

The Insights of Many Top the Wisdom of One

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Thank you, President Elsener. Distinguished guests, faculty and friends, it's an honor to be with you this morning. I congratulate our graduates, their parents, family members and friends on this happy day. My mother, who celebrated her 80th birthday last November, would never forgive me if I didn't wish the mothers here today, a very happy Mother's Day.

It's great to be back in Indianapolis, an area that will always be special to my wife, Mary Anne, and me. We built a lot of our life together here in this region. We have many friends. We built community, family and career. President Elsener shared some of my background with you about my career and my company.

I give a lot of speeches. This week, I spoke to a group of steelmakers in Phoenix on Monday. Some of my speeches are long, some are short, some are to large groups and some are to small groups. There were over 300 people in Phoenix. Then I spoke to our investors and the media, including appearing on CNBC on Tuesday. We had our annual shareholders meeting and board meeting on Thursday, and as President Elsener mentioned, I was on Capitol Hill yesterday and in the White House, meeting with key members of President Obama's team, and here I am today.

Being a speechwriter for me is a tough job because I am really bad at following the script. I talk about energy. I talk about the environment. I talk about electricity. I talk about climate change. I talk about how we have to prepare our society for tomorrow, and that we need to engage in cathedral thinking and look beyond just today to build for tomorrow. In this world of the McMuffin and everything quick, it's really critical that we do that.

I could give you my prepared speech and talk to you about those issues, but the truth be told is that on the plane flying here yesterday, I changed my mind about what I should do.

Now, I'm going to ask you if you have a cell phone, an iPhone or a BlackBerry, I want you to hold it up. Hold it out and hold it up. Come on, graduates, hold it up. I know you've got them. Now, not many of you remember ancient history 15 years ago, if I had asked that question, nobody would have held it up—and I am amazed at the number that were held up.

Technology has changed the way we talk to each other, and it has changed the way we work. About two weeks ago, I started a blog to collect ideas for today's speech. It was a new use of a communications technology—a blog. My hope was that by listening to what you said, I would be better able to connect with you and to find my voice. My theory was that commencement speeches are part of our shared human experience. They are something we've all had to sit through, and they are occasionally enjoyable, but often just endured.

Just yesterday, I was talking to Senator Evan Bayh, and I commented to him that I would be here today. He said he had to give a commencement speech at I.U. where he graduated. He put a tremendous amount of work into it and he wanted to do a terrific job. It was a cloudy day. He got up to speak, and within four minutes of his speech, the clouds opened and it torrentially rained. He then terminated his speech and told people that if they emailed him, he would send them a copy. And the remarkable thing he said was that he never gave a speech where he got so many positive comments! So his advice to me was "be brief."

But all of this got me thinking. What would today's graduates like to hear about? What would the alumni like to share? And for those of you who have been out of college for a while, what message do you wish you had heard at your graduation? And then the question was, can I synthesize these ideas into a coherent message for you? So I started the commencement thoughts blog. Now, I'm okay on technology. I'm tied to my BlackBerry—you saw that I held it up—but I aspire to get my thumbs into more interactive media of blogging, Twittering, Jabbering, Yammering, and whatever else you call it.

I will admit today that I didn't know what to expect. Would anyone come to my commencement thoughts blog? Would anyone share? I took a risk, and quite frankly, in life, I've taken a lot of risks, and you will take a lot of risks in your life. But thanks to the college Web site and some enthusiastic and well-connected staff, and a few good plugs in the press, many people posted their thoughts and advice to the class of 2009. Think about that: A remarkable number of people cared enough about you and your future to fire up their computers, find the blog and share their best ideas, wisdom and experience with you.

The comments are touching, funny and practical. They're also heartfelt, thoughtful and authentic. And while I can't cover them all today, I just had to build my comments around what I heard on the blog.

First, I got pretty clear direction from a graduate of another college in this region. He vividly remembered his own commencement address, and said, "The speaker—who shall remain nameless—talked about himself the whole time, and it was terrible and embarrassing. Try not to do that," he said. I got it. I'm not going to do that, even though I think my story is riveting. My wife, a product of 17 years of Catholic schools, colleges and universities, says I'm simply a legend in my own mind, so I won't spend time sharing that legend.

Now, there was some really helpful, practical advice for you—things like "Protect your credit. It will matter to you over time, if you can get any credit today. Be careful what you put on YouTube. It will probably be shown, to your embarrassment, at the rehearsal dinner for your wedding.

Listen to someone you can't stand and try to figure out what makes him or her tick, you might actually learn something."

Many of the contributors, however, had a serious, sober tone reflecting this uncertain time in our economy and in our world. They sense we are entering a new era of getting back to basics, so one blogger said: "We're reevaluating our careers, adjusting our lifestyles and focusing on our physical, financial and spiritual health. This may turn out to be the bright spot among the clouds of recession, each of us discovering what is really important in our lives."

Not surprisingly, there was a lot of empathy, support and encouragement for the class of 2009, as you enter this tough job market, and there was lots of advice, too. One person said, "Do work you enjoy and do it with passion. Define the work and don't let it define you. Dream big and act big. There's no such thing as failure, only learning experiences."

Another said, "Look for a job, and if you can't find one, make up your own. Who doesn't want to be their own boss, anyway?" I've been a CEO for 20 years. I think I'm my own boss, but not really. Yet another said, "Your career path is not going to be linear. It's one thing to have your career mapped out from entry-level to the executive suite, but just know that it won't work that way. You're likely to find the job along the way that you fall in love with."

And that reminded me of how I started because when I left my hometown, I went to college to be a medical doctor. I had taken 10 years of classical piano. I took four years of Latin. I worked in a hospital. That was the route that I was on, but it didn't work out that way. I later became a newspaper reporter. I later became a lawyer. I worked in the government and in the private sector as a lawyer. I later became a businessman. I lived in Kentucky, Washington D.C., Houston, Indiana, Cincinnati and Charlotte. I've been a CEO, as I mentioned, for 20 years because I fell in love with the job of being a CEO—not a bad thing to fall in love with.

But the fact of the matter is there was nothing linear about my career history, and my suspicion is there'll be nothing linear about your lives, because very few of us know and have it written in our DNA what we will be. It is truly a blessing if you know from the beginning what you will be and what mission you will have, but often, our mission varies over time.

And then there was this terrific note from David Dawson who said, "Follow your light. I believe everyone has a passion—or a kernel for a passion—and maybe more than one. Curing Alzheimer's, writing the great American novel, making deserts bloom, bringing peace to the world. Keep that passion alive, even though you may not immediately be able to embrace it. If you do, someday that opportunity will come."

What David and many others speak about so eloquently is the importance of passion in your life, and I agree. And if I had to point to one single thing in my life, then that's passion. I've done a lot of different things. It may sound like I've had difficulty holding a job, but the truth of the matter is, I've loved everything that I've done. I've found meaning in everything that I've done. I have grown with everything that I have done. I think that's because I tried to turn my energy into passion to make a difference in what I was doing at the time.

Several of the comments on the blog spoke about the importance of being alert to the opportunities and events that arise outside of your plans—things that are unexpected, accidental and maybe even unimaginable today. One person talked about the series of choices and chances that forged her path in life. I think it's important to make plans, and you should. I think it's important to make choices, but only choices that are grounded in values—and more about values in a moment.

But I suggest to you, be open. Embrace and enjoy the serendipity of life, the chance meetings. Oftentimes your best friend turns out to be the person that you happen to sit next to in class, or your lifetime friend might live on the block that you grew up on. The randomness of life is wonderful. There are many surprises—don't be afraid of them—embrace them. Those of you who have attended Marian College, the graduating class and alumni, you have already made an important life-defining choice in coming to this terrific school.

As I read through the blog, Marian's faith-based values came through loud and clear. Dignity of the individual, peace and justice, reconciliation, responsible stewardship—all of these important foundational values that have stood the test of time, and yet, to me, still feel remarkably contemporary. You all may someday forget the courses you took at Marian or the names of your professors. Please don't forget them today. But these values, strong and constant, will be with you for your lifetime. But you must internalize them, you have to practice them, you have to make them part of your core. You've got to have your passion come from these values that you hold within yourself.

One of my employees, Ginny Segbers, posted this on the blog: "Life is a journey. Marian College is privileged to have been part of the journey these graduates have taken and has contributed to who they are about to become. As they continue to do the great things in their lives, they will run into obstacles and ethical dilemmas. "They can always count on"—and I want to underscore this—"those faith-based values to guide them through the rest of their journey."

This concept of journey is central to your mission at Marian. Your website says, "We view education as a journey of a lifetime and in the same way that St. Francis did. We believe it is a personal journey full of human interactions and relationships." It's "a life of learning, discovery of

questions and of wonder," as one person put it. This is what I look for not only in my team members, but I try to emulate it myself.

For me, the joy has been the journey, even more than the celebration of the achievements. My wife says I'm deficient in my ability to celebrate. But that's because I find the journey so rewarding. Every graduate here today is special, but I have a strong, personal connection to those of you who have earned your degree while working a full-time job and raising your family. Let me mention something about my past, which will explain why I feel so strongly about this.

I married at 19—well, I grew up in Kentucky, so you're not surprised. I had two kids before I graduated from college. I worked full-time at night as a newspaper reporter. Then, I went to law school. In the first semester, I saved enough money to go without working and I became number one in my class. But then we had another child coming, I dropped out of law school, worked for a year, and by the time I went back to law school and graduated, we had three children. In eight years, we had three children, and between us, we earned four degrees. We were exhausted!

But it's that experience that really bonds me to those of you who have worked your way through school. That experience is why I was particularly drawn to the posting on the blog from Manuel Gonzalez, who is graduating today from Marian's Adult Program. Get this: Manuel began working toward his college degree in 1976. Today, more than 30 years later, he's achieving his goal. I encourage you to read his posting. He talks about the role his faith has played in providing the stamina and focus to pursue his dream. Manuel, if you're with us, could you please stand so that we may recognize you?

There were two other comments on the blog that I'd like to share. There was a wonderful comment that I think speaks for all of the moms and dads that are here today, and it goes this way: "As a parent of a 2009 Marian College grad, I'd like my daughter to know how proud we are of her accomplishment, but more important, how proud we are of her growth as a person."

And finally, there was this post, witty and wise, from John Sherman: "If you laugh at yourself loud enough and often enough, you're allowed to laugh at others—maybe." I would underscore 'maybe.'

Have a sense of perspective. Have a sense of humor. Have a sense of history. Today, you are dressed in period clothing. Years from now, your children and grandchildren will laugh at your haircuts, your tattoos, your shoes, your eyeglasses and your clothes. They will wonder why you didn't know any better. I want you to laugh along with them; I want you to blame your parents!"

Now, I graduated in the sixties and the seventies. I remember very well bell-bottoms, puka beads, platform shoes and Fu Manchus. I had no one to blame but myself because my parents hated the look!

Hope that your children see beauty among the messiness of life—and there is a lot of messiness in our lives. One person on the blog said, "One day, I was driving my children, then preschool age, through a particularly ugly part of town with leaning telephone poles, broken sidewalks, weeds and trash. Suddenly, both of them cried out from the backseat, 'Daddy! Look! Look at that sunset!' I knew then that my wife and I had done something right. Take risks. Seek challenges. Toast the sunsets."

So there you have it, some of the richness, sincerity and spirit of the comments on the commencement thoughts blog. If you want to read more—or for some reactions—we're going to leave it up for a few more weeks. To everyone who contributed to the blog, I thank you sincerely. You've proven again that the insights of many top the wisdom of one.

In closing, I would suggest that you be true to your values, and be guided by your faith. Be passionate. Make good choices, and be unafraid to take some chances. Be unafraid to fail—the fear of failure blocks many. Savor every step of the journey—even the blood, the sweat and the tears. And always remember to toast the sunsets and to celebrate your successes.

Remember, technology is a great tool, and each of you have access to it as I just saw. But technology is no substitute for face-to-face conversations. You will never find the intimacy in texting that you will find sitting and talking face-to-face. You will never find the intimacy in being online like you will sitting around a table talking to people. Thank you for letting me share this time with you.

Let the Twittering begin!

Thank you.