

Commencement Address, Colgate University, May 17, 1998

Gov. George E. Pataki, "The Mystery of Success."

In preparing tonight's address I was reminded of something Charles Dickens said in 1842, after coming to America to observe the workings of Congress.

He attended numerous sessions, whereby representative after representative would get up and speak. And he noted that, in the hallway after each session, the question was never "What did he say," but rather "How long did he speak."

I don't want that to be an issue here today, so I will provide you with the answer up front: 19 minutes. And to demonstrate my commitment to keeping that pledge, I hereby give the State Troopers here today the following command:

If I am still speaking 19 minutes from now, forget that I am Governor and take swift and decisive action.

As a father of four, I cannot begin without a special word to the parents here today.

Last year, my oldest daughter, Emily, left home for college. For me, it was a time of mixed emotions. More than anything else, I was proud -- proud that all of those long nights she spent up in her room doing homework and studying for tests had finally paid off. But I also dreaded the fact that she was leaving home.

And as I prepared today's remarks, I thought about how I felt then -- and how you must be feeling right now. I know this is their moment -- but I also know that your love and guidance over the years is what made it possible.

From one proud parent to another, I want to congratulate you on a job well done.

And, of course, I want to congratulate Colgate's graduating Class of '98.

In just a few short years, you've undergone a great evolution. Yesterday, the administration here called you "Colgate students." Today, they are calling you "Colgate alumni." Tomorrow, they'll be calling you for contributions.

It's customary in commencement addresses to give wise advice about how to succeed in the
-- quote unquote -- "real world."

So a few months ago, I asked the administrators here to send me copies of the campus newspaper each week, hoping it would give me insight into what kind of advice you might need.

And it did. In the March 27th issue, four students were asked to complete this sentence:

“Dating at Colgate is like...” blank.

A member of this class -- who is sitting in this auditorium — responded by saying that “Dating at Colgate is like walking on the moon. I’ve never done it.”

I know I’m supposed to giving advice here today... but Kurt Mueller, unfortunately there are some things you have to learn for yourself.

But on the subject of the “real world” let me say this: The “real world” you are about to enter is no more difficult, and no more demanding, than the world you’ve been living in for the past four years.

The rules for success or failure don’t suddenly change when you walk off this campus.

Just as it was hard work and perseverance that earned you a degree from Colgate, hard work and perseverance are the only values that you will need to succeed in your next endeavor — whether you’re going off to graduate school or launching a career.

You came to Colgate because you believed -- and had every reason to believe -- that a degree from this prestigious university would open up a world of opportunities to you and ultimately lead to a life of success.

The greatest challenge you face today is defining, to your own heart’s content, what it means to be successful.

From my own experience, I can tell you that hard work usually leads to success, but success -- or rather, society’s interpretation of success -- doesn’t necessarily lead to happiness.

Look up the word success in ten different dictionaries and you will get ten different definitions.

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines success as -- quote — “The gaining of wealth, fame, etc.” End quote.

If that definition is correct, what word should we use to describe the men and women who pour their hearts into their careers... who devote their entire lives to raising bright and honest children... who give generously to their community and live model lives?

Are we to conclude that they are good and decent people, but not successful people?

If a person devotes her entire life to preserving the environment — and she does it well, but does it quietly, and for little pay -- is she any less successful than a corporate CEO who makes millions of dollars and appears on the cover of Forbes?

Not by my standards — and, I hope, not by yours.

To me, success is merely the process of fulfilling your own hopes and dreams -- not by the standards set by society -- but by the standards set by you.

There is no uniform definition for success because success comes from within.

You are the only one who can determine whether or not the path you choose in life leads to happiness and success.

And you'll notice that I put the word "happiness" before "success." As you begin making decisions about your life and your careers, you would be wise to do the same.

I can almost hear your parents whispering to one another...

"Did the Governor of New York just tell our kid to choose the path that leads to fun over the one that leads to a paycheck?"

That's the last thing I'm suggesting.

I'm merely pointing that you can't truly be successful unless you are engaged in a pursuit that is full of purpose and has personal significance.

Berry Gordy -- the former President of Motown Records who made a career out of turning ordinary people into superstars -- had an interesting perspective on this subject.

Here's what he said:

"One of the biggest problems in being an entrepreneur is the problem of happiness after success. Many people say: 'Hey, give me success and I'll worry about the happiness afterwards.' Unfortunately, it doesn't happen that way. You have to consider happiness before you consider success. Many people, in their rise to success, are so busy running to the top, stepping on their competitors, and even stepping on their friends and loved ones, that when they get to the top, they look around and discover that they are extremely lonely and unhappy. And they'll ask me, 'Where did I go wrong?' My answer has always been: Probably at the beginning."

The happiest and most successful people I know are the ones who devote their lives to causes they truly believe in -- who pour their hearts into their work -- and view that work, not so much as a job one reports to, but as a calling one fulfills.

For me, happiness and success meant giving something back to a state that has provided me and my family with a lifetime of opportunities and memories.

And I believe that, for all of us, success carries with it the obligation of giving something back to the society that has allowed us to prosper.

But, again, how you do that should be based on your values and principles -- not someone else's.

Most politicians would tell you that giving something back to society means devoting part of your lives to public service. But such generic advice ignores the fact that an undertaking is only as noble as the intentions behind it.

A doctor who routinely spends her own time counseling patients — not because she has to, but out of the goodness of her heart -- is doing a wonderful public service.

The same is true of the little league coach who spends two hours each day after work teaching children valuable lessons about baseball and life.

And so, I would simply encourage you to follow the path of your own choosing -- based on your own set of beliefs, principles and values -- and try to touch as many lives along the way.

If it is personally rewarding, if it is devoted to good, if it has the blessing of your heart, the best thing you can do is spring into action.

The worst thing you can do — as Theodore Roosevelt once said -- is nothing. Don't waste valuable time planning, pausing, pondering and procrastinating.

Your parents are whispering again: "Did he just tell our kid to leap without looking."

By all means, look -- but don't stare. Don't stand idle, longing for the perfect opportunity. Don't question your ability to get the job done. Don't sell yourself short by striving for less than what you're capable of achieving. And by all means, don't let the fear of taking the wrong step prevent you from taking any steps at all.

The greatest achievers are those who walk with purpose -- who march boldly in the direction of their dreams -- fall flat on their face -- then get back up and keep on walking.

Stumbling is not a bad thing. It means that you were on the move, instead of sitting down doing nothing.

When setbacks occur, view them as experiences to learn from rather than failures to brood over.

This is important to remember because -- aside from apathy and idleness -- the greatest threat to success and personal fulfillment is the fear of failure. It robs even the brightest and best educated people of their boldness, their creativity and their ability to achieve their dreams.

Avoiding failure is easy. All you have to do is set the bar so low that there's no possibility of not clearing it. But you'll never impress anyone that way. And worse,

you'll never know how high you could have soared.

In everything you do, assert yourself, take the initiative, engage in courageous experimentation.

If you do that, success will take care of itself.

And on that note, I'd like to leave you with some words from Theodore Roosevelt, whose philosophy on what he referred to as the "strenuous life" has been so inspiring to me.

He said: "The country needs and -- unless I mistake its temper, the country demands -- bold, persistent, experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."

Believe in yourself. Believe in your dreams. Act on those dreams. And there is absolutely nothing you cannot achieve.

[Stop and look towards the back row -- uniformed trooper with hand on holster walking forward]

Apparently, a State Trooper has every intention of obeying the command I gave him earlier. He just looked at his watch, and now he appears to be moving into position -- presumably to get a good shot.

The expression "aim high" is used often in commencement speeches, but I have purposely avoided saying that here tonight, because I was afraid the Trooper might take it as a direct order.

And so, let me close with my sincere and heartfelt congratulations to all of you on the first great step in a lifetime of achievement.

Graduates, there is no height that cannot be scaled by those who believe in themselves and what they are doing. Remember that, and not only will you go far, you will soar beyond the boundaries of even your own expectations.

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