

Commencement Address
Saturday, December 16, 2017
College of Arts and Sciences

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Stray Dog Theatre

Good Afternoon – It is such an honor to be here today. I would like to take a few moments to thank a few special people who are here celebrating this day with me – My Mother Ingelore Smith and her husband Dale Smith. My sister Jennifer Bell and Brother-In-Law Rick Sullivan. My colleague Robert Kapeller. Mr. Peter Wolfe and his wife Rette who were instrumental in making today happen. All the great folks here at UMSL - And my life and work partner Rob Ogden who assisted in creating the great life we have shared over the past 15 years.

What to do with a life. Your life. We only get one – so we better think wisely and move carefully as we plan the trajectory and ultimate outcome of this one precious life. Our life's work – our job – our basic form of survival - is a huge factor when considering and creating our life plan - the work that will fill the majority of our days. The day to day tasks that will keep us most busy.

I am an artist. An actor, director, a creator of art. Specifically, theatre art. My life's work is full with what I love to do and what gives me meaning and fills my heart with passion. I always knew what I wanted to do for my life's work and when I look back upon my childhood and remember what gave me the most joy – I see a clear path to my life. As a child, I loved writing plays, and dramatic stories and bringing them to life through puppets that I made from old Shampoo bottles yarn, felt and cardboard. As a pre-teen – much to my family's astonishment – I quit the swim team and ran off and joined the local community theatre. You would have thought I had joined the circus. When high school came, I auditioned and performed in every play and musical available and wrote by senior English thesis on the topic "How to Produce a Broadway Play". I knew what I wanted to do. I was burning alive with passion – so much so that upon graduation I convinced my folks to audition for the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City – and yes I was accepted and my life and my life's work were at that moment inextricably joined together as one. One life full of passion. Full of joy. I think that most of us – if we take a moment of stillness and look back to our younger years we will find the path and passions that have brought us here today.

So, when I left home at 18 years old – I headed to New York City with one goal in mind: to be an actor. In the 35 years since this time, I have become a student, director, scholar, educator, community leader, employer, and business owner. All of these roles still falling under the main title of Artist – still filling me with passion. I found success as an actor because there were ample roles for my "type" at the time. However, when I grew out of this "type," my mentor steered me towards directing for the stage instead

of acting on the stage. It's not that my goals had changed; it's just that my perspective on what I wanted from life had expanded, reconfigured, and become clearer. It is only through my own openness to follow these shifts in perspective that I have found success in almost every new avenue I have tried - under the main title of Artist.

As a new college graduate, you have chosen a vocation in the form of your major, your course of study, the careers and postgraduate programs you've applied for, and the internships, extracurricular activities, and jobs you've held. You've been studying something because you want to do it. You have a passion. Always try to incorporate your passions into your life's work so that you love what you are doing with your life. By combining your education, your work, your spirituality, and your life with your passions into one big cohesive package, you will always be following your passions. When I was forming my theatre company, Stray Dog Theatre I invited my life partner, Rob Ogden to leave his traditional business to become the Executive Director of the company. He agreed under one condition. That we make this new theatre company be bigger than just us - to include community through outreach and social programs. To give back to the community that we lived in and that served us in our endeavors. Being the typical actor I said "Can't we just make it about me?" Rob wisely said no - and I soon found the importance of his request. In developing a number of community programs through Stray Dog Theatre—after school arts programs, summer arts camps, senior theatre and youth theatre—I have learned that by giving back and sharing your passions with your community, you can manifest even more for yourself and find a deeper, more fulfilling meaning. You can make your own life stronger by using your passion to help others and lifting others up.

I've found power through perseverance. When I look back on the moments of struggle in my past, they are my defining moments—the times I had an opportunity to take a risk and took it.

I've owned up to my mistakes (trust me, I have made many) and learned from them as a way of growing stronger, better, and more passionate.

When I've struggled, I fought to make it through. The greatest joy of my career has been finding the challenges (large and small) that have arisen and daring to solve them, rather than letting them define and overcome me. One of the secrets to success, which I dare you to follow, is to always follow your passions.

And if you can tie those passions to your life and your life's work then you will find true success. Thank you!