

John Wilkerson Commencement Address  
Utah State University  
May 7, 2010

President Albrecht, Mrs. Albrecht, Trustees, Fellow Honorees, Parents and Families and Utah State University Graduates of 2011.

You had a tough choice today. Attending THE FINALE OF LADY GAGA'S MONSTER BALL TOUR at WORLD FAMOUS Madison Square Garden.

or ...

Staying in Cache Valley to listen to John Wilkerson, someone you have never heard of, a first time commencement speaker, a Utah State-educated cowboy from Elko, Nevada, who flew in to give you the traditional obligatory "Big Wet Kiss" Commencement Speech!

Let's be clear. I know you are looking at each other and asking, "JOHN WHO"?

I wish I knew each of you: who among you is the most agile dancer, fastest hurdler, gifted musician, winning debater, the all-star mother and the most celebrated Lothario. It would be my pleasure to know each of you and your aspirations, victories, secrets and even a bit about your disappointments.

I do not know these things about you but there is one thing I know for sure. You are graduating from this great university and "You Chose Me Over Lady Gaga."

President Albrecht and parents, this graduating class has good values!

I do not give a commencement speech every year, so I have given much thought about my gift to you. I'm going to share four Fundamental Organizing Principles for your career -- things I wish someone had gifted me at graduation. I want to talk about my experiences with Culture, Passion, Mentoring and Making Career Choices. These guiding principles brought success to me in business, not-for-profit work and various cultural and philanthropic endeavors.

But before I talk about these principles, join me and let's reflect on our good fortune and the responsibility that accompanies this.

Living in America -- a society where we seek, liberate and venerate talent and ambition -- is a blessing.

How wonderful it is to be in a nation whose mantra is "Meritocracy," a nation where we celebrate personal reinvention at the ages of 20, 40 and even 80. Americans empower each other, and we define failure not as defeat but rather as a learning experience.

And when we are at our best, we combine meritocracy and compassion to create America's ultimate "Performance Drink." Just a sip of this liquid is a potent fuel for human progress.

Thirteen months ago I pedaled my Trek hybrid bicycle over 750 miles of potholed roads from the southern border of China to Yangon, Myanmar. Mr. Win, my young Burmese guide, had, like you, graduated from a top university. He is very smart, personable, and industrious. Graduating ladies, Mr. Win is also single and very handsome. If he were sitting alongside you today, Mr. Win would be a candidate for Most Likely to Succeed.

You will be amused to know that when Mr. Win introduced me, a 6-foot-tall, fish-belly-white-skinned, Spandex-wearing cyclist to the tenth most powerful general in Myanmar, the general also was thinking: "John Who"?

In Myanmar, a country of 55 million people controlled by 200 corrupt generals, Mr. Win's future is bleak. He is one of only seven government approved bicycle guides, and he can only find work 30 days a year for \$2.00 a day. Eleven months he lives in the Buddhist monastery where he gets food and shelter. One evening alongside the road connecting Mandalay and Yangon, we leaned our bikes against a tree and Mr. Win confided, "John, my only hope is to win Burma's annual Green Card Lottery allowing me to go to America."

Educated and unable to work. Industrious and unable to support a family. Talented with ambition and unable to rise out of his quagmire.

1.4 billion human beings wake each day to a world stacked against them. Imagine having only 150 pennies or fewer to buy your food, water, clothes, medicine, fuel and shelter. \$1.50 per day is the definition of extreme poverty. In Logan this is not enough to buy one small bottle of Vitamin Water. Extreme poverty results from poor and corrupt government policies and practices, robbing mothers, fathers and their children of dignity and depriving us of their creativity, humanity and productivity.

You have been empowered from birth. But Francoise Hume, my Vietnamese interpreter and friend was not empowered by his government. In 1967, two years after leaving Logan, I married and four days later was in the Central Highlands of Vietnam as a volunteer, doing resettlement work with indigenous people 15 miles from the Hoi Chi Minh trail.

Francoise saved my life. He tugged on my tent flap at 4 a.m. one monsoon morning and whispered "Stay where you are" and then disappeared. One hour later the landmine planted for me was tripped, but not by me. I returned to my wife, and we converted beautiful dreams into reality. Francoise was imprisoned, brutalized, brainwashed and released to a life without hope. My country empowered me. Francoise's shackled his human potential.

Today you move forward from Utah State University, a school where 46 years ago two horticultural professors changed the arc of my life. It was the first of my many reinventions. They saw capability and promise but misdirected ambition. And they passed me the magic key to graduate school and launched me on a lifelong round trip -- mostly economy but sometimes first class to New York and back to Logan for your commencement today.

I never felt my opportunities were limited by anything other than my capabilities and drive. In fact, the key to motivating John was and is to tell me I can't do something. How wonderful it would be if humans everywhere lived in a world where a "Can Do" attitude is the norm. But that is not reality. On a recent overseas trip, I asked Arman, my taxi driver, what to tell my Utah audience today. Without a pause, he said, "Tell them to listen to Pink Floyd's beautiful song, Another Brick in the Wall":

"ALL IN ALL, YOU'RE JUST ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL."

Arman's counsel, while sobering, accurately portrays the outlook for some university graduates in 2011 but not you. You aren't just another brick. You are whatever you make of yourself, and that will be determined largely by talent, drive and whatever fundamental organizing principles you embrace for navigating your career.

One day 20 years ago, while struggling with a Rubik's cube level business problem, I asked my business partner Dave for help. He is Harvard Law, former General Counsel for Johnson and Johnson and the man that managed Johnson and Johnson's response to a tragic Tylenol poisoning incident. Business schools have written case studies on this tragedy because it is the model of how corporations should respond to ethical dilemmas.

Dave heard me describe my problem and said, "John, in law school I learned if you get the principles right, all else will follow." Together we identified the principles, and the solution to my problem was obvious. I love this problem-framing device, so here are the four guiding principles I use when I make career decisions.

## PASSION

Lives are the expressions of our passion. It is a fundamental aspect of our being, but be careful not to confuse passion with enthusiasm and excitement. They may be part of passion, but enthusiasm and excitement are not terms used to describe Mother Teresa. Passion literally compels you to act in a certain way, almost as if you have no choice in the matter.

Passion is why I volunteered for Vietnam. It is also why at 67 years of age I got a guide over the internet and the two of us took off to meet the people of Myanmar.

And lack of passion was why I left a promising career as a security analyst. I could not get out of bed one more day to call clients and tell them I thought Medtronic or Pfizer was going to report 87 cents per share in earnings and not the consensus estimate of 88 cents. However, endless passion is why my career in the medical products industry and involvement in the art and philanthropic world has been so gratifying.

Be honest about the inner forces compelling you to act in a certain way. Following your passions will not guarantee career success, but your journey will certainly be richer for it.

## CULTURE

Imagine the joy of working with people you cannot get enough of – a job where you actually smile when you think of your co-workers and you and your colleagues understand that disagreements are healthy for your company. Perhaps the ultimate test of an organization's culture is when your spouse and children genuinely look forward to corporate events.

There is good reason books are written and speeches are given on creating corporate culture. Put culture near the top of the list of what you look for in any company and organization you join or create. Join forces with people having aspirational goals you love, go forward together and slay the competitive dragons and have fun. My secret for getting this right is once I determine a job applicant is qualified, which means I have concluded the candidate is better than me, I move to the windshield test. "Would I enjoy spending four hours riding in the car with this person?" A friend of mine believes culture is as key as technology for sustained high corporate performance. His advice is even blunter than mine: "Don't work with Jerks!"

## MENTORS

Competitive athletes watch videos to learn from winners. As you plan and burnish your career skills shouldn't you study "Lives Well-Lived?" Read obituaries, particularly those from the London and New York Times and the Washington Post.

Listen to the career lessons contained in these recent obituaries.

Dr. Harry Coover: "When he passed he held 460 patents and appreciated being introduced as Mr. Super Glue. But his greatest pride was knowing that throughout the world, medics carried tubes of his Super Glue to patch and save lives of soldiers in the throes of combat."

Or the final words written about a well-known woman who designed and manufactured ladies undergarments: "Department store buyers and women throughout the United States knew her uncompromising standards. Her brassieres garnered premium prices because they fit perfectly. She took deserved pride that well into her 80s she remained a near perfect 34B."

Ira Cohen, an artist whose work included photographs of Jimi Hendrix and thousands of poems. But said his obituary: "His most amazing work was Ira Cohen himself. A multimedia shaman, he compared writing to "pushing a peanut with my nose, but sometimes when I pick up a pen it leaks gold all over the paper."

Get experienced mentors, both living and deceased, and launch your career not from your feet but from their shoulders.

## OPTIONS

I am a mentor and love helping people think about career decisions. You will have many career options come your way over the next 40 years, and most will be dead ends cloaked as opportunities. Is it an opportunity if it caps your future?

Always ask this question: By accepting this position will I expand or reduce future career options? Amazingly, very few people frame career choices this way. They should.

Looking back over my career, each for-profit and not-for-profit position I embraced or company I started eventually led me to numerous new and exciting opportunities.

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It's 2011, and I am reinventing myself once again. This time I have embraced a vibrant youth movement whose aspiration is to make extreme poverty history in our lifetime.

The Global Poverty Project is starting up in the United States. We are an educational and campaigning organization. We advocate changing broken systems that keep people poor. GPP employs the most advanced social media technologies to attract, educate, engage and mobilize the persuasive and politically powerful 16-35 year old cohort.

There are "Big-Social-Justice" issues out there, and The Global Poverty Project takes them on. We mess with the world's status quo!

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Because of poor and corrupt public policies and practices throughout the world, my four guiding principles for building careers are, unfortunately, not relevant for Mr. Win, Francoise Hume and my driver, Arman.

But you are building your life in an empowering system. So along with your career success I urge you to find the Big Social Issues that resonate for you, commit to them and do your part to move our world onward and upward.

Talent, Ambition, Compassion: Each attribute by itself is necessary, but not sufficient for success. You have the opportunity to combine them and produce a better and just world while simultaneously building a great career.

Graduates of 2011, Go For It!