

Commencement Remarks
The Passion of Life
Northwood University (May 13)
(12 minutes maximum)

Thank you, Dr. Fry.

I am honored to have been asked to speak to you today.

It makes it even more special to address the graduates at the local University in the community that my company calls “our hometown.”

Let me offer my congratulations to you the graduates, who have worked hard – and I’m sure often played hard – to reach this day of celebration.

I am sure many of you have been to Commencement ceremonies before and a speaker like me would begin the address by quoting a great philosopher from history.

Well, not to break from tradition, I will begin by quoting one of our modern day philosophers of sorts . . . comedian Jerry Seinfeld.

He says, and I quote:

“Life is truly a ride. We are all strapped in and no one can stop it. When the doctor slaps your behind, he is ripping your ticket and away you go.

“As you make each passage from youth to adulthood to maturity, sometimes you put your arms up and scream, sometimes you just hang on to that bar in front of you.

“But the ride is the thing. I think the most you can hope for at the end of life is that your hair is messed up, you are out of breath, and you did not throw up.”

Indeed profound words, Mr. Seinfeld.

Now, while your doctor may have slapped you on your behind to start your life, I am sure there are many others who have given you a pat on your back to get you where you are today.

So, my second congratulations is to all the parents and other supporters in the audience ... the people who made this day possible through their hard work and sacrifice to. . . in many cases. . . pay for your education and to support you in so many other ways that only each of you really knows and appreciates.

While there may be a thousand things left unsaid between you and your parents, my guess is, that if your family is like mine, that there are a thousand things understood.

As the father of three children – two now in college ... in fact two weeks ago I was listening to a wonderful commencement speech at our oldest child's graduation ... I'd like to give all of you parents and other supporters out there a tip of the hat and a round of applause.

[Start clapping]

And today, another group of people are patting you on your back and sending you into the world . . . your professors and administrators of this great institution. To them, I say a job very well done getting these graduates prepared for the next phase of their lives.

Graduates, today you are receiving a gift . . . you may even be receiving a few material gifts later today . . . however, the gift I am referring to is the gift of a higher education.

With this gift, many doors can open for you . . . rewarding careers, exciting travel opportunities, working on causes or discoveries that will better the world. The possibilities are endless.

In my brief comments to you today, I want to tell you about three gifts you can and should give back to the world.

The first gift . . . you will need to develop.

The second gift . . . you will need to find.

And, the third gift . . . you will need to protect with every fiber of your body.

So, what are these gifts? Let me tell you.

The first gift is what we engineering types call your toolkit ... our jargon for the knowledge, skill and experience you have spent most of your lives accumulating, primarily in formal education – of which this is a huge milestone.

You are leaving Northwood well equipped, because in Henry Adams' phrase, this is where you not only learned, but more importantly, where you learned how to learn.

But having said that, my advice is, never assume your toolkit is full. There is always something to add to it, and it is up to you to be around people and institutions to help you do so ... and bear in my mind that keeping it replenished is ultimately your responsibility.

Add to your toolkit an appreciation of the world's different peoples, societies and cultures.

The world is not, contrary to conventional wisdom, a village ... it is a huge and diverse place ... and you should take every opportunity to understand it ... by reading about it, traveling around it, talking to foreign visitors, learning to speak several languages... explore our world by any means possible.

And when you do so, you will not only learn about the world, but you will have the genuine privilege of seeing your own country and culture through the eyes of others. You may not always like or agree with how you are perceived, but you will benefit enormously from it.

So, check out your own toolkit. You may be pleasantly surprised that there is more in it than you think. There is most assuredly knowledge and experiences ... it is only a matter of making a career out of what you feel most strongly about. For some of you it may be the law ... others the environment ... others the world of business ... or medicine ... or diplomacy ... or teaching ... or running a museum or a Goodwill mission for people in need ... Rest assured, there is something and someplace where you can pursue your dreams ... and fulfill the dreams of others.

You owe it to our world . . . and the people on it . . . to continuously improve yourself in all facets of your life in order to make a difference and an impact on the course of history . . . develop this gift.

The second gift is one you must find. That gift is Passion.

I am sure you have heard the saying that “if you love what you do, you will never have to work a day in your life.”

You must explore and find what you are passionate about and set your life’s path toward that direction.

To illustrate this gift, let me tell you a bit about my journey that has brought me in front of you today.

How I found my passion.

I was born in Darwin Australia ... way up in the country's tropical north. My grandfather emigrated there early in the 20th century from his native Greece when it was much more of a wilderness than a town ... with only about 300 people, no electricity or infrastructure to speak of ... just about every exotic and deadly tropical disease you could imagine ... and a large contingent of the world’s crocodiles.

My grandparents must have seen something promising in Darwin; they stayed and built a life for themselves and their children, including my own father ... who himself built up a successful business.

By the time I was a boy, Darwin was a real city ... not on the scale of New York or London, mind you, but thriving. When I think back on my life there, I am reminded that I didn't take a plane ride until I was 20 years old and our family didn't own a TV until I was 17 ... ironic for a guy who can't live without his cell phone in the sixth decade of his life.

And I also remember the tragedy that changed our lives ... the sudden death of my father when I was 16 years old ... and our family moving to Brisbane, on the Australian east coast, where my mother's relatives lived. I of course went to school to get a degree – as all of you have – and I worked odd jobs – as many of you have – to help support my education and also my mom and two younger sisters.

And since I was a sports nut, I played just about every game I could in Australia. I continued my love of sports when I moved to the United States several years later picking up many American sports especially basketball which I enjoy playing even to this day.

(By the way . . . Go Pistons!)

In playing sports, I discovered something about myself that I am sure you can relate to. When I have a deep passion for something . . . as I did with playing sports . . . I have boundless energy to do it.

Of course, one is really a function of the other. If you have passion for something, you will never be short of energy.

In fact, a big part of the passion in my life today, in running a \$46 billion company, is the knowledge that if we at Dow are successful in making money, a lot of terrific things result . . . more jobs, better paying jobs, taxes and philanthropy that support social programs . . . in other words, the creation of wealth that is essential not only to raising people's living standards throughout the world . . . but also the quality of their lives.

There is nothing more exciting then going to places like China and India today, and seeing the energy of people building their lives in ways they could not for generations.

And to think that my company is a part of that – along with so many other companies – is very exciting and gratifying. You don't have to be a raging capitalist to understand what Adam Smith wrote nearly three centuries ago: that economic growth is the engine of all human progress. Without that engine, there is no movement and no progress.

Seeing The Dow Chemical Company produce products that improve the standard of living around the world and contribute to human progress is what gives me the passion and energy to do what I do everyday.

So I would say, whatever you do in life, do it because you have a passion for it ... not because someone else thinks you should do it or because you think it will bring you status or prestige.

And I would also advise that you find this gift as quickly as possible . . . explore your passion in life and apply it to make the world better.

The third and final gift is the one you must protect and enhance with every fiber of your being. This gift is your reputation.

Reputation is, simply stated, what other people think of you.

Whether you are in a humble or exalted position, a laborer or a president, you cannot order others to see you as you want to be seen. Many have tried; no one has succeeded.

Reputation is something you build over a lifetime but can lose in 5 minutes ... we all know of people and companies who lost their positive reputation literally overnight.

I will not recite the entire list of what constitutes a good reputation, but I will cite three things: your integrity, your work ethic and your judgment. All are demonstrated in the following ways.

- Be the person who does a thorough job on everything and always gets the job done on time.
- Be the person who gives credit to others.
- Be the person who is easy to get along with ... the one others want to work with.
- Be the person who helps a co-worker who is in trouble ... who steps in and averts disaster, and never says a word about it to anyone else.
- Be the person who takes others seriously but not himself or herself too seriously.
- Be the person who is willing to take risks ... to stick out her own neck ... and who takes responsibility for the consequences, even if they are bad.
- And be the person who is as good at listening as at talking.

When opportunity knocks it is not just the people with the best skills who get the call, but the ones with the passion, energy and reputation.

I promise you, no organization, either public or private, ever has enough of these kinds of people.

As important as your work life is to your reputation, your person life is equally important. You must keep your life in balance.

Working hard is important, but working so long and so hard that your family and friends become a low priority in your life is wrong ... it makes your life less important ... it saps your energy ... and believe it or not ... it ultimately makes you a less productive and valuable worker.

It chips away at your reputation.

So by all means, get to the theater with your friends and your spouse ... plant and grow a garden ... get out and fish your favorite river or lake ... volunteer your time and not just your money ... coach your child's team ... and stay in touch with the people who have been important in your lives ... like a special professor or a mentor at home or elsewhere ... many of whom are surely in this gathering today.

I promise you, no person at the age of 70 who looks back on his or her life ever wishes he had spent more time at the office and less time with his or her family and friends.

Keeping your life in the proper balance will go a long way to protect and enhance your reputation throughout your life.

So, there you have it, the three gifts I truly hope you give our world.

Continuously develop yourself and build upon your toolkit . . . and help others develop as well.

Discover your passion and use it to create a better world.

And, protect and enhance your reputation. Be the person that uses all your potential. This will have a positive impact and benefit all the people who count on you and love you.

Today you are being patted on your back again; your ticket is ripped for the next stage in your life. Go forth and make an impact.

But, most importantly, as our friend Jerry Seinfeld said, “Enjoy the ride!”

My best wishes as you follow your passion. We will be watching in amazement!

Thank you.