

Commencement Address
Saturday, December 14, 2019, 6 p.m.
College of Business Administration
UMSL/Washington University Joint Undergraduate Engineering Program

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Thank you, Dean Hoffman.

I'm excited to be here, not only to address the distinguished graduates and alumni, but also to challenge the assumption that one must have been a 4.0 student to be a commencement speaker... or...3.5...or...3.0...or....Ok, ok, I better stop there...

I can only imagine my wonderful wife, Jennifer, is shaking her head at this very moment. Probably muttering something to herself like, "what is this guy doing up there?"

Let's just say I am forever grateful our three children take after you in their academic career. This is my first commencement address.

To those of you who know me this will come as no surprise. To all the rest – I'm sorry you're stuck with me for the next 10 minutes. I will not be speaking to you in complex terms, Shakespearian prose or Socratic Method. That's not me.

Instead, my goal is to share some thoughts – three to be exact – on what has made a difference in my life and career as you embark on your own. Commencement is the beginning.

True, you rightfully celebrate the conclusion of your college career tonight. A major accomplishment for sure. But tomorrow starts anew.

Maybe, just maybe, something I share will resonate as you begin this journey. Worst case scenario, I have no idea who the commencement speaker was when I graduated and I sure as heck couldn't tell you what he or she said. So at least I've got that as a backup.

These themes are not ground-breaking, nor were they made up for tonight's ceremony. My family can attest that they hear me utter these words, or something close, quite frequently at home.

First – I strongly encourage you to get up and show up.

I can see some of you shaking your head now, thinking, "I went to four years of college for this guy to tell me to get up and show up? Seriously?" Yes, I am serious.

The world is not run by the smartest...or the wealthiest...or the most beautiful. No. I assure you the world is run by those people who get up each day and show up...

To work...

To school...

To that volunteer activity you committed to doing last month, before you got an invite to do something better...

To the work event on the weekend...

To the big project that requires one more late evening at the office...

To the commencement address that seemed like a good idea at the time, but then actually required writing a speech.

Simply put, as Harry Truman once said, "Decisions are made by those who show up." Now, he may have been referencing the ballot box, but I'm referring to the board room or conference room or weekly staff meeting.

You would be amazed by how many people I have worked with, who will remain nameless, who were simply incapable of doing this – getting up and showing up. The drama...the excuses...the absences...the lack of follow through will kill a career.

Be the one in the room when brainstorming happens and tasks are handed out. Be the one who others can count on and you'll be the one they look to when promotions are considered.

In my role as executive director, I am not a clock watcher for the simple reason that I have a team of committed individuals who are passionate about their jobs, take incredible pride in their work and do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Give me a group of truly committed individuals and, in turn, you've created a team of leaders. That's what employers are looking for. Will you get and show up?

Speaking of that, be a leader! The world desperately needs more of you. Notice I didn't say – "be a manager." Leaders come in all forms and ages - many without even so much as a title. Leadership is not a position...it's a choice. But the term "leader" is loosely thrown around these days.

So, what am I suggesting? Leadership is not so much about personality as it is about character. Be a person of integrity and convey it through your actions, not just words.

Your character will be defined by your commitment to doing the right thing for the people you lead and interact with, especially when it's most difficult.

Leadership is also about communicating a clear and persuasive vision.

No matter your role, from entry level to running a department, your job will include influencing others into action.

We are all influencing one another. The only difference is we have unique responsibilities. To do this effectively, you must genuinely listen and incorporate input.

Just this past Wednesday, I had the honor of introducing Bob Chapman, CEO of St. Louis based Barry-Wehmiller. Bob was recently named the #3 CEO in the world by Inc. Magazine and he authored the best-selling book, "Everybody Matters: The Extraordinary Power of Caring for Your People like Family." Among many key pieces of advice, he remarked, "the greatest act of leadership is listening and it's the most powerful gift of caring."

Above all, act with genuine humility. Be a servant leader by honoring the skills, work and accomplishments of those around you. This is not about you. In the words of Mr. Chapman, "people want to know who they are and what they do matters."

I submit to you that I am not the world's best manager – I'm quite certain my colleagues, if they were here, would agree. But I try – and fail often – to be a humble, servant leader each and every day...at work, at home, and in all of my relationships. Be a leader and you can change the world for the better, no matter your role or title.

Finally, I ask you to consider the road less traveled.

It's December 1992 and I was sitting in your chair. A young graduate with the world ahead of me. I took a job with a healthcare company in St. Louis – a good job with opportunity for career advancement and professional development. I made my way up the ladder and, by the time I was 26, was responsible for a sizeable piece of business in the Southeast.

I had the world at my fingertips. Except, that I didn't...and it all ended almost overnight. You see, in 1998 we were purchased by a competitor in Dallas. By the next year, senior management informed us they were moving operations from St. Louis to headquarters down south.

Some of us were offered positions in the move; severance packages were given to the rest. I was one of the lucky ones to be offered a job in Dallas. A good position, in fact, to secure our business relationships as they transferred to the new combined company. It was a generous offer with a chance at executive development at 29 years of age. I thought about the offer and possibilities. I thought long and hard but ultimately decided Dallas was not for me. I decided on a different route – somewhere a tad bit warmer. No, I didn't move to Dallas; I moved to Africa.

I always regretted not pursuing the Peace Corps or similar international volunteer experience immediately following my own graduation. Instead, like most of my friends, I started my career and, by the time 1999 rolled around, I was 7-years down the road, with responsibilities, bills to pay, and commitments to keep. International volunteering was no longer an option – unless, your company is sold and your job is moved.

It's called a major change, or, in my way of thinking – a 2nd chance to take the road less traveled. That year turned out to be one of the most impactful and transformational of my life. We had no TV, limited phone and even less internet access. We rationed electricity, so evenings were spent reading books by candlelight.

The difficult times and learning a new culture only forced me to strengthen and grow as a person. Those with whom I worked were some of the most devoted, loving and inspirational people I've ever met.

I remember writing an email to my best friend at home on the occasion of my 30th birthday in March of that year. Back in college, Terry and I had often talked about our need to be making six-figures by the time we turned 30. As if our entire career would be off course if we weren't. I wrote that evening something to the effect of...

"Hey, Terry, guess what? I turned 30 today. I don't have a job, I don't have a house, I don't make a single cent and yet I've never been happier in my life. Figure that one out."

When I finished my time in Kenya, I moved back home. From there, I transitioned my career into international business – traveling and working in more than 40 countries on 6 continents. And now leading the World Trade Center, where I have the rare opportunity in St. Louis to combine my international experience and deep love for the community to make a positive difference.

I share all of this not to encourage you to run out of here and sign up for volunteer work in Africa. I imagine more than a few parents in this audience would have some choice words for me.

My point is this – you might have your entire career and life mapped out. And that's not bad – setting goals and pursuing dreams are essential to your success.

In her book, "The Defining Decade," Dr. Meg Jay notes that most of the substantial and lasting events of our lives – those that led to career success, family fortune, personal bliss, or lack thereof – are decided by far-reaching decisions in our twenties. However, just when you find the world at your fingertips – as I once did – you must be ready and willing to embrace the unexpected and learn and grow from it.

Had I not taken – in the words of Robert Frost – "the road less traveled" to Kenya, I would not be working in international business...I would not be living in St. Louis...and I most certainly would not have met my wife. My life would be radically different from what it is today.

Trust me, unexpected turns in your life will happen. Embrace it with the conviction that good can and will come of it. I've been incredibly challenged in my own career and rewarded beyond expectation – and not just financially...

"Hey Terry, I turned 30 today. I don't have a job, I don't have a house, I don't make a single cent...and I've never been happier."

Where will you be when you turn 30...or 40...or 50?

I shall be telling this with a sigh.
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Best of luck to each of you for a meaningful and purpose driven life.
Congratulations!