

Mid-Year Ceremony – Vicki Colvin – Remarks

INTRODUCTION

Thank you Vice-President Klawunn for that kind introduction and welcome graduates, families, friends, faculty, and alums to this celebration. Congratulations graduates! This is it – you are finished – you have a college degree.

About one in three people in this country reach this milestone, and sadly, fewer than 1 in ten people globally have the benefit of a college education. So thank your parents, thank your friends, thank whomever helped you on your way so that you could sit out there and suffer through my remarks on this your graduation day! You are incredibly talented and incredibly fortunate, and as much as this day is about celebration it is also about gratitude.

I have struggled with what to say to all of you – I am not an expert on life, and I'm not sure what such a diverse audience might relate to. My solution is to talk to myself, and hope that some of what I say strikes a chord more broadly. As an only child, I've had a lot of practice talking to myself. For example, when facing a big audacious transition or decision at your age, I often would pretend to converse with my much wiser, older 36-year old self. So today I'll do the reverse. I will go back in time to 1987, and ten minutes offer three thoughts relevant to the worries and concerns of my 22 year old self.

TRUST, BUT VERIFY, YOURSELF

My first message would be don't be terrified by all the big, important decisions you now have to make for yourself: your instincts are better than you think – trust yourself.

To be honest, I sort of hate this advice – trust yourself, trust your instincts. How do you know if you have an instinct? Does it tingle? And what if you have more than one? Let me tell you how I know when to trust my instincts.

This starts with a story of a fateful day in my life. It was 1986 around 6 am during my senior year at Stanford; I was driving my orange and black Ford Fiesta along highway 101 up San Francisco bay to take the chemistry GRE exam which is required for graduate school. As I was driving along a stretch of the bay right alongside the water, my car made a loud pop and filled with smoke and flames. I pulled over, and escaped no worse for the wear, and sat near the water watching my car burn while the sun rose over the perfectly calm bay.

Back then there was no cell phone, so I had some time to think while I waited for the tow truck. It dawned on me that all of my plans were now gone. I was to miss the last exam date that year, making me ineligible for graduate school. I knew working for a year would kill my applications for the very best schools, and my financial aid would not cover more time at school. So at that moment I had no plan, no job, absolutely no idea what the future would bring.

At first I was terrified, but then slowly I became quite calm and determined. I knew with certainty that I absolutely loved scientific research. I had not always trusted this instinct – both of my parents are scientists, and I questioned if it was me or them who liked science. So the last four years I had sampled tons of activities – writing, music, volunteering, teaching and somewhat grudgingly, scientific research. And there was no doubt in my mind I was happiest in the sub-basement or the chemistry building studying silicon surfaces. I had felt the exhilaration of seeing great data finally emerge from an experiment that took months to perfect, and the deep satisfaction of condensing the findings of 100 publications into a single page. I trusted my instinct that science was my career because I had forged that instinct from concrete, personal experience.

And when instincts are truly your own, they are powerful. People acting on their true motivations are very focused, very determined, and very creative – they become a ‘force of nature’. This is what enabled me to find my way to graduate school, a year and a two degrees later, even though my car blew up.

For the analytical among you, you know your instincts are true when two conditions are met: first, when you can identify how personal experience shaped them and second, if those instincts make you annoying and persistent. For everyone else, you'll know when to trust your instincts because they will give you no choice.

COMFORT IS OVER-RATED

Let's switch gears and talk even more about me. You might be surprised, or not, to learn I am quite uncomfortable right now. I would be vastly more at ease teaching you how to solve an acid/base problem, using a whiteboard, or even better giving you a powerpoint presentation. In fact, I had to exert a great deal of self-control to not use a powerpoint. What I have spent a lifetime developing – my scientific knowledge – matters not at all to whether the next ten minutes are in fact useful. All I have to offer is a deep commitment to stay to time and my willingness to do something I find uncomfortable.

I would guess that there is little about the next year that will feel comfortable to many of you. On a daily basis you may encounter unfamiliar people, places and be asked to do things you never did as a student at Brown. And that would be my second message: even though you may be nervous, awkward or downright nauseous please welcome any and all chances you will have to feel uncomfortable.

You actually have great preparation for whatever life throws at you. Brown has given you a liberal arts education – you know how to read, how to critique, how to write, how to analyze, how to research. To write this speech for example, I used my prodigious research skills and typed '*how to give a good graduation speech*' into Google– remember that I went to Stanford and not to Brown. You can tackle hard problems, and when you are feeling uncomfortable know that what you have learned here will see you through.

With practice, with thought, and with an open mind sometimes the uncomfortable will become a familiar and treasured experience.

And sometimes you try to do something that challenges you, and you know, it never gets easier. For me, there is a trail in Zion National Park called angel's landing which ends with a steep rocky path about 3 feet wide with 1500 foot drops on either side. After years, I still can't make it the full way up the trail. But, I now accept that having a fear of ledges is simply part of who I am, and honestly I wonder about the sanity of the people who have no fear on that trail.

Either way – whether the unfamiliar becomes comfortable or stays awkward – you will grow through your willingness to tolerate being uncomfortable. Such experiences will teach you about yourself and what you need to do with your life.

NOTICE YOUR LIFE

About twenty years ago, I had this conversation with a close friend about Einstein. We were trying to decide how many actual days of Einstein's life did he really have great thoughts. My friend, a theoretical physicist, argued that Einstein spent only about a hundred days in about the 20,000 he was alive having genius-level ideas – I think my friend was just rationalizing his own tendency to work maybe two hours a day.

But, it did get me thinking about what I call the fateful days of my life: days where I had a great insight, celebrated a substantial transition, or made a decision that changed the arc of my life. By my count, I have had about 45 fateful days since I was 22: the birth of my children, entering my first home, when I landed a major grant, and most recently the day I decided to come to Brown. When I was younger it seemed like these fateful days defined my life; I was always moving away or towards one of them.

The problem is that leaves nearly 10,000 days of ordinary living that goes unnoticed, and unremembered. My wish for my 22 year old self is that she would have recognized earlier all the living that happened between the important and dramatic decisions of her life: namely 99.9% of her life. Now every day I try to really remember a great moment – whether it's noticing the beauty in the crimson leaves of fall, or a connection made with a stranger while waiting in line for my morning coffee.

These in between times are not dramatic, or glamorous, but those are actually the days where you shape your life, where you doggedly move towards an important goal.

So, while I enthusiastically endorse any ambition to live an extraordinary life, I think that to do so you have to really notice and ultimately remember your ordinary days.

CONCLUSION

My time is just about over. Every professor summarizes so here's mine: thank everyone you can today, trust your 'real' instincts, be OK with being uncomfortable, and finally pay attention to each and every day of your life.

I know if this were actually a conversation with my 22 year old self, she would have been full of questions "Does my life make a difference to the world, or at least someone? Do I make any really bad decisions? Do I end up happy?" And, I would not have given her any real answer. The true joy in life is unfolding it, without knowing the future. The only reassurance I have to give to her, and to all of you, is that your families, your friends, and this university have prepared you for a wonderful journey towards a life of usefulness and reputation. I wish you the best as you discover that life.

Thank you.