

“The Balance of Your Life”

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Penn State College of Engineering Commencement

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Anxious graduates, proud parents, loving family, supportive friends, and distinguished faculty, I am honored to be here this evening in Bryce Jordan Center to share in this exciting time in your lives. My experiences in this building began about 10 years ago as a spectator, sitting in the seats surrounding the floor, watching a juniors volleyball tournament. Last year, I migrated to the floor to support my daughter during one of Penn State's now hallowed traditions – THON. This year, I've made it to the stage, someone whose time and words are between you and your diploma.

To you graduates, I'm old, perhaps some might think ancient is a more appropriate term. I was in college here at Penn State, before the internet and electronic mail, in fact, before microprocessors and even THON. I was a nerd (more specifically a geek or computer nerd) before those terms were commonplace. When I came to Penn State, I didn't even know I was to become an engineer. I thought I was studying to become a scientist (after all, computer science was in the College of Science back then). As I graduated and made my way into the workplace, I quickly realized that the methodologies, processes, and disciplines with which I approached tasks and my life were very much the DNA of an engineer. And roughly twenty years ago, even computer science moved into the College of Engineering.

You are sitting here, ready to pursue “the balance of your life.” But I want to offer you a few thoughts about the harmony, not just the remainder, of your life. You stand on the threshold of a new phase of your life, whether that brings more schooling, or a job and the pursuit of a career, or something else entirely. Some of you, perhaps many or even most of you, already know what this next step will look like. For some of you, you are just beginning your search for your true passion. When my daughters were young, and people wondered what I wanted them to be, I said I didn't care, as long as they have a passion for something. For many, many years I've said, “I don't work, I get paid for a hobby!” Seek your true passion, for it will be part of “the balance of your life.”

There is so much more to life than just being an engineer. The world does not revolve around technology, though all of us engineers like to think it does. The world is dependent on technology, and our collective mission as engineers is to ensure that technology is used to better humankind. I implore you, to paraphrase a rather large, influential company these days, “to do no evil.” Find ways to make your talents available to a wider slice of society than just your place of work. Your engineering discipline will be helpful in solving problems in a myriad of strange and unusual places, and that will provide “the balance of your life.”

Don't be afraid to take a chance on the unknown. Be an entrepreneur, be a pioneer. I followed a dream, as a television show of my day said, “to boldly go where no man has gone before!” When asked to work on something called electronic mail in 1978, I agreed and told those

around me, long before I had kids or was even married, that someday I wanted to sit my grandchild on my knee, and say “Granddaddy was a pioneer.” I thought I saw something that would be a game-changer. As my career progressed, I joined a bunch of fellow engineers who were envisioning the creation of a service to download video games into the old Atari VCS (your parents and grandparents may remember and some of you may know about the Atari, but for the rest of you, it was the forerunner of the PS3, Wii, and Xbox of today). I joined them because it sounded like fun, not because I envisioned the game industry of today. Out of that start, eventually grew the team of people who would start America Online. That combination of vision and fun helped provide “the balance of my life.”

Work hard, but work smarter, not harder. I’ve said for a long time, “I’m inherently lazy, I’m always looking for an easier way to do things!” I’ve worked hard too, as my wife will attest to the 100-hour work weeks during the boom years of AOL. Some have said I’m lucky, and perhaps there is some truth in that. But I’ve believed in a statement first attributed to Samuel Goldwyn of MGM fame, “The harder I work, the luckier I get!” However, during all that hard work, I took time to spend with my family. I can count on my fingers and toes the number of times I didn’t wake my daughters up and get them off to school, or tuck them into bed at night. My wife and I also are very proud of one of our accomplishments. We did not succumb to what I suspect is an all-too-common side effect of start-up ventures – divorce. Of the original co-founders of AOL, Marci and I are the only married couple still together. So, please, find ways to maintain “the balance of your life” with your family.

Work on your communication skills. The engineer who can express his ideas to more than just his peers has a leg up on them. Be something like what I’ve been referred to, “a geek that can talk.” Learn to listen, even more than you have in your time here at Penn State. The way to become a great engineer is to hear and understand what your customer wants. Continue to ask questions, continue to be a student! Build on the work and information of others, so that you, too, can make a statement like Sir Isaac Newton: “If I have been able to see farther than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.” Listening, as well as speaking, is another part of “the balance of your life.”

Travel! Enjoy the sights, sounds, and people of our wonderful country. Visit other countries and acquaint yourself with their culture. It will help you appreciate more what we have here at home in this great country of ours. And wherever you go, don’t just be a tourist, be part of the whole experience. Ride public transportation, see how other people live and shop, and learn their systems. You might be surprised at the insight you’ll gain that is beneficial to your job or project, as well as providing more of “the balance of your life.”

Volunteer! Give back to your community, your country, your world! Giving back is defined simply as giving of your time, your talents, and/or your treasure. Volunteering is easy and simple, as many of you have learned here at Penn State just by the various things you’ve done to help support the success of THON. It can be swinging a hammer, reading a book to a young child, digging a ditch, giving a child a ride on your shoulders, or countless other things. You’ll

meet new people and gain a fresh perspective on life in general, and it will help to provide “the balance of your life.”

So where does all this advice lead you? Similar to the advice I had given to me as a new parent, and I give to expectant parents. Read all you can from the experts, listen all you can to the experts, and then “go with your gut, do it your way, and stick to your guns!” If you do that, you can go beyond what even you think is possible. And remember that no one you admire would have gotten where they are without pushing the boundaries – whether they were technological, practical, or even social. As Muriel Siebert, the first woman to buy a seat on the New York Stock Exchange in 1967, said, “When you hit a closed door, don’t get discouraged. Just rear back and kick the door open.” As you embark on the next part of “the balance of your life,” remember something I first heard from Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Computer, and have found to be oh-so-true, as I look back over my life so far, “The Journey IS the Reward.”

In closing, in the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson said, in part, “... we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” As you pursue your happiness, keep the following words in mind that are the motto of my church’s mission trip that I’ve been on for 19 years. It is found in Micah 6:8 in the Old Testament of the Bible: “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the Lord.” Those words have helped me to keep a balance in my life, and will help you with “The Balance of Your Life.”

Thank you, and good night!