

QUEEN ANNE SCHOOL CLASS OF 2009 GRADUATION ADDRESS

Thank you very much—thanks Temple, Father Harris, and everyone else at Queen Anne who have welcomed me back. And thank you Class of 2009.

You know, Pat Noel and I were in the same class at Queen Anne, and we were laughing the other day how it feels funny to come back as alumnus of the year. I wouldn't have wanted to tell you this before you'd all finished high school lest I be accused of encouraging bad behavior, but I got into a fair amount of mischief in high school—though I was generally pretty good about not getting caught. When you're an Asian kid, you can really use that 'model minority' stereotype to your advantage. Though Harold and Kumar may have ruined that trick for your generation.

Kathy Cunningham passed on to me your requests for what you'd like to hear from me tonight, which I'd like to quote back to you briefly:

You said:

“Inspire us.”

“Tell us what to expect in the real world. What is it like out there, beyond high school? Not just college—but what's it like to really live life”

“How did your own experiences at Queen Anne help you in your career? Were you prepared?”

Great questions, and I'll do my best to answer them.

When Temple called to ask me to give this address, I was elated, humbled, and deeply, deeply moved. After that I was terrified. I mean, how am I

supposed to inspire you, with the world being what it is today. The economy has collapsed, we're hemorrhaging hundreds of thousands of jobs every month (I know a lot of very esteemed journalists who have been laid off in the past year—I'm sure the crisis has affected many of you and your friends and loved ones too. There are multiple international crises festering across the globe that your generation will inherit, and a fair number of people around the world who would like to kill us. Oh yeah, and global warming, and swine flu and, what else, pirates for god's sake.

So good luck with all that, class of '09!

Seriously, I thought, if all this instability and chaos were scaring the devil out of me and everyone I know, how can I give you all useful advice without being a total phony?

What's there to be inspired about?

Well, on deeper reflection, I did manage to talk myself down, and in these remarks I'd like to tell you how I got there...

First off, and I hope this doesn't sound like a trick answer, but just looking out at this crowd, I can say that you inspire me.

It may sound strange since I don't know you all that well, but I can sincerely say that I'm deeply proud of all of you for having reached this moment. I know just how hard each of you have worked to get here.

I'm also proud of all the parents and families here, who have worked so hard to provide you with a great education. You're inspiring.

But where does that get us in this real, nasty world? How have you been prepared by Queen Anne? I'll try to answer that, though perhaps in a roundabout way.

There's always crisis and instability—maybe not always affecting the whole world at once as it is right now, but in billions of individual ways. People can lose their jobs in a great economy—or be afflicted by things a million times worse than just losing a job. There's a kind of cruelty to this randomness of things, or at least a sense of unfairness. But there's also something liberating as well.

I guess this would be first piece of advice I would give you: *embrace* randomness and instability. Because along with the cruelty, there's the other side, which the religious people call fate and skeptics call dumb luck. It doesn't matter what you call it, because it's real.

And I would even say, if and when it happens to you, embrace failure. Nietzsche was right when he said, “Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger.” Failure teaches you more than success. And *failure isn't permanent*. It's a stop, not a destination.

I'll explain by telling you a little of my own story of abundant failure, which will hopefully answer another one of your questions, which was to tell you about life in the “real world”

(for some reason I can't seem to say that without quotation fingers)

In my early 20s, after college, I was kind of a mess. It was 1992. President George Bush had just fought a war with Iraq, and the economy was in the dumpster.

You know, a totally different time...

I had a degree in English literature, and couldn't find a job that let me apply what I thought to be my creative talents. Much worse than that, I couldn't find a job.

Before long I was applying for jobs at the 7-11, at the risk of becoming an ethnic stereotype (Much as I love the Simpsons, I had no ambition to become Apu).

Finally, unable to find a job where I was living in Oregon, and racking up debt, I came back to Maryland to live with my parents. I worked random jobs. I delivered pizzas for a while, then worked in a hospital emergency room. None of these jobs, by the way, required that college degree—Hell, I don't think I even needed a high school diploma. Feeling without direction, I applied to graduate school—big mistake.

As an aside, another quick piece of advice: don't go to grad school looking for direction.

I drifted along for a year and a half in grad school. I had no idea what the hell I was doing. I didn't feel like I fit in.

I washed out of grad school. I didn't complete my degree—I didn't even complete several of my classes. I felt like a loser with a capital "L"

There was one bright spot toward the end of my grad school experience—I was working as an intern on the National Public Radio program 'Talk of the Nation.' I'd always been a news junkie, and it was a geeky thrill for me to

get an insider's view of a major news operation. Still feeling like the incompetent, disorganized, drifting loser that I knew I was, I was also positive that I was a crap intern.

I thought the senior producer was pulling a cruel joke when she told me I was the best intern they'd ever had, so I could scarcely believe it when I got a call from another NPR producer offering me some paying work a couple of weeks after the internship ended. That was the start of my journalistic career.

Oh, I forgot to mention how I scored that key internship:

not through the university, not through scouring the paper or working alumni contacts.

No, I got it because I happened to meet the outgoing intern of Talk of the Nation at a sweat lodge party.

(By the way, that sounded as weird then as it does now. It's not like in the 90s everyone was having sweat lodge parties while we listened to Nirvana and started up dot coms.)

So dumb luck. or fate. Whatever it is, the point is, be ready for it and embrace it. Don't get caught up in the useless mental gymnastics of 'Do I deserve this?' whether the thing is good or bad. For a long time, I tortured myself with the idea that, without the lucky break of that sweat lodge party, I would just have been a well-read bum. I had to have others point out to me what I did with that opportunity—how I ran with that dumb luck.

Less than three years after finishing my internship at Talk of the Nation, I was the director of Talk of the Nation. Less than two years after that, I was at the helm of my own show, On the Media.Living the dream of being a working journalist in New York City.

Dumb luck can set up an opportunity, but you've got to be smart and hungry and ready to seize it when it happens. And that's where we get to the payoff of your education. What you've learned at Queen Anne will pay off in unexpected ways in the "real world."

I'll never forget the time when I was that insecure Talk of the Nation intern, and I completely blew away the woman who was directing that show at the time by joining her in reciting the first 10 lines of the Aeneid, which I'd memorized in 11th grade Latin class.

Believe me, that was the last thing I thought I'd ever find useful in the "Real World."

but these little details of facts learned—and there are many others I could mention-- don't convey the totality of what Queen Anne did for me as a person, and what I'm sure it's done for you. To get back to your questions-- how it's prepared you.

Not to sound stuffy, but your Queen Anne education establishes you in an intellectual tradition that is very rare these days. Nothing can totally prepare you for college, let alone the real world, but you have an intellectual leg up that will distinguish you in an intensely competitive world. It's one of the reasons I advanced so quickly once I had my opening.

Now, one person's success story is not a formula—and again, I have to acknowledge that the challenges your generation faces are beyond what we would have imagined 10 years ago. But I think that your generation—and you, the class of 2009 in particular—are spectacularly equipped to deal with these challenges.

You had witnessed terrorist attacks and wars by the time you were in high school—horrendous events, but your eyes were opened to the world in a way that will make you both tougher and smarter than my generation.

(also, from what I can tell, less whiny)

And since you're tough and smart, I can tell you that the kind of instability the world now faces can be liberating for talented young people like yourself. Outside of the health care, there seem to be few professions that are truly 'safe' anymore. This is a time when you can see where your passions take you, and follow your dreams.

(sorry to sound like a cliché)

To extend that point, before I finish, there's one final, important piece of advice I would have for you,— it's not one of your questions, but it's something I wish I had realized when I was sitting where you are.

Belief in yourself will take you farther than anything,
even education, talent, even basic intelligence.

Now, I know, it's hard to take seriously, because it sounds like one of those soft-headed new-agey clichés, something you'd find in that cheesy "successories" store in the mall, on a poster with humpback whales and a sunset in the background.

-- but I have seen time and time again that it is true.

Belief in yourself will take you farther than anything

You may have had this experience:

How many times have you listened to a tremendously successful person speak—maybe their success is in business, or politics, or entertainment—and as they talk you find yourself saying—"wait a minute, that guy's an *idiot*."

--hopefully you're not having that experience right now—but you ask yourself,

What gives? How did they get to be a CEO, or a bestselling writer, or ...President? The simple, ugly truth—which I resisted believing for so long—is that these people simply *believed in their own abilities* and the rest fell into place.

Now all of you have already accomplished something substantial—getting a diploma from a school like Queen Anne is an achievement, not something you can get without hard work.

So you have every reason already to believe in your own abilities. Even if you are set back—by losing your job, washing out of grad school, whatever—no one can take that away.

I have no doubt that you will be able to face down whatever confronts you in the years ahead.

Thank you so much for the honor of speaking to you on this special occasion, and congratulations , again, to you, the class of 2009.