

“Best in the World?”

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Penn State College of Engineering Commencement

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Thank you, Dean Elnashai, distinguished guests, friends and families, and most of all, graduates!

Graduation speeches are a rite of passage, whereby the speaker is supposed to inspire you with pithy life wisdom that can be summed up in a few minutes, under the false pretense that you will listen to it—mostly because you have to—and then at some point in the future, you will remember it and follow it. Only, that never happens. I have been to about a dozen graduations in my life—my own, and those of numerous family members and friends. I cannot tell you who spoke at any of them, or what they said. Even if I did remember, there is rarely a moment in life when you all of a sudden change course or do something different based on a Top Ten list that a stranger told you many years before.

So it is a daunting task to provide advice that you probably won't remember. What do I say to inspire a group of overachievers who have already secured jobs and graduate admissions, and frankly are poised to have a better financial and professional future than most people in the world?

You are the cream of the crop; the ones who got better grades and test scores in high school, and who could actually get through that defining moment called “Calculus” that separates all of us from the business school graduates, and who are the ones your friends trust to improve the performance of the beer tap and wire up a better sound system. And you are graduating from a topnotch university—one that proudly proclaims:

“Educate — Dominate — Graduate!”

You are Penn State engineers! You are leaders in the Big 10 and leaders in Pennsylvania and leaders on this campus. You have a bright future and you have been working hard all of these years to win and be the best—perhaps even the Best in the World!

So what do I say to you? I say, “Who cares?”

Because excelling and winning and being the best is interesting, and might make you feel good, but it is not relevant. You have been training your entire life for this moment. Let's face it—when people hear you are an engineering graduate, they are impressed. You have been appropriately focused on succeeding. So you might wonder why I would not ask you to be the best in the world. I would ask you to just change one word in that phrase, and then we will have something to talk about.

Best IN the World? No. Best FOR the world? Yes.

Because now that you are graduating, you have a different responsibility than others, and it starts today. And that's what my message is, one that you might remember in the future.

As engineers, you are the world's problem solvers. You are intellectually curious and have learned important, valuable skills to tackle complex challenges. And in the past few years, you have also had to examine your conscience, ethics and morals ... probably more than most others in college campuses across this country. I know you are prepared to do amazing things to make this world better.

And I hope you are outraged at the dichotomies of the world you have found so far.

- We have better technology and engineering and construction techniques than in the entire history of mankind, and yet the world is more polluted today than it ever has been, and much of it lacks access to basic sanitation, infrastructure, and energy.
- We can produce, and store, and move, more food than ever possible, yet hundreds of millions starve. Kids go to bed hungry every night, including in this very state, let alone the rest of the world.
- We put a man on the moon decades ago but we cannot figure out how to deal with the urbanization and industrialization of our own planet.

These problems are not isolated to third-world countries. There are challenges regarding mobility, urbanization, energy and infrastructure right in this state, and in this town.

I hope you are outraged. Because if you are, you are the very people who can—and will—drive positive change.

Today, you carry the privilege, and the moral burden, of being an engineer. Because what we do as engineers is to design and build a better world. As you receive your diploma, please do not take this lightly. You now have the responsibility to do something about it.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "Oh sure, she's going to ask us to go live in a tent in sub-Saharan Africa and battle tsetse flies while digging a water ditch and reading to the blind." Nope, I'm not saying that. Go live in a cool apartment in New York or a two-bedroom house in Pittsburgh or Westchester, maybe get a partner and a dog. Work hard, play hard, buy a new car, go to concerts, have cookouts, come back to Penn State for football weekends.

What I am saying is that when you work, whether you work in an office, or for yourself, or even if you decide to work in the home and not as an engineer, be the best you can be FOR the world. I don't care if that means working in a tech startup, improving a chemical plant, or figuring out how to get water to a remote location ... teaching a child to read or simply putting up a swing set in the backyard for your kids.

Being the best IN the world is about you. Being the best FOR the world is about others. The world needs your help.

And when you help, you might get paid a little or a lot, or based on your choices, you might get paid solely in kisses from your kids every day. Statistically, only two-thirds of you will actually be doing something related to engineering 10 years from now. But ALL of you have the skills to help the world, starting with your own community. It doesn't matter what you do, where you do it, or how much you are compensated for it. You are engineers for life.

Now, most of you will forget how to do differential equations and PChem and surveying and circuitry design—frankly, most of the details of what you have learned these past several years. That is not the point of being an engineer. What you really learned here, and what will always be part of you, is how to solve problems. Go ahead and solve a few that help you personally along the way. But make sure you solve some that help others, in your neighborhood, and beyond.

You will live better than 95 percent of the world's population. Please do not squander what you learned at Penn State only on yourself.

In closing, I want to share a little about me so you know why I am so passionate about this. I am holding up my college transcript. If you look at it, you will see that I graduated with a rather underwhelming 2.98 grade point average, with a B.S. in environmental engineering. By the way, you can't even get that as an undergraduate degree here anymore. I think they decided that the course of study wasn't tough enough.

You cannot find my name in any list of honors, clubs, or accomplishments from the four years I was here. I had a lot of fun at Penn State. I studied some, but not a lot. I made some great friends here, but 30 years later, I'm only in touch with one or two. And by the way, my senior year, Penn State won the national football championship and that made my class overly focused on proclaiming that we were the champions and the best in the world.

After I graduated, I went to work in an engineering firm. I never got another degree, although I did manage to get my P.E. license. It turns out that I am not actually a great engineer. I am an OK one, but I grow tired of working through lots of details. What I am is a great listener and leader. And I can immediately frame a problem and bring together a strong team of people to solve it.

What has mattered most is not what particular engineering skills I have (or in this case, don't have), it's how I used them to help others. I have had the opportunities to:

- Help clean up hazardous waste sites and restore drinking water to thousands of families in New Jersey and Pennsylvania
- Help manage the expansion of the Panama Canal in order to improve global trade

- Work on the development of the world's first carbon-neutral city, in the United Arab Emirates
- Deliver more than \$10 billion of sports venues and infrastructure for the London 2012 Olympics—and in the process, train 2,000 people for construction jobs who were previously on welfare
- And along the way, mentor a dozen young girls and women who now have STEM careers

I have had a fun life. I have visited and worked in more than 40 states and more than 20 countries. I make a very good living, play and work hard, take time to really enjoy my husband and kids and family and friends, and engage in great hobbies.

I can look at you today and say that I was NEVER the best in any class, on any test, or on any project. I was never the smartest or most clever engineer or project manager. Probably not even in the top third.

But I can tell you with absolute certainty, that since I got my engineering degree, I have been the best I could be for me, and for the world. I know that I have made a tremendous difference in the lives of others. And it feels really, really good.

I hope that someday, you can say the same. Thank you.