

Graduation Address Arizona Charter Academy May 15, 2015  
Mayor Wolcott FINAL

First of all.....congratulations! You have achieved one of the most fundamental building blocks of a successful adulthood, your high school diploma. You have also completed four of life's most interesting years. For better or for worse...and I have a feeling for most of you it is a little bit of both....you will be talking about and referring to your high school days for the rest of your life.

As excited as you are by what's happening today...I know there is sadness, too. You will be saying goodbye to a lot of people tonight who have been very important to you...without knowing when or if you will see each other again. And you have that funny feeling that even if you do meet again...things won't be the same.

Well, you are right about that. Your high school days will never be repeated and you can't recreate them. I hope you had a good time, and I wish you fond memories.

If you have your plans all made and a career path lined up, good for you and best of luck. We are all pulling for you.

But I imagine most of you are wondering, "What do I do now?" Heck, you might be wondering,"What do I do tomorrow morning?"

First of all, it's OK not to know. Life is long, and it's a journey. If you had told me on my high school graduation day in Minnesota

that tonight I would be delivering a commencement speech to the class of 2013 in Arizona as the Mayor of Surprise, well, let's just say I wouldn't have been able to imagine how that could possibly happen. But look! Here we are together tonight...and there is nowhere I would rather be!

Life's funny that way. Think of what your life was like four years ago. Maybe you couldn't imagine you would be at this place, with these people, tonight. But I know there is nowhere you would rather be, either!

So if you aren't too sure about tomorrow morning, don't worry too much. As you work things through, a good place to start is by being sure of what you don't want to do.

If the magic of numbers and the satisfaction of solving problems very accurately leaves you cold, then don't study accounting or engineering. That's a decision. That's a step forward.

If you think Japan or Italy sound like interesting places you want to learn more about, find out how a young person can get there

and what they might do....maybe you will get a job teaching English while you study Italian or Japanese.

You may end up like James Burke, one of the most respected science journalists in the world. It's a long story how he wound up like that...but he started by moving to Italy when he was young because he wanted to learn Italian. One thing tends to lead to another...and another...and another.

You may have heard Sofia Vergara, one of the most successful people in entertainment, recently say she never planned anything. She knew she wanted to perform, so she went where the jobs were, worked hard and kept her options open. But she didn't know what was going to happen next. No one does.

Maybe you love to play the blues so you move to Atlanta and get a band together and start playing clubs. Who knows what will happen? Maybe something. Maybe nothing. That's what John Mayer did. It worked out for him.

But maybe you aren't sure what interests you. Try not to let that worry you, either. I know of a young high school graduate from Hawaii who moved to Los Angeles, to a cheap apartment with roommates, with no idea what was next for him. It was two years before he realized he was interested in civic affairs. Two

long years. He was 20 before he stood up in front of a group and made a speech for the first time. You've heard of him, too. His name is Barack Obama.

One thing leads to another. But nothing, absolutely nothing will happen if you don't start trying things out.

This "not knowing" bothers some people, but it shouldn't. That's life. As the computer people say, it's not a bug, it's a feature!

So start figuring out what interests you. Here is a hint: most people are good at what they like, and like what they are good at. From there things will more or less take care of themselves.

Life is long but your youth is not, so don't waste it living someone else's idea of who you are. You have an inner voice and you know you do, so listen to it. It is the only authentic voice you will ever hear from now on.

I bet sometimes you have sought guidance in a tough situation by asking yourself what someone you really admire would do. After a while, you realize what you are really asking is what YOUR BEST SELF would do. You start to tune in to your authentic inner voice.

When you hear people say follow your heart and your intuition, realize that isn't bad advice, but no matter what, you will still probably have to get up in the morning, go to work and pay the bills. There is no escaping that, so accept it; embrace it. Your inner voice will help you, in its own good time.

So while you are making certain you can make a buck, also be sure you are doing something you enjoy doing at least 50% of the time. Be sure you are with people you like to be around and who enjoy your company. Otherwise....what's the point?

On that subject...I know a lot of your friends, the people you enjoy being around, are here tonight. Some you probably didn't even know a year or two ago.

Most friends will come and go, but there are always a few you should hold on to, no matter what. Now here is something that may surprise you: this takes work. You have to work to bridge the gaps in geography as you move apart, in lifestyles as you mature and change. But it is worth the effort. One thing you find out as you get a little older....you need the people who remember you when you were young. Your 10 year reunion, then your 20 year reunion, will be here sooner than you think.

Most of you have family here tonight. You are at a point in your life when you start to look at your family in a new way. Change is

coming, and your relationship with them will be among those changes. You may be crazy about your family, or they may be driving you crazy, or maybe both, but no one will love you or stick with you longer, decade after decade, than your family. Please don't forget that.

You may be feeling some anxiety, even fear, about the future. That officially makes you normal! Fear is the Great Preventer for us all. We fear failure, change, rejection, fear that we aren't good enough, even fear that we may be very good, perhaps even great.

No one can help you very much with fear. You have to find a way to deal with it and it's complicated.

I am not talking about rational fear. You know what that is. It's rational to be afraid of a rattlesnake or a tornado.

I mean irrational fear, that ghost that lives only in your mind and limits you or makes you give up a dream. It will rob you of the joy and excitement of an adventure or a new experience. That is a very real and very negative effect. Don't be 30 and going to a job you hate and looking in the mirror and saying "I should have....fill in the blank." Find out now, and don't be afraid.

Here is something else that might surprise you. You will get used to failure. You can't live without failing at something, unless you are so careful that you take no chances at all, and what kind of life is that?

We all know lots of stories about people who failed and went on to achieve great things. You hear those stories all the time. But here is the thing they never tell you. Those people...Barack Obama who lost his first election, Oprah who was fired from her first job as a TV anchor, Lincoln who was washed up after one term in Congress....those people had no idea that in the end, they would succeed. There was nothing inevitable about it at all. It just looks that way to us, because we can see how the story ended. But they had to face their failures, and find the courage to carry on. You will have to do that, too.

Are you familiar with what Steve Jobs said to students at Stanford a few years ago? He said: "You can't connect the dots of your life looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. What seems obvious in retrospect is not so obvious at the time. The future is never certain. So you have to trust. You have to trust that somehow the dots will connect in your future.

You have to trust in something... your gut, your faith, your destiny, whatever.”

He actually did say “whatever” at the end there. I loved that!

What people like Jobs learned is that failure is a temporary condition. Only giving up makes failure permanent. There is a Japanese proverb: if you fall seven times, get up eight times.

A minute ago I said life is long. But you always hear people say life is short. So which is it? They are both true. Is that a contradiction? Yes, it is. Life is full of them.

Life is long in the sense that you have time to experiment. If you need a few months or years to sort things out...well, take the time. You can change your mind!

In the work place, in the adult world, the difference between a sharp 22-year-old with a college degree and a sharp 26-year-old with a college degree is basically nothing. They are both eager, qualified young people.

So use these years to find out more about you and where you think you might fit. That way you have confidence in your choices, and you are comfortable in your own skin. I know you can tell the difference between people who are confident and comfortable, and people who are not. There is a very noticeable difference, and over the course of a lifetime, that feeling will be very important to your ability to enjoy your life. So don't cheat yourself.

Enjoy being young. Believe me, in ten or twenty years, when you look back at your high school photos, it is going to hit you how much possibility these days present to you, and how good looking you really are. I think it's impossible, but I will ask you anyway...try to realize that right now.

You are all young and beautiful and in great shape. So what do you think would happen if you and I were to face off in dodge ball? Who would win?

The answer is: it depends!

If we each throw the ball only once, I wouldn't bet against me.

But if the game is longer and harder, you distinguish yourself from me; your better reflexes become obvious. You win.

So if you are serious about your education, don't pick where you can't stand out from someone who has less talent than you.

Getting good grades and having a wonderful time doesn't distinguish you from everyone else if you don't play a hard game.

What I am saying is....don't be afraid of the hard stuff. Finance, physics, computer programming. Find out what it's like to struggle and how satisfying it is to achieve and what it's like to fail once or twice. You will get a real education, and in the end, the world will know you didn't take the easy way. That says a lot about you.

And so....off you go to scatter to the winds. There is a lot of wisdom in the world. I hope you will be patient with us adults, who like to share with you what we think we have learned. We learned it the hard way, and sometimes we are afraid that it is really all we have to offer you.

Here's something from a Roman writer, Seneca, who said it more than 2000 years ago. Life is like a story...it is not how long it is, it

is how good it is, that really matters. Tonight and from now on, you are the authors of your lives. Make the story a good one!

###