

Life: The Delicate Balance Between Planning and Control

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Good morning Juniata students, faculty, parents, relatives, friends - and everyone else who came here today to celebrate this momentous day with all of you. I'd like to give a special shout out to my family who are all here today –including my parents, my in-laws and my husband (who are also Juniata grads), but especially to all three of my children, who I just assume immediately stopped paying attention the moment they heard my voice over the speakers. My hope is that, at least for the next few minutes, I can keep you all engaged in a way that I clearly am unable to do in my own house.

It is an incredible honor that you asked me to come and speak today, on what is such an important step in your journey through life. Over the past few months, I've thought long and hard about what I wanted to say to all of you, I wanted to find something that would be relevant, meaningful, and that drew insight from what my journey in life has been since I was sitting where all of you are today. As I started thinking through what I would focus on in this speech, the first thing I looked back to for inspiration was the person who had the honor of speaking at my Juniata graduation back in 2001. My hope was that I could take some helpful nuggets from this person's speech to get my creative juices flowing. But, my commencement speaker was a man named Bill Phillips, who some of you may know better as Dr. William D. Phillips, 1997 Nobel Prize Winner in Physics. Now, I know that a lot of you probably like, and maybe even love Netflix, which is where I've spent the bulk of my career. But I, in fact, have never won a Nobel Prize. And while Dr. Phillip's speech was incredible and inspiring, it seemed very audacious for me to start there for any inspiration.

Step two for me was to ask my friends for advice. Can you all guess what every single person I asked suggested to me? They said to me "Oh! You should have Chat GPT write it for you!" I'm actually not kidding when I say that everyone I talked to threw out that idea like it was the first time anyone had come up with it. And I'm not going to lie - it was one of the first ideas that came to my mind, too. Then I quickly realized that, even though I did not pay any tuition for the honorary degree that I just received, most of you that are graduating today paid really good money for these amazing Juniata degrees, so - in

the end - that approach did not feel great to me; and it definitely wouldn't be giving any of you, or your parents, or this day, the proper amount of respect you all deserve.

But, that doesn't mean that I still didn't tinker around with it just to see what it would give me. I've experimented with these tools enough to know that what I choose to input into them will generate different, interesting and unexpected outputs on a daily, and even sometimes minute-to-minute basis. For instance, I asked my friendly AI tool: "What is the best piece of advice to give to students during a commencement speech"? Its answer to me was: "Embrace Lifelong Learning." This was not a bad suggestion - predictable, but it makes sense and is generally good advice. I then asked it the same question again, and it told me: tell them to "Build Valuable Connections." The third time I asked, I added "for students at a small liberal arts college," it suggested: "Don't fear Uncertainty." I liked this one too, but it was still somewhat generic, and I felt like there was still a bit of a theme here. Finally, the fourth time I asked it, I added in a "but make it funny," and now, its advice was that I should tell you all to "save your money - you'll need it to pay off your student loans." This last one was funny (though still true), but it definitely reinforced for me that I made the right choice to not use this tool to write this entire speech.

The good news about this exercise was that, instead of being a total waste of time, it actually became the inspiration for the message that I wanted to convey to you all today, which is this: life, generally (and one's career path, specifically), is a delicate balance between planning and control and the unexpected twists and turns and obstacles and opportunities that it invariably will throw your way. And while it is incredibly important to put in the effort to control the things you can - let's call these the "inputs," it is also important to understand and recognize that the world and all of the people you will meet and the circumstances in which you will find yourselves, are taking all of those very well controlled inputs and plans that you have, and they will sometimes offer you up some unpredictable results. And it is not only important to understand and recognize this, but to be open to these unexpected outputs.

Because unpredictability is not always a negative thing - it just means that the opportunities or challenges that you are presented with are different than what you may have planned for or anticipated. If you remain open to embracing the unknown with an open heart and a flexible mind, it can lead to opportunities you never even considered in your careful planning.

It is also worth noting that, just because the outputs can frequently be unpredictable, that does not mean that you should relinquish all control and just let things happen to you. As with my AI "test" in preparation for this speech, the quality of the inputs does generally affect the quality of the results, even though you can never be 100% certain of what you will get. So, while it is important to remain open to the unexpected, you absolutely need to put in the work on the front end to determine what you want the inputs of your life to be. And, when I am talking about "inputs", I am not just talking about the mechanics of mapping out your 5, 10 or 20 year plan for your career - what you want to do and by when,

and how you want to get there. I am also talking about the “how” of these inputs: how you show up on a daily basis, how much effort you put into things, how you treat people you encounter, and how you choose to react to circumstances. The control of these quality inputs into every circumstance of your life are massively important - because while they may not always directly result in the outcome you expect, they are a very important factor that will drive the quality of how the world will react to you in a given situation.

I think about these principles frequently when reflecting on my own career path. When I was in law school and considering what area of law I wanted to pursue, I was initially convinced that I would practice bankruptcy law - so much so, that I even clerked for a federal bankruptcy judge after my first summer. The idea of working in entertainment was not on my radar, let alone the prospect of working in streaming television, which was not even a thing that existed in the world at that point in time. When I started at a firm after graduation, I started to work on bankruptcy matters (as I had planned), but because that practice group was part of the larger Corporate and Finance practice, I was offered the opportunity to take on some broader work within that team, which I took. I eventually realized through raising my hand for these opportunities, that working on complex M&A transactions was way more appealing to me than bankruptcy work. Eventually, becoming a generalist in Corporate/M&A practice opened the door for me to an opportunity at Comcast at the point in time when they were starting to license television for streaming. I spent a lot of time over the next few years working on some intense negotiations with a lot of very colorful personalities, but was fortunate enough to have some really great mentors who set some positive examples of being tough and smart, while still being respectful towards our counterparts when we were across the table in some very tense situations. I learned a lot from them, and I tried to leverage this approach in my own negotiations over the next couple years - including a particularly long and protracted negotiation with Disney, where tensions were very high, and where maintaining that level of respect and patience was particularly challenging at times. Fast forward to a few years later, when a new opportunity at Netflix came calling. It turns out that the person who ended up giving a backdoor reference to Netflix about me (and recommended that they hire me) was one of the people who sat across the table from me during that Disney negotiation. I often think about how different my life could be now if I had just not put in the effort to show up in the way that I did during that particular deal, or if I had been less patient and respectful with some of my counterparts who were admittedly driving me crazy at times. Now, one could take away a very selfish lesson from this - specifically, that the main reason you should put in the effort and always be respectful to others is, because in the end, it is all about what it can do for you. But honestly - if that’s what it takes to get you to think twice about the effort that you put into the quality of your inputs and how you show up to situations and other people, I still think that’s great.

You probably already all realize this, but: there may be no better institution than Juniata to prepare you to heed this advice. The ability to create a highly personalized POE enables you to tailor and prepare what you are putting into this upfront planning in the most personalized manner possible. And even if you are leaving here today questioning where ultimately your degree will take you, I know that Juniata (and your liberal arts education that has taught you to ask questions and be open to considering new points of view) has trained you to be agile and adapt to whatever you may encounter.

Now that I've taken you through my advice on controlling the inputs/being open to the various outputs, it seems like our AI friend was not that far off base when I originally asked it for what themes I should cover : (1) "Embrace Lifelong Learning," "Build Valuable Connection" (i.e., inputs) (2) and "Don't Fear Uncertainty" (i.e., outputs and being open to what life may throw at you). "Save Your Money" doesn't really fit neatly into one of these buckets, but I'll give it partial credit for being good advice, generally.

Since that was pretty solid work, I thought: why not give this AI chatbot a chance to send you all off. To wrap things up, I asked the tool to write me a "conclusion paragraph for a commencement speech at Juniata College."

And here it is: "As we stand on the precipice of a new chapter, let us carry forward the spirit of Juniata College, a spirit of curiosity, resilience, and community. As Juniata Eagles, we have soared above challenges, and now, we fly towards new horizons. Remember, wherever your journey takes you, you carry the legacy of this special place within you—nurtured by friendships, knowledge, and experiences that will illuminate your path. Congratulations to each one of you, poised to shape the world, grounded in values, and ready to soar. Here's to new beginnings, endless possibilities, and the enduring bond of the Juniata family. Fly high, and make your mark!"

Thank you so much for inviting me here to speak to you today - and a huge congratulations to all of you!