live your life without fear.

In any case your lot has been cast, you live in our world, this beautiful blue globe in space and there is still no way of moving elsewhere.

You are inheriting a mess. We and the generations before us have done our best with the knowledge available at the time. Today we know more and we know that the earth is in a critical and pivotal point. It is up to your generation to make the decisive changes that will pull us back from the brink. Yes I believe it is possible. It's an intimidating job and an assignment that you really had no say in. You have to do it for yourself and for all of us. The time is now or never.

Is that fair? No, you didn't sign up for this. But this is a good lesson in life. Life is oftentimes not fair. You have to deal with what you encounter. Sure you can try to avoid it by pursuing your individual agenda, but it is too late. The inevitable interdependence in our planetary system is bound to reach you no matter what corner of the earth or career you try to hide in. Better do what is going to give you the rewards and satisfaction of living a life in which you can proclaim your passion and fulfill your life mission – by being truly useful and meaningful to the whole. Live your life with passion and with conviction that you can and are making a difference. Live out loud. You will be glad you did and so will the rest of humanity and the earth that we share.

As George Bernard Shaw so wisely said:

This is the true joy in life - being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

So as you venture forth graduates, remember this. Live each day as if your life depends on it. Because it really does.

Congratulations, Good luck and many blessings