

Rick Eigenbrod: The Commencement Address He Never Gave

NOW WHAT?

I would like to thank the University and the Class of 2005 for the invitation to join this celebration and let me add my congratulations to the graduates and their families on the successful completion of your course of study.

“Now what?”

I realize that question may seem a bit abrupt, maybe a tad premature but this gathering for the conferring of degrees is traditionally and I believe appropriately called commencement. It's a celebration of what is to begin even as your pursuit of a degree and your time at the University ends. In fact I would bet some of you have been living with this question for some time. Some brought it with them today and will take it home tonight. 'Now what' is the twin of I did it—the shadow of success. There is no success without succession. There is: “No, I did it” without “Now what.”

Your flattering invitation may have been extended because we share knowledge of something important. Success. You know a lot about getting what you want. I know a lot about what happens when you do. Traditionally the Commencement speaker invites and exhorts the graduates to even greater success in the future--to capture it early and often.

I would like to talk about the 'Now what' that goes un-discussed and un-noticed. I don't want to talk about what you need to do for success in life, but what success in life does to you. I know what you are thinking—we all know what success does to us and it's all good.

But let me ask you: today, right now what is the truth about success as you know it. And please, modesty aside, you are successful. You have realized one of the goals that our society sees as valuable and valued. You, your parents, your teachers, this university have expended enormous effort to help you have a seat at this table. Is it what you imagined, were told it would be? How close is the reality to the fantasy? How does your true story of success compare to the ones you were told?

Earlier I said what I know about is what happens when you get what you want. In a sense I know about the whole story of success not just the abridged version that goes like this: “...and they lived happily ever after.” I learned what I know from people in business and the professions who must have taken their commencement speakers' words to heart because they have accomplished on a scale that you and I and our society hopes we will match. In the spirit of preparing you for one of the most challenging, rewarding, perhaps even dangerous events in life--getting what you want. I would like to share some of what they taught me taken from their true stories of having success.

Getting what you want, the most basic and broad definition of success, always, always creates change in the most basic components of our lives. Success changes the structure that are our goals and the means we use to pursue them. Success changes our current system of meaning and value. Success changes how we and others see us. In short, success always creates a change in our current system of structure, meaning and identity.

The bigger the achievement, the faster it comes, the earlier in life it comes, the more unexpectedly it comes, the bigger the change. Has anyone ever told you that? Think that may be true for them? And I know all of you aren't convinced it is, but not for you? We are at a world class research institution—let's test the theory.

Let's start with loss or change in structure. When we hear the word structure we probably think of a building. By structure I mean not only architectural structure but also social structures, financial structures, organizational structures, cultural structures, systems, habits, routines, titles, roles and conceptual and belief structures. So how many of you will continue to live in the dorm or your apartments? I won't ask you to identify yourselves, you know who you are. But I have a message for you from campus housing, your landlord: "Please clear out. You don't belong here anymore." When you wake up tomorrow morning, you will not be going to class. The structure of last semester is gone. The professor will not be there and neither will you. Sell a business you have spent years building—it's the same. No more familiar place to go.

You have spent four, OK five or more years working to earn the degree you receive today. It had a central importance, it mattered, and you cared. You wanted. You got it. How important does it feel now that you have it? What does matter now? What's important for you to know? What will be the central focus in life now? What will you barter your life for now. What do you care to learn now? How will you measure yourself now?

Are you the same person today that you were when you came for freshmen orientation? Ask your parents what they think. How is the kid they dropped off the same and different from the young adult they sit next to today? How you are known to others, how they see you, what their expectations are, has changed. How you are known to yourself has also changed. You have a different picture of you to carry around. Physically, intellectually, interpersonally, economically perhaps also spiritually you see yourself differently then when you came. In short you are no longer the person who 'wanted.' You are the person who 'has.' The dream you pursued, is in your lap. Right. Getting what you wanted has caused quite a bit of change. And the University is the villain. They conferred on you a degree, what you wanted—success. Now what? Deal with it.

Let me try and provide you with a larger, more coherent answer to the question of what happens when you get what you want.

We grow and develop as human beings, as individuals in fits and starts. Our lives are marked by periods of what Stephen J. Gould has called punctuated disequilibrium. These critical periods are familiar to us in young children as growth spurts. Where the greatest changes in a life are catalyzed by physical changes that are easy to observe both in cause and effect. Later on in life these critical periods are more likely entered as a result of changes that take place outside of us. These critical periods are normal, predictable, and generally follow an orderly if somewhat individually expressed pattern in continuous stages. Coping successfully at one developmental stage makes us able to deal with the tasks of the next. I want to offer you the consideration that when we get what we want, we initiate one of

these critical periods. That achieving our goals forces us to deal with who we are now, what we care about now, and how I will express this in my life. Most of us believe what comes first is setting a new goal and getting on with it.

The fundamental tasks of development are a continuous refinement of our individuality, our uniqueness, our place in the world and our difference from it. The mechanisms for this process of having more me are integration and differentiation. In simple terms to continuously refine what is me and what is not. What matters to me and what doesn't. What I will seek and what I want. As we continuously reshape and refine who we are, what we care about, and what we will create will become more and more the author or artist of our lives. Success inevitably faces us with a challenge and opportunity to grow our selves.

Today you have been thrown into just such a period. Your success is the cause, the University was the agent, the weapon of choice—a degree. You got what you came for. “Now what?” You may commence.

If it's any comfort or encouragement, dealing with the “Now what?” question is the signature experience of success and you share it with everyone who gets what they want. If people actually talk with each other more honestly about success, they would have told you it was coming along with the other losses and gains that you and they find with every victory. If they were here they would paint a picture of success that is far larger than the one most of us carry around. They would not change your view of success—they would enlarge it because the Grand Narrative of Success isn't a false story. It's an incomplete story that leaves out some of the best and most important parts. Like that little detail of getting there to find that Structure, Meaning and Identity have all taken a walk: you graduated—you're not a student anymore; you got what you wanted—get out.

Many of you have been nodding your heads as if to signal me: “Uh, huh that's right—I know what you're talking about, been there and there, and from what you're telling us today, will be there again. Many of those nodding heads don't have funny hats with tassels on them. And I see other heads with faces on the front of them that have cramps in their brows. “What the hell are you talking about?” the faces say. I know exactly what the answer to “Now what” is and have all my life. I'm on my way to Med School, Law School, Wall Street, Sand Hill Road, or my family's business. Being at the University was just a stop along the way, a box to tick, a hurdle to jump on the way to REAL success.

An aside here...As best I can tell, these are days the definition of the big one is beginning to be defined as “unlimited consumption on unearned income,” or a bit more modestly “maintain current lifestyle on passive income.” So you are probably saying: “What does this have to do with me?” Even if we have a constructed view of getting what we want, why should I care? I'm doing just fine now and will in the future. Or as some charitable and sympathetic observers have put it: “Who cares about the problems of a bunch of rich whiners?”

If I could invite a group of the “rich whiners” to join me up here, and I think you would be surprised who you see on the stage, I believe they would offer you some important lessons on the value of reframing your picture, our shared picture of success. If I can be presumptuous and speak for them, here are things I think you would hear them say:

If we believe that we are going to be successful then we need to be better prepared for it than we are. No one talks about success but we can't seem to stop talking about failure. When I finally was able to have all I ever wanted and, to be honest a bit more, no one asked me about it. No one came up and asked, “How'd you do that? What's it like now that you have? How does it feel?” They talk to you like they know: “It must be great for you. You must feel so proud and happy!” And if they do ask, I can tell that's what they want to hear, that's all they are prepared to hear and they want the short version. If I had fallen on my prat, they would be voracious for the whole story, insatiable for the details. I mean, I would probably be asked about it all the time. “What happened? How did that happen? Tell me about it. Are you doing OK? After I sold the business, if they did ask, and if I answered honestly, I probably would say “sort of.” We love failure particularly if it is followed by a comeback. We love to hear comeback stories. The TV is filled with people telling their stories of how life, their spouse, their boss, their own behavior did them in. The tears and empathy flow. There are case studies and companies built around the examination of failure. We think failure is the best teacher, the richest learning opportunity. On the other hand, the person who falls only to rise again has become our teary national icon. Failure is our true test of character. We even give partial credit for failing and trying again. We are offered in excruciating detail, how failure happened and what it's like for the failed.

Quickly, what is the public face of success? The lives of the rich and famous? “Ain't I The Nuts,” autobiographies, clueless celebrities? In companies it's called “Best Practices.” This is the process whereby a company looks back on what worked and documents what they believe were the critical variables so they can do it all over again just the same way. What's missing are honest pictures of success and its companions. If that more fully draws a picture of success doesn't fit our tidy picture, we don't want to hear it. We are far less sure about success has to teach us--if there is anything to be learned. If I told people that reaching my goals actually was a more complex, challenging, different and hairier critter than I would have ever imagined, would people believe me—want to hear about it, have much sympathy for me? I can tell you from experience the stinging answers are no, no, and no you ungrateful, unappreciative, unworthy rich whiner! We look at anyone who may suggest that success is a challenge from the height of our superiority and down the length of our nose. Anyone who can't handle it should give it back or at least to a more worthy recipient. Getting what you want is hard only if you didn't really earn it, aren't big enough for it, have a seriously misshaped personality. If I talked honestly to people about this stage of my life, I would get some version of: “Don't dis the myth.” I'm out here trading my life for a version of what you got, and I don't want to hear anything that makes me question the value of the trade off. The second message would be: “If I had your problem, I'd have no problem.” We all want to live happily ever after and keep telling ourselves we will.

What I've learned, the hard way, from a deeper more comprehensive understanding of the reality of success achieved will serve me well in the future, when once again I get what I want. I now have more realistic expectation about the destination when I arrive. I'm not suggesting that victory is hollow or success an empty promise. What I am saying is it can't possibly deliver on the promises we made in its name. There is no endless happiness. In fact, the thrill of victory has a short half life. One of the strangest experiences my colleagues and I share is the discovery that the myths of success, the ideal of success is very different from the reality. With my next success, I will have more realistic, more comprehensive expectations. I will be better prepared for what will inevitably come. I would have avoided a lot of surprises and disappointments. I would have been prepared for the opportunities and the challenges. I would have known that some of the biggest challenges are the opportunities. One of the biggest dangers of not understanding the truth of success is that you will be misdiagnosed or judged by yourself and others. One of my friends was referred to a psychiatrist who prescribed medicine because he was pretty down after selling his business. I'm not offering a second opinion, but I am offering an opinion. Down comes with the territory. Me too, all of us, it always is a part of the real picture. Hey, you just lost Ol' Yeller—your business was your best friend and constant companion. No wonder you are bummed, Doogie. Money doesn't fetch and time doesn't sit when you say so. I will certainly be able to make better choices. Free and enlightened choices. Choices that are informed both with respect to the costs and benefits and the relative worth of each. My choices will be made, free of the disinformation, misinformation, and partial information. My choices will be free of the expectations that I carried for myself and others. Free because I now realize I always was freer to choose than I thought I was or maybe wanted to be. I may not have all the choices, options I want, but I have all the freedom I thought I had to earn. What you don't know can hurt you and my colleagues and I can each tell you of the cuts and bruises and breaks we have suffered because no one spoke to us as we speak to you now. So you must make a part of your continuing education, learning not only how to become successful but how to succeed at success. How to live for and with success. And just how do I do that? Glad you asked because we have some suggestions for you which somewhat to our surprise and amusement, we all endorse. Take advantage of the opportunities that come with success. We don't refer here to just the good things but the upsets and dislocations as well. Remember every achievement presents us with a critical event, a developmental slingshot. Don't miss it. Don't back off because it's hard, don't think there's something the matter with you. There are critical task and require us to learn the lessons they offer or we will have to learn them later. And the tuition is almost always higher later.

Figure out what you want. Well here's a no brainier. So we would like to think. How many of you out there can say you really know what you want. Here's the tricky bit no one tells you: the more you get what you want, the harder it is to know what you want. When we are young, we want so much. We worry that we won't get it. You will soon learn once you get it that knowing what you want is one of the hardest questions you will face. I'll bet no one ever told you that. It's part of the whole truth. At some point we really don't know what we want and I'll bet a large part of this audience can relate graduates and guests alike. It gets even

harder after you think you know what you want because then you need to check out how do you know that's what you want. Where did the want come from? Is it your want or someone else's? Is it a want I have for me or want others have for me? We are told all of our lives what to want. The specific cultural version of the Grand Narrative tells us what to want. There is an estimate that we are told over 700 times a day what to want by ads, TV, magazines, teachers, friends, and parents, etc. Am I at the point where I can know a want from a should? We need to be able to discern with great accuracy my want, where it arises, and what's important about fulfilling it. It's that darned integration, differentiation thing again. For those of you out there who are saying to yourselves, I have no idea what I want, am scared and embarrassed that I don't and have no idea how to figure that out:

I can offer an answer. It's an answer that lots of people fall back on—"more." If you don't know what to want, you can always want more. While you can hear just a touch of factiousness in my suggestion, we have to acknowledge that this is the answer to the question that some of the most famous people in the world, in history, have chosen. When we choose this answer we set in motion a constellation of forces including a pattern of repetition. We can choose similar goals that produce similar achievements, collecting more of what we already have. I have wondered if what we are observing in this era of wretched excess represented by the CEO Poster Boys doing the perp walk can be explained simply not as greed but as an inability to know what they really wanted so they went for more. The imperial CEO didn't work hard enough at "Now what do I want?" More turns into more. The satisfaction of more is a declining function.

Invest in energy exploration. Arguably the two most important theories of the twentieth century were Einstein's theory of relativity and Freud's psychoanalytic theory. One helped us understand the dynamics of the world inside our skin; the other, the world outside of it. I would humbly like to offer my Grand Unification theory of the two. Einstein showed us the relationship between energy and matter, $E=MC^2$. Freud showed us the relationship between mattering and energy. For Freud the meaning of life was Work and Love. Work and Love are both forms of engagement. We put energy into work and love and work and love convert to energy. All life is energy and the search for energy and engagement offers us a path to move along in addition to our familiar set goals/achieve goals paradigm. Learn to recognize and monitor your own energy and move toward it.

Define your own organizing principle. The organizing principle of life in general is provided in the pursuit of success. When we achieve success, we lose that central guidance system. What then replaces it? The search for more? I'll offer some quick examples of what others have decided on: curiosity, learning, and my own personal favorite—to live so that I am interesting to myself.

Create multiple structures. We tend to want turnkey solutions to everything. Work has now become the turnkey provider of almost all of our needs from financial security to friendship. We want convergence in everything. One gadget does it all—phone, email, music, photos, calendar, TV. Think in terms of multiple structures for multiple purposes.

Take your time—there is no timetable for finding the answers to “Now What?” or “What do I want?” and don’t let anyone tell you there is. One lesson we all learned as we came into this life with success: the white spaces are important—make some. Often the first step to taking it slower is to rest. The harder and longer you have been working, the more you need to rest before moving on. How long? You will know. Rest until you are rested—not just until you are restless. You will begin to hear your own voice again if you can slow down and stop some of the noise.

Capture your inklings. Inklings are your hearts thought and are there all the time even if you don’t recognize them as such. They provide information that tells where to move. They are recognizable because they come with vitality, truth and fear. If it doesn’t have all three it probably ain’t an inkling. Look first for energy and I can assure you it often comes unexpectedly and from unanticipated directions.

Act on inklings. You have to move. Movement generates more information. Reach out along the path of information. Find out by seeking information.

Develop personal polices and practices. One of us follows this set of rules. Only go where I am needed and only get involved if it is one that is needed. Jim Collins says: “I don’t do derivative work” which led to Good to Great. Create a framework for making choices. The tough part of moving forward is deciding how you will choose NOT what you will choose.

Live with the questions. We think of questions as problems and answers as solutions. We want to throttle questions into submission but they foster exploration and learning. It’s the Zigarnic Effect. Jim Collins will tell you how difficult it is when you lose your question. In fact, success may be defined by: “I lost my question.” Suggestion: live with the question. And if you don’t one, let it find you. Success allows you to trade in your old questions for better ones.

Move self development to the center of your life. Business and professional development gets you more stuff. The winner is not the person who dies with the most toys, but with the most me.

Travel like a discoverer, not a navigator. Navigators know where they are going and how to get there and they use other people’s maps. Discoverers set their own course and let the landscape tell them where to go. If you don’t know where you are going, you will see more.

Get started before you know where you are going. Move toward energy and engagement.

Pick the right metrics. Life after success will be measured according to your scale. What you measure is what matters. Someone said we measure what we can—not what’s important. How will you measure your life? Everyone will tell you what the measures should be. By the act of owning the measure, you control your life.

Face into freedom. We can all tell you that we have worked very hard to get to a point in our lives where we felt free only to find we were all alone and didn’t know it. We have confused freedom—that is, our ability to choose with what we wanted to choose, choices. We found we were gathering choices to avoid the freedom. And with success, found ourselves

burdened by the absence of “have too’s.” Do not as Frankle urges escape from Freedom back into the old Grand Narrative of Success. Be the author, be the actor—that’s the offer success always brings.