

Keynote Speech by Autar Kaw at the USF College of Engineering Fall 2012 Ring Ceremony

Thank you, Professor Wiencek for that kind introduction. Thank you Professor Perez, faculty and staff, alumni of USF, family and friends of the graduates of the Class of 2012.

I am honored to be here with you today during the ring ceremony. Graduates, I want to congratulate you for reaching this milestone and I am sure that the journey to this auspicious day has been worth it.

What you have gone thru is no different from a boot camp. In the boot camp for Navy Seals, the sergeant may ask a recruit to give him 50 pushups at a moment's notice, but will the recruit ever be expected to do any pushups in the middle of a rescue operation. No, but that is part of how they get the Navy Seals ready for action. Those long projects, 50-question problem sets, weekly quizzes, working in a group you did not like, long days and nights in the fish bowl - they were all to get you ready for your professional and personal life.

And at the end of the boot camp for Navy Seals, there is something called Hell week where recruits only get a few hours of sleep and are commanded to do all kinds of timed runs; we at USF also have Hell week – we just call it final exam week.

When Professor Perez invited me to give the keynote speech, I accepted immediately. Soon after saying yes, I started to get anxious and thought what kind of trouble have I gotten myself into.

I consider myself to be a man with flaws, not a man of advice. I see many of my colleagues and graduates nodding their head in agreement. But graduates, as your mom must have said to you at least once in your childhood, “Do what the preacher says, not what the preacher does.” So here starts my sermon.

I googled “commencement speeches” to find out what other speakers have said to graduating classes, and that is when I started to wonder what will it be that I can say which is different and yet profound. So, I went to my other source, not Wikipedia, but what you know as Facebook. Half of my friends on Facebook are current and former USF students, and I asked them what they would have liked to hear at their ring ceremony. I was pleasantly surprised by their comments –

including – live below your means, open a Roth IRA, the degree is just a stepping stone, spend time with family and friends, but then there were these gems of advice.

When you start looking for your future spouse, please spend more time on that pursuit than you did for doing your homework for Drs. Pyrtle, Rahman, and Nohra. Another one told me that if you are going to look for a trophy spouse, make sure that the trophy is for first place. Yet another one wanted to wish your life to be as wonderful as your Facebook status updates.

Some people believe that engineers can practice without good communication skills. I have even found some engineers pride themselves in not being good communicators. In fact, they point out their lack of communication as being the reason they went into engineering. I am here to say that your oral and written communications will define your professional and personal lives. Talk about personal lives, just ask your parents what the word “fine” can mean.

As you must know that your degree is accredited by an agency named ABET which has a list of 11 competencies that you are supposed to have. In a rigorous study published in Journal of Engineering Education about which competencies are important for professional practice for engineers, undergraduate alumni consistently rated communication in the top cluster in addition to teamwork, data analysis, and problem solving. This advice about communication is coming from me who made all A's and B's in his undergraduate degree except for 3 C's. These 3 C's were in English 101, English 102 and Technical Writing. And I paid a heavy penalty for not taking my written communication seriously. But it can be overcome, as otherwise I would not have been invited here today to speak to you. Just do not wait as long as I did!

Some people will tell you that money is not important. Poverty is glamorized only in Bollywood movies and as the author of the Harry Potter series JK Rowling said, “Poverty entails fear and stress and sometimes depression. It meets a thousand petty humiliations and hardships. Climbing out of poverty by your own efforts that is something on which to pride yourself but poverty itself is romanticized by fools.” Now, you do not have to go as far as singer Ke\$ha by putting a dollar sign in your name, while single-handedly creating a shortage of glitter and my favorite drink Jack.

The only people who will tell you that money is not important are the ones who have the money. It is not because they do not want you to have the money, but it is because their basic needs are met and they are figuring how to get their higher needs met. Another group of people who will tell you that money is not important are the ones who confuse “money is not important” with “money is not the only thing”. Of course, there are more important things than money like your health, family and friends.

Some people will advise you to live in the moment. Neuroscientists are finding that it is impossible to do so. Our brains are made to use past decisions to guide future behavior. People suggest “living in the moment” for two reasons. First is because we tend to regret our past and worry about the future; instead, we should learn from the past and plan for the future. Second is where they confuse - “living in the moment” to “being in the zone”, that is the feeling we get when we lose track of time and our surroundings in what we are pursuing.

So, how can we put ourselves to be “in the zone” most of the time at home and work. For that, I will defer to Daniel Pink who wrote the book “Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us”. His book based on many scientific studies examines the trinity of motivation – autonomy, mastery and purpose. Autonomy is the craving to be self-directed and this is practiced in companies as well; you do not have to be self-employed to be autonomous. Mastery is where you can keep on becoming better and better in what you love to do. And purpose is where your contribution is not just to yourself and your family to earn a paycheck but to be part of something bigger than who you are.

And this concept of being a part of something bigger than yourself is the last but most important part I want to talk to you about. As much as I have gone dangerously inward during my troubling times and there have been a fair share of such times and there will be more, I have found that reaching out to other people at work, at home and in the community is what takes me out of my doldrums. Even Pitbull in his new album called Global Warming says, “It ain’t greedy when you are sharing”. I will not tell you what follows that line of lyrics as that will defeat the point I am trying to make.

The number one need of a human being is predictability, not to be confused with boredom of doing the same thing day in and day out. While the level of this predictability is low for most of us, we certainly can help to make life a little more predictable for others. Keep your promises, give a helping hand without being

asked, say thank you to those who help you, be there for your friends in need just by listening or treating them to an overpriced venti latte at Starbucks, and renew some of the relationships you have put on the back burner.

So, once more, congratulations graduates. Today is your day. Tonight is your night. Tonight is going to be a good night. And as Mary K Blige would say, "I told you leave your situations at the door, so grab somebody and get your butt on the dance floor". And when you do get on the dance floor, as your last homework assignment for extra credit, do it Gangnam style.