

Graduation Talk at the Chapel Hill-Chauncy Hall School

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Mr. Conrad, members of the faculty, trustees, parents, family, friends, and students of the class of 2013.

Congratulations...to all of you.

Congratulations to the faculty and trustees, for creating and sustaining such a fine educational institution, where boys and girls are nurtured into young men and women.

Congratulations to the parents, family, and friends, for supporting these students through the often-tumultuous years of being a teenager.

And, most of all, congratulations to the students who are graduating here today. This is truly a milestone for you. You have worked long and hard to be here. And you can feel justly proud of your accomplishment.

But make sure that your pride comes with the requisite degree of appreciation. Before the day is over, be sure to give a hug to your favorite teachers. When you learn from them how to enjoy Shakespeare, how to factor a quadratic equation, or how the Federalist papers shaped American democracy, you and your teachers are engaged in a joint activity. Your success is also their success.

Make sure to appreciate as well the support your family has given you over the years. As an economist, I have to point out that this support is not only emotional (although some of it is) but also financial. Excellent schools like Chapel Hill-Chauncy Hall don't come cheap. You students were all fortunate for the chance to attend here, and for that opportunity you should be sure to thank your benefactors.

I will always remember when my sister graduated from college. After the ceremony was over, she walked up to my parents in her cap and gown, handed them her newly awarded diploma, and said, "Here's your receipt."

I am often struck by the fact that graduation ceremonies are called "commencements." The word "commencement" comes from the word "commence," which means "begin." Commencements are not so much the end of one experience as the beginning of another. To be

sure, we are here to celebrate your completion of high school. But even more so, we are here to send you off into the world, so you can find your place in it and pursue your passions.

In the years to come, you will have more autonomy. You won't have teachers and parents looking over your shoulder. You won't have weekly progress reports on Podium. You will have the power to make more of your decisions.

Most likely, you may be finding that prospect, at the same time, both thrilling and frightening. When you are at college making your own decisions, you can pull out your laptop and play *Grand Theft Auto* 24 hours a day. But making your own decisions also means accepting more of the blame for your mistakes. Always remember the lesson of Spiderman: with great power comes great responsibility.

It is an honor to be able to speak to you today. When Mr. Conrad invited me, he suggested that maybe, as a professional economist, I could talk with you about the future economy that you will soon be entering and in which you will be spending your lives.

It is true that as an economist, I know precisely what the future holds. But union rules prevent me from sharing that knowledge with the general public. So we economists usually just make stuff up, and it often turns out to be wrong. I won't burden you with those made-up stories today.

What I would like to do, instead, is share with you a few real stories about my own journey through life. Trite as it may sound, life is just a long learning experience. I hope these stories will illustrate a bit of what I have learned, and maybe help guide you along the way.

My narrative begins around 1965. Lyndon Johnson is president, and everyone is listening to the Beach Boys and the Beatles. I am in the second grade.

At the time I attended school in Cranford, N.J., where I grew up. It was a typical suburban public school. A short walk from home, a nice playground, good teachers, but the classes were much larger than anything you would ever see here at Chapel Hill-Chauncy Hall.

I am sure the school worked well for many of the kids there. But it did not work for me. I was relatively shy. I usually sat in the back of the classroom. My main goal was to make it through the day without getting noticed. Most of the time, I succeeded.

One day, the teacher called my mother and asked her to come in and meet with her. So my mother came to school after class. The teacher explained that they had given the entire class some kind of standardized aptitude test.

"Mrs. Mankiw," the teacher said. "Greg did well. We were very surprised."

Until then, the teacher had thought that I just wasn't very bright. Given my lackluster performance in class, that was a reasonable inference. But it wasn't a correct one.

It was then that my parents realized that I was in the wrong place. They understood that the teachers there barely knew me, and that while I could survive there, I wouldn't thrive. Soon thereafter, they pulled me out and sent me to an independent school, where I stayed through high school.

The school they sent me to was a lot like this one. It had small classes and a tight-knit community. No student could ever hide in the back of the class, like I had until then. Every student was involved not only in the academic life of the school, but also in the extracurricular activities. Everyone had to participate.

For me, the change in school worked wonders. I was not a great athlete, but I ended up captain of the fencing team. I was not one of the cool kids, but I was president of the chess club. I was not a diligent enough student to be valedictorian, but I was a far better student for having been an active member of the school community.

So here is my first lesson: Communities matter. Communities influence your behavior and shape who you will become. So choose your communities wisely. What is the right community for one person is not necessarily the right community for another. Find a place that will support you and push you to be a better person, as this school has. So far in life, your parents have often chosen the communities for you. But going forward, this is going to be more of your responsibility.

Okay. Fast forward to my own high school graduation. It is 1976. Gerald Ford is president. Everybody is playing Bruce Springsteen's breakthrough album *Born to Run* and Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* (which, by the way, is Dylan's best album).

At the time, I was the school math geek. I took all the hardest math classes, took more math classes on the weekends at a nearby university, spent the summer before my senior year at a summer activity focused around math and astrophysics, and won the school math prize. I thought I was pretty hotWell, you get the idea.

When I went to college the next fall, I started off as a math major, thinking I would end up being a professional mathematician. I was doing what economists call pursuing your comparative advantage, which means doing what you are good at compared with other people. I thought if I was so good at math compared with my high school classmates, it would make sense to turn that talent into a career.

But then something happened: I met some other students who were *really* good in math. And I mean *really* good. These were the kind of kids who not only took hard math courses in

high school and did well in them, but they spent their free time competing in the international math Olympiad. They were in an entirely different league than I was. I felt like I was the most valuable player on my little league team, and all of a sudden I was practicing with the Red Sox.

Over time, I realized that I was pretty good in math, but far from a star. I was good enough to take college-level math classes and pursue a more quantitative career, but I was probably not cut out to become a professional mathematician.

So here is my second lesson for you: You may think you are good at something, and you may think you know what you should spend your life doing, but you may well be wrong. You will learn a lot about yourself during your first few years of adulthood. Be prepared to change your mind about your path in life and about your self-image. I know I certainly did.

I realize that is a bit of a downer. But don't worry: The story will get better.

During my first year of college, like most people, I made a lot of friends.

One of them was a young man named Richard Greenberg. Academically, Richard and I were about as different as two people can be. I was a math/science guy; Richard was into the arts. In fact, it is hard to imagine that we had anything in common, other than happening to be thrown into the same freshman dorm. But for some reason, we got along splendidly, and always enjoyed each other's company. We became roommates for the rest of our college years.

As I mentioned, Richard was very much into the arts. But he wasn't sure where his niche was, what his comparative advantage was. Should he be an actor, an opera singer, a novelist? He tried out a variety of paths when we were in college. When Richard graduated, he still had little idea which way to head, but he kept experimenting. He started a PhD in English literature, thinking he might become an English professor, but after a year he dropped out of the program.

At the time, it looked like Richard was floundering. And indeed he was. Sometimes floundering is what you need to do as a young adult, as you try to figure out your place in the world.

But before you let yourself off too easy, I should point out that not all floundering is created equal. Richard's floundering was the best kind. It was never lazy or aimless or paralyzed by fear and indecision. Rather, it was energetic, purposeful, and passionate. For each activity he tried, he gave it his all. And each activity taught him something about the world and about himself.

So how did it all end? Richard did not become an actor, or an opera singer, or a novelist, or an English professor. Instead, he eventually went on to become a playwright. He now has had more than 25 plays produced on or off Broadway. One of his plays, *Take Me Out*, tells the story

a gay baseball player and the media reaction to his coming out. In 2003, it won the Tony Award for best play.

Meanwhile, as Richard spent his college years trying to find his niche in the arts world, I was doing much the same in more quantitative fields. My epiphany came to me in a most unexpected way.

During my freshman year, I started dating a young woman, who happened to be on the same dorm floor as Richard and I. She also happened to be taking a freshman course in introductory economics. Those coincidences changed my life.

She used to come back from her economics class and tell me what she was learning. To my surprise, I found it fascinating. I entered college with little idea what economics was, and little intention to study it. But from what she told me, it seemed that what she was learning was far more interesting than anything I was learning in any of my classes.

So the next semester I started taking economics classes. And I really liked them. And, it turned out that I was pretty good at it.

Eventually, I switched my major from math to economics. I went on to get my PhD and have been a professor of economics at Harvard for almost 30 years, as well as an economic adviser to presidents and presidential candidates. It has been a great career for me. And it all began with some offhand conversations I had during my freshman year in college.

This brings me to my third lesson: Your niche in life—your comparative advantage—is out there waiting for you. You may not find it immediately. It may present itself to you at an unexpected time and an unexpected place. Be sure to be ready with an open mind.

One last story.

Fast forward four more years.

It is now March 1981. Ronald Reagan has just moved into the White House, and the Talking Heads are starting to make it big in the music world.

I am in the first year of a PhD program in economics at MIT. It is spring break, and I am heading home to visit my parents in New Jersey.

I am taking the red line to South Station, where I plan to board an Amtrak train heading south. I spot a girl toward the other end of the subway car. She is cute. I guess she is about my age, maybe a bit younger. She is probably a student too, I think to myself. I wonder how I can meet her.

It turns out that we both exit the T at the same station. We both start walking in the same direction. We both get in line to buy our train tickets.

I am behind her, so she doesn't notice me. That is fortunate. If she did, she might think I was a stalker.

We both start walking to the train platform. It looks like we are taking the same train. What a stroke of luck.

I walk up to her.

"Excuse me," I say. "Is this the train to New York?"

She assures me it is.

I don't remember what I said next. But I kept talking, and she was polite enough to keep responding. When the train pulled into the station, we boarded, and I sat next to her. We chatted for the next few hours.

I am not sure what this young girl thought of me at the time. As far as I know, she might have thought I was a creep. But for the past 30 years, she has called me her husband. And we have had three wonderful children together, one of whom is graduating here today.

So this is my final lesson for you: Random stuff happens. Life is not completely in your control. To be sure, some of the random stuff is bad. But some of the random stuff is awesome.

Everyone in life is dealt a different hand. If you want to be happy and successful, don't complain about the hand you are dealt. That takes too much energy, which only ends up being wasted. Do your best to play the hand you've got.

And rest assured that as you are doing so, something or someone awesome may be right around the corner.

Thank you.