

April 15, 2020

Dear Graduates of May 2020,

Congratulations on reaching a significant milestone in your life! I still remember the day that I graduated with my graduate degree, and for some reason, I remember this day more vividly than when I graduated from high-school or with my undergraduate degree. Maybe, this is because the work associated with the graduate degree was not “structured” and as a result, was so much challenging. And I have news! Life is very much the same; despite how much you try to bring structure and order to your life, the chances are that disorder will creep in (isn’t it ironic that the only constant in life is a *variable* named “change”?). I am sure at the beginning of this last semester, you thought that and the end, everything will be fine...But, think how much this world changed within a span of a couple of months. You are graduating at a time when the whole world is wrapped in fear about our health, the economy, and, honestly, our lives. When I was asked to write a few words to our graduating “graduate students”, I was not sure what to write – and I still am not. But then I realized, I have two sons of which one is a junior at Texas A&M and the other is a high school senior. So, an idea crept in: I should give you some “fatherly advice” this time, not as a lecturer but as a professor. These are ideas that I have gathered living over 50 years on the face of this earth. So, here you go.....

When you are navigating through life, this question will come at some point: What is Happiness? What you feel right now is a collective of a combination of a few positive primary feelings (peace, joy/happiness, satisfaction as a result of achievement) and negative (worry/fear, jealousy, sadness, inadequacy/despondency, loneliness, hate and hopelessness). All these feelings coexist in our minds and are expressed in various degrees as results of different triggers. So, how are you to feel some kind of contentment among all the madness that is going around you? The answer is “choice”. With some practice, you can choose what feeling you want to “allow” at any given moment - what you feed more will overtake the other!

Your mind always goes from order to disorder via a process called entropy. To keep your mind in order, you have to constantly input work into the system (brain). Unfortunately, entropy is a natural process and if you ignore it, you inadvertently have chosen to give in to disorder (like ice), an ordered low entropy state becoming disordered water the moment you unplug the refrigerator. So, in order to keep your mind "ordered", you have to keep inputting “positive energy”.

The level of happiness and fulfillment in our mind is like water in a pot with a bunch of holes. Inflow is the positive energy by various actions (setting and achieving goals, maintaining physical and emotional health, relationships, financial health etc.). Holes are processes and actions that drain energy like entropy, and negative emotions. The only way to keep the water level constant (i.e., a feeling of peace and contentment) is to keep working on inputting positive energy. The moment you stop adding positivity, your fulfillment level starts to decline (succumbing to the natural depletion process), sometimes to levels so low that it can lead to anxiety, panic, and even depression. And, the lower the fulfillment level, the faster (and harder) you will have to input positive actions to get back to normalcy. The principle of entropy also explains why it is next to impossible to (and the futility of trying to) sustain elevated levels of happiness.

Success and Achievement: So, what is success? I have been reading about this a lot and the only true definition that I could agree on is “reaching your full potential”.

Early life is all about laying a strong foundation. Inarguably, those who succeed later in life are those who got this message early and acted upon it. But also realize that laying this foundation (education) is boring, cumbersome and painful (just like laying the foundation is the messiest part of building a house). When you start clearing the field, you don't see it. But foundation is the most essential element for success. Remember, if you wait to lay your foundation until later in life (i.e. while enjoying youth), you will still have to do it later (after you come to your senses) and it is going to be even more painful (seeing others who were at the same level with you surpassing you and reaping the fruits while you are still struggling). The feeling of achievement is very real, as well as the voice in your head, telling you that you did not realize your true potential. So, bite the bullet and lay that strong foundation!

So what career should you choose? Find a career that challenges you, that inspires you and serves some good to the community while giving you a good return. In terms of return, how do you make more money? It is straightforward - your income will be proportional to the value that you bring to the enterprise! If your colleague is making more money than you, chances are, he/she is bringing more value to that enterprise/marketplace than you. The truth of any career is that “you will have to work damn hard”, and regardless of your career choice, there will be elements that you will love and those that you will hate! But finding a career that has more tasks that you enjoy will be a blessing! And yes, there are many elements in our careers that are competitive, and that is a fact of life! So, use your time wisely and put your time and effort on high return activities.

In almost any career, there will be goals that you will have to fulfill with timestamps attached. The area where most fail in achieving your goals is in execution! We are good at making plans, we know what needs to be done, and even how to do it. But we fail miserably when it is time for execution. So, keep an eye on execution! And the easiest way to execute is by habitualization (put the task(s) in a calendar and do it as a habit - whether you feel it or not). So how can you be successful in whatever career you choose? It is simple, be damn good at it!

Relationships: Contrary to the popularized notion that people do not think about you but themselves, the truth is that people, especially those who know you and close to you, watch, compare, and think about you all the time (yeah, while also thinking about themselves). So, be a genuine role model (internally and externally). However remember that, only a few will be there to defend you in your absence – and those are your true friends!

And yes, the old cliché is true, "it is not what you know, it is who you know".

But also remember, jealousy is everywhere! It comes to you from others in various forms, shapes and colors. If you are more successful, the jabs will come to you more fervently and sometimes more subtly. So, be mindful and prepared.

So, what is my final message? Life is short and messy, but learn to enjoy it!

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