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UCSC Crown College Commencement Speech

Thanks for your generous words and introduction. Provost Camps, Faculty, Parents, Friends, and especially the students - all of you. I'm truly honored to be here today, there's no other word for it.

First congratulations. Bravo to the graduating class of 2016. Rock On. If you completed your studies in four years or less you've already got a jump start on me - it took me six years to get through my studies here. I don't think the powers who invited me here knew what a flakey student I was in so many ways.

Giving this talk has asked me to look at the world through a new lens. Your lens. I don't do this very often. It's been a creative but complex assignment, trying to be relevant to you. You are young and a diverse student body, individuals, looking at your future in very different circumstances and times than I did in the 70's.

The range in your majors is impressive. Anthropology, bio-engineering, history, the full range of subjects it seems. Such intelligence out there in front of me, with subjects like astrophysics that are over my pay grade to understand. If you guys cannot change the world nobody can.

Most of my friends and peers mostly come from the somewhat narrow creative and visual fields. We are the art and design geeks. Most of us are self-employed, or run our own companies, independent types with major issues with authority. I just had thirty friends over for a party on Memorial Day and I realized that only one of them has a day job. Only one was working for the man.

I've been musing on this: "What have I learned for sure of relevant to you and your broad and diverse majors and careers today?"

I confess that I've gone down some rabbit holes. At one point I even sent out Facebook requests for ideas. What came back were mostly clichés, clever, but nothing that rang true to me.

Then I watched youtube commencement speeches for inspiration. That was a big mistake. There are so many brilliant speeches on line, very intimidating, So I put a stop to that right away. And I began asking my friends to tell me what they recalled from their commencement exercises. Only one could remember anything from any commencement talk: My pal Laura recalled Tom Watson, ex- CEO of IBM, at Colby College, advising the graduates to:

"Read the newspaper everyday"

Now this is from the 90's when newspapers were the viable news media. And "read the paper" translates to something like "think globally" or "be present". Smart, simple, genuine, - not a cliché- as good as anything I'd come across. And memorable to Laura 20 years later. And that fact stuck with me.

So I took this on as a perverse personal challenge, to try to come up with something memorable, rather than some sage piece of advice. The truth is I'm not a sage kind of guy.

It had to be honest, something gleaned from my life's experiences. And something related to my Santa Cruz education. So here it is. My advice. Just two things:

First: Fall in love deeply with something of value and pursue it

You can fall in love with anything, marine biology, pastry, social cause, a mammal, whatever, anything, anything but yourself.

And second: Avoid Dickheads, as much as possible

This term has been on my mind a lot recently because of this guy running for President. Dickheads are the self-centered types that we have to cope with in life from time to time.

Follow this advice - Fall in Love deeply and Avoid Dickheads - and everything else will fall into place. You'll find the perfect job, become successful, or famous, whatever.

I'm actually being dead seriously with respect to my own career. Any and all of my successes are a function of falling in love and pursuing something of value and steering clear of jerks as much as possible, or the converse, surrounding myself with people of character and substance.

And my failures, which are as numerous and epic as my successes, have come from periods when I was not in love with what I was doing and when I was tolerating Dickheads and the unpleasant work environments they commanded.

If you love what you do it and it has value, you will not have to be advised to "work harder than the next guy" or "always go the extra distance". Those things are super important, but you'll do them anyway because your work excites and stimulates you, and you'll want to excel at it. It will not really be work at all.

Also, if you fall deeply in love with something of value, you won't really need to worry about a career strategy. This has been my experience. I've never really had a strategy. I've just followed my instincts.

So if you have a career plan, great. Consider yourself lucky. You have a start. But if you sitting are out there without one, as I was at your age, not to worry. It'll come along. You are all smart enough to do whatever to you set out to do. And let me use my oddball career to make those points

My career began at Santa Cruz when I took a pottery class for fun. I came here to be either a philosopher or a geologist, I wasn't sure. I had no training in art whatsoever. I became obsessed with ceramics. I fell deeply in love with making objects, with their form, their place in history, their capacity to bring beauty into our lives, the technology behind the craft. All of it.

This launched me on a ten-year career and took me around the world, teaching at colleges. I was working hard, but winging it much of the time. It was not a strategy. Early in this period I also took off a year from Santa Cruz after my sophomore year and went to Europe. I just needed a break from academics and wanted to screw around a little.

I worked under difficult artists in France and the UK. Got caught in a small pox epidemic. Had all of my possessions stolen. Hung out with foreign students who were far more worldly than me and I learned, for the first time, that I was not the center of the universe. Neither was California.

During this year I fell deeply in love with modern European architecture, art, and design—things you could not see in the US, except in the movies. There was no online video. This grounding gave me the inspiration and confidence to found both companies I am known for today, some 30 years later. But I had no idea of this at that time. It was not a strategy.

Another example of my dubious career planning skills came ten years into this art career. I took a professional U turn in my 30's and went to business school. I did not know what I was doing really, it was a strategy, but a flawed one. I was honestly just following the lead of an ex-girlfriend, a Santa Cruz classics major who got an MBA. She had a great job working for the LA Olympics Arts Committee, and I was envious.

I figured I would get an MBA and find a reasonable job in the Public Sector. The thought that my MBA studies would lead me to founding Design Within Reach, a high growth start up that would go PUBLIC was preposterous.

It worked because I had a deep grounding, love, and commitment to design. I could throw myself into this job entirely. So I did. And I got lucky. I would not be here speaking to you without having created this company. But there are a couple footnotes that might be relevant to you.

First: I was almost 50 when I found this gig. I had over twenty years of career twist and turns and highs and lows before this landed in my lap.

So don't worry if you don't know what you are passionate about right now. Take your sweet time to fall in love. It can happen anytime, when you are least expecting it.

Second: this career high followed a year that was my absolute career low.

The year prior to DWR I was in a dead end job, cynical about the business world. Dickheads ran the company. A close friend had died. It was a psychic low point. Life seemed short. I needed to find meaning. So I quit my job and took off, again for an entire year.

I fell in love with a design concept, wrote a business plan, found some investors, and away we go. Five years later I'm heading up a \$100M Business. It worked. Lucky.

So twice in my life I have had to take a full year off to find something of value, and each time it has always been the best thing I have done for my career. Knowing this, should I encourage you all to take a year off? That would be some pretty novel and irreverent commencement advice.

Of course it's not essential for most of you.

But for those of you who are cynical or pessimistic about your future, or drifting a bit, think about it seriously. Go get some life experience and adventures. Go fall in love with helping people less fortunate than yourself. Go work in a garden in Nepal. But don't go live under the safety net of your parents. You're not likely to fall in love with anything epic at home.

So, I'm a big fan of taking the time to go deeply into something you really care about and letting that lead you around. And this was in fact the value of the education I had here at Santa Cruz. I had great teachers who encouraged me to pursue my passion, to think independently and to see the world broadly.

OK. Enough about me. And I've done my job of complimenting my alma mater as I am getting paid the big bucks to do today. So what about you and the crazy working world you are about to enter?

It seems like the most exciting time to be heading out into the working world, ever. That may sound parental and patronizing, let me back it up. We have this amazing economy, and a job market especially open to young people in this part of the world. It's only been this way for the last fifteen years since the Internet came into being. Examples of gains made in diversity and gender start at the top and work their way down:

We elected and re-elected an Afro-American to be President, and it looks like we're about to elect a woman

The most influential design company in the world – Apple – is run by openly gay guy

Organizations and businesses today are run by all genders and ethnicities and ages

Everyday day it seems some arts organization, or Indy publisher, or café, music app, green tech firm, comes on to my radar.

Compare this to any other modern culture or economy and we stand out

For some perspective, go back just thirty years, when I was in school. Cool jobs were pretty hard to find. Companies like Coke, Walmart, and McDonalds were the Googles and Apples of the day, largely run by old white guys in suits. Most manufactures in the US were in decline and making stuff that was inferior to imports. Words like sustainability, entrepreneur, organic, design were not part of our working vocabulary. You couldn't even get a job as a barrista- espresso coffee had not yet come to the US. And it was super harder to find work in cool places. Our cities were in decline. Crack epidemics were making cities like New York unlivable. Companies were leaving San Francisco to set up in the business parks in the boonies.

Seems to me that we have turned a lot of this around. And that there are lot of great jobs, and cool work environments, to fall in love with. So go for it. And we need you out there. While we have this vibrant private sector economy, we also trail most of modern world badly in our commitment to most Public goods; Public Education, Public Health, Public Transit, Public Art, PUBLIC everything across the boards.

So I hope some of you, fall deeply in love with social causes that benefit those groups that don't do that well under our severe form of capitalism.

But whether you want take on social challenges to improve the world or pursue some shameless commercial venture – it seems like a great time to be shaking it up out there. Like everything that I'm saying today is just my point of view, could be wrong. But what I know for sure, what

has not changed, what is true for astrophysicists and artists alike, true forty years ago and true today, is this:

The people in your life, teachers, mentors, family and especially your friends will matter a lot more than your job, salary, or social status in the long run.

My close friends are the best measure of any success I had had. So treasure the friendships you have made here - it is a special one-time deal. As special as the education you received here. And they both just get better over time .

So thank you UCSC for what you gave me in friends and a framework for seeing the world. And thank you all for hearing me out.

Congratulations. Rock On Class of 2016