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10 Things Your Commencement Speaker Won't Tell You

By CHARLES WHEELAN



Getty Images

Class of 2012,

I became sick of commencement speeches at about your age. My first job out of college was writing speeches for the governor of Maine. Every spring, I would offer extraordinary tidbits of wisdom to 22-year-olds—which was quite a feat given that I was 23 at the time. In the decades since,

Look to your left and then to your right. Is that pretty girl Phi Beta Kappa? Marry her.

I've spent most of my career teaching economics and public policy. In particular, I've studied happiness and well-being, about which we now know a great deal. And I've found that the saccharine and over-optimistic words of the typical commencement address hold few of the lessons young people really need to hear about what lies ahead. Here, then, is what I wish someone had told the Class of 1988:

1. Your time in fraternity basements was well spent.

The same goes for the time you spent playing intramural sports, working on the school newspaper or just hanging with friends. Research tells us that one of the most important causal factors associated with happiness and well-being is your meaningful connections with other human beings. Look around today. Certainly one benchmark of your postgraduation success should be how many of these people are still your close friends in 10 or 20 years.

Commencement Wisdom From

2. Some of your worst days lie ahead. Graduation is a happy day. But my job is to tell you that if you are going to do

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Charles Wheelan checks in on Mean Street with some advice for the Class of 2012: pay very close attention, because there are key things you need to know that you won't learn by simply donning a cap and gown. Photo: AP.

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anything worthwhile, you will face periods of grinding self-doubt and failure. Be prepared to work through them. I'll spare you my personal details, other than to say that one year after college graduation I had no job, less than \$500 in assets, and I was living with an elderly retired couple. The only difference between when I graduated and today is that now no one can afford to retire.

3. Don't make the world worse. I know that I'm supposed to tell you to aspire to great things. But I'm going to lower the bar here: Just don't use your prodigious talents to mess things up. Too many smart people are doing that already. And if you really want to cause social mayhem, it helps to have an Ivy League degree. You are smart and motivated and creative. Everyone will tell you that you can change the world. They are right, but remember that "changing the world" also can include things like skirting financial regulations and selling unhealthy foods to increasingly obese children. I am not asking you to cure cancer. I am just asking you not to spread it.

4. Marry someone smarter than you are. When I was getting a Ph.D., my wife Leah had a steady income. When she wanted to start a software company, I had a job with health benefits. (To clarify, having a "spouse with benefits" is different from having a "friend with benefits.") You will do better in life if you have a second economic oar in the water. I also want to alert you to the fact that commencement is like shooting smart fish in a barrel. The Phi Beta Kappa members will have pink-and-blue ribbons on their gowns. The summa cum laude graduates have their names printed in the program. Seize the

5. Help stop the Little League arms race. Kids' sports are becoming ridiculously structured and competitive. What happened to playing baseball because it's fun? We are systematically creating races out of things that ought to be a journey. We know that success isn't about simply running faster than everyone else in some predetermined direction. Yet the message we are sending from birth is that if you don't make the traveling soccer team or get into the "right" school, then you will somehow finish life with fewer points than everyone else. That's not right. You'll never read the following obituary: "Bob Smith died yesterday at the age of 74. He finished life in 186th place."

6. Read obituaries. They are just like biographies, only shorter. They remind us that interesting, successful people rarely lead orderly, linear lives.

7. Your parents don't want what is best for you. They want what is good for you, which isn't always the same thing. There is a natural instinct to protect our children from risk and discomfort, and therefore to urge safe choices. Theodore Roosevelt—soldier, explorer, president—once remarked, "It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed." Great quote, but I am willing to bet that Teddy's mother wanted him to be a doctor or a lawyer.

8. Don't model your life after a circus animal. Performing animals do tricks because their trainers throw them peanuts or small fish for doing so. You should aspire to do better. You will be a friend, a parent, a coach, an employee—and so on. But only in your job will you be explicitly evaluated and rewarded for your performance. Don't let your life decisions be distorted by the fact that your boss is the only one tossing you peanuts. If you leave a work task undone in order to meet a friend for dinner, then you are "shirking" your work. But it's also true that if you cancel dinner to finish your work, then you are shirking your friendship. That's just not how we usually think of it.

9. It's all borrowed time. You shouldn't take anything for granted, not even tomorrow. I offer you the "hit by a bus" rule. Would I regret spending my life this way if I were to get hit by a bus next week or next year? And the important corollary: Does this path lead to a life I will be happy with and proud of in 10 or 20 years if I *don't* get hit by a bus.

10. Don't try to be great. Being great involves luck and other circumstances beyond your control. The less you think about being great, the more likely it is to happen. And if it doesn't, there is absolutely nothing wrong with being solid.

Good luck and congratulations.

— Adapted from "10½ Things No Commencement Speaker Has Ever Said," by Charles Wheelan. To be published May 7 by W.W. Norton & Co.

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