

## How to Be Important

Convocation Speech at Graduation,

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Graduation is always joyful. For the students, a lot of hard work has paid off. And for many parents, a lot of hard paying off has worked.

As a marine biologist who has earned 3 degrees, working toward a degree has always seemed like being a salmon swimming up a river: Full of energy and enthusiasm—*excited!*—you enter the flow. You really have no idea what's coming. You encounter a constant struggle against the current. But, determined, you keep swimming, always working hard. You stick with it. And by the time you realize you've been so busy swimming upstream so hard, for so long, that there's almost no time left for sex—it's suddenly over. And you think: *"Too soon! More sex would have been nice."*

I have been lucky enough to watch my life proceed from being that hopeful, hopeless graduate of this very State University system, so uncertain of my own worth, so unconvinced of my talent, to the man you see before you now—so uncertain of my own talent, so unconvinced of my worth.

It is from this wellspring of insecurity, but with a resume since graduating that satisfies my mother, that I offer these ten simple steps to succeeding and becoming important:

Step 1. Be very lucky. Success depends mainly on luck. So remember this: luck is too important to leave to chance. Don't wait for luck. Don't hope for luck. *Make luck happen.* I'm not talking about wish-upon-a-star, fantasy kind of luck, like wishing of winning the lottery. But rather, the luck that you engineer. Like the luck of winning a marathon for which you've trained hard. Grown-up luck is rooted in reality and hard work, skill exerted, odds tipped slightly in your favor by your own insight and muscle.

Work and thought create luck. Generosity and compassion create luck. Kindness—creates luck.

Step 2. Never grow up. The most successful people remain playful. Be wildly idealistic. Dream up unlikely schemes. Take healthy risks. And once you've imagined a better world, pick one part of that world you envision. Then roll up your sleeves and devise a way to make it happen. Dream—then get there. Henry David Thoreau, perhaps the truest and greatest American, said: "If you have built sand castles in the air... there is where they should be. Now put foundations under them." The best idealists are also highly pragmatic.

Step 3. The best pragmatists are *curious*. Always be curious. To be interesting, *be interested*.

Step 4. Fail. If you're not occasionally failing, you're probably being too timid. People who succeed are not afraid to fail. They are the people who, *after* failing—after being rejected or passed over—pick themselves up and keep going.

Step 5. Never give up. Be patient. It's too easy to think, "What's the use?" or "This is no good," or, "Why bother?," or, "I can't." Just stay patiently in the game. When things seem so bleak that you can't see the way out, simply wait. Dawn will come. Better, take just a small step. Life can be like walking with a flashlight on a dark night. You might not be able to see your destination, but each small step illuminates the next few steps—and you can make the whole trip that way.

Step 6. Take yourself seriously. We are constantly bombarded by messages from people who want to trivialize us, so they can control us. They make us think, "I'm not good enough;" "My efforts aren't good enough." Ignore those thoughts. Yes, the world is complicated and beyond your control. But that's only partly true. A lot of your life will actually be up to you. So have faith in yourself. Immediately reject *anyone* seeking to discourage you. Especially if that person—is you. The great thinker Ralph Waldo

Emerson said, “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.” Cherish your own ideas. Put them in writing and keep them in a safe place. Honor them with energy. Work on them and make them grow. Embrace encouragement, find mentors—and mentor others.

Step 7. While taking yourself seriously, never take yourself *too* seriously. No one upon their death bed ever said, “I wish I had spent more time in the office.” Busyness destroys relationships. Love *is* all you need.

Step 8. If you seek power—and perhaps you should, because life can bury the weak—seek *not* the power to control others. Seek instead the kind of power that prevents others from controlling you. Never strive to prove anything to anyone—except yourself. The more you measure yourself by the yardsticks others give you, the more *they* determine your life, and drain you of your own. Develop your own measures of success, even if they differ from the norm, and you will be running your own race, not the rat race.

Step 9. Never chase money. You are not the product of four billion years of evolution just so you can own a cluttered garage. The human mind is the most complex thing in the known universe. Use yours. Never make excuses against your own heart. Never talk yourself into things. Always pursue truth. Always do the right thing. Act always with integrity. Be true. Rise above. You will make yourself someone rare and valuable. Then instead of chasing money, you’ll find money chasing *you*—and along will come satisfactions that cannot be bought at any price.

Step 10. Realize this: the world is on fire. As Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.” The most satisfying thing the human mind can experience is the realization that it is serving a worthy cause. Seek to help heal the world. A life of *service* will make you both the most satisfied, and most *important*, person you can hope to be.

Now in just a little while, you will go—and you will begin to make your own luck. After

all, that's the approach that's already gotten you this far. So take the credit for having earned a little faith in yourself. Congratulations, and best of making your own luck!