

Wu Han's 2006 Menlo School Commencement Speech

When Norman Colb asked me to give this commencement speech, I was flattered and honored. Without thinking too hard, I said "sure." After about a month went by, I started to realize that I had never given a commencement speech before, and in a moment of panic, I called Norman and asked him what I should tell all of you. He quickly replied, "Tell them everything you've learned in life." So, my first point is, if you want someone to do anything at all—even something they don't know how to do or don't want to do—do make them feel flattered and honored to start with, and then you will have a good chance at having them do anything you want them to!

I have thought back on my own life to determine the lessons that could help you to move forward at this exciting juncture in your lives. I know you are facing the world before you with excitement, wonder, and anticipation. Many opportunities and offers will come your way, and you will make many decisions from this point on, with or without your parents. I will tell you about a few things that have helped me during similar times of excitement in my own life, such as making my solo recital debut when I was 15, accepting a scholarship to study in the US and moving to a new country, walking on stage to play for thousands of people on so many nights of my life, starting a new summer festival such as Music@Menlo, accepting a directorship position at Lincoln Center, or even writing this commencement speech. Through all of these moments, I would say that I always enjoy what I do.

Number one: to enjoy what you do is the most basic element you can use to motivate yourself. Search for what you feel passionate about and go after it. I know that you will tell me later that not all of the offers and projects that come your way are enjoyable. My advice to you is to make *everything* enjoyable so that you can be ahead of game! I guess my way of dealing with the most unpleasant things in life is to find something that is enjoyable in every situation. I can think of many undesirable situations that are difficult to deal with, such as a long flight delay. When I experienced a long flight delay recently, I used the down time positively to finish this commencement speech. Many people have told me that fundraising would be the most difficult aspect of my administrative responsibilities, but I have actually found that it's a most wonderful opportunity to meet all new friends and convince them to do great things for our society. So, look hard and think creatively to make sure you make every turn of your life enjoyable.

Number two: be curious and be well prepared. In my work, I have to meet all different kinds of people, from the directors of companies to stagehands, from travel agents to piano technicians, from great artists to recording producers, and from artist managers to general audience members. Through meeting all of these people, I often find myself attracted to individuals that have a powerful presence. "Presence" is a hard word to describe, though I know we can sense it when someone enters the room or when we find ourselves unable to draw our attention away from someone. It took me years to figure out that often, when one radiates presence, it's because that person radiates curiosity. I do not mean curiosity in the sense of being nosy, but rather, a curiosity about life, about the world, about one's surroundings, about everything. I am speaking of a genuine curiosity that can infatuate and influence

everyone and everything around the person that exudes it. This sense of excitement and wonderment about everything that has happened or could happen is the most wonderful thing you can bring to this world as you prepare to explore and experience whatever paths might lie ahead of you.

Let's talk for a bit about being prepared. When I committed to giving this commencement speech, because of my inexperience in giving speeches like this, I decided to find out everything I could about how to craft an effective commencement speech. I had a wonderful time reading incredible speeches by numerous expert speakers. I must say that I have had a ball preparing for this day! In my work as a performing artist, I really have to be fully prepared in order to deliver performances that meet audiences' high expectations. The preparation process entails a lot of hard work analyzing the music and preparing my muscles through technical training in order to handle the demands and pressures that come with life as a performer. I would say that this intense preparation is very similar to a competitive athlete's training and preparation. In the case of preparing this commencement speech, which I do not have a lot of experience doing, in the end, the work I have done has led me to learn so much and expand the sense of possibility in my life through the experience. In the case of preparing for concerts, which is an arena I *do* know well, in the end, I always put in a lot of hard work in order to succeed in accomplishing my goals. In both of these situations, without the curiosity to accept this speech-making challenge or the curiosity to try and offer successful performances, and without the hard work of putting in many hours of reading speeches and practicing my instrument, I would be making a fool of myself all of the time. But when you learn and work—even if it's very difficult work—you always end up expanding your life, and can savor the fruits of your efforts.

Through working hard and being curious, you will establish both mental and physical discipline. Take an idea that you are committed to, organize yourself and others around that idea, put in consistent and persistent energy toward pursuing that idea, and use all of your resources and imagination to execute the idea. If you have strong discipline and thorough preparation, you will have the self-esteem to move forward toward your goals with confidence. Because, deep inside, you know you will have to learn, expand, grow, and lead your own life in the most productive way you can. External success or rewards become secondary, because the fundamental rewards that you have in your life are your commitment to yourself and the clarity and solidity of your goals.

Now, this one story I have to take from Thomas Friedman's Yale graduation speech in 2003, which included an adaptation of Taylor Mali's poem "What Teachers Make." Friedman's adaptation of Mali's poem contains some words of wisdom that I think belong in every graduation speech. It goes like this:

The dinner guests were sitting around the table discussing life. One man, a CEO, decided to explain the problem with education. He argued: "What's a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher? You know, it's true what they say about teachers: 'Those who can do, do; those who can't do, teach.'" To corroborate his statement he said to another guest, "Hey, Susan, you're a teacher. Be honest, what do you make?"

Susan, who had a reputation for honesty and frankness, replied, "You want to know what I make? I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could, and I can make kids sit through 40 minutes of study hall in absolute silence. I can make a 'C-plus' feel like the Congressional Medal of Honor and an 'A' feel like a slap in the face if the student didn't do his or her very best." Susan continued, "I can make parents tremble when I call home or feel almost like they won the lottery when I tell them how well their child is progressing." Gaining speed, she went on: "You want to know what I make? I make kids wonder, I make them question, I

make them criticize, I make them apologize and mean it, I make them write and I make them read, read, read. I make them show all their work in math and hide it all on their final drafts in English.” Susan then stopped and cleared her throat. “I make them understand that if you have the brains, then follow your heart. And if someone ever tries to judge you by what you make in money, you pay them no attention.”

Susan then paused. “You want to know what I make?” she said. “I make a difference. What about you?”

Make a difference in your everyday life, not only for yourself, but also for people around you. Think of a way every day that you can make a difference. It could be as simple as a smile to a stranger, or it could be as grand as developing a wonderful idea from the level of imagination all the way to fruition. This could be a wonderful exercise for each and every one of us to try.

Now, we should have a big finish to the speech, but I have one more piece of advice for you first: be kind.

The other day, I was in LA playing a very important concert for a very big organization. The green room door opened and a very important looking woman walked into my dressing room. She introduced herself as the head of the marketing department that manages publicity efforts for this very large organization, and she was the one who was responsible for getting the word out to the public about me, which helped to sell out my concert. I was certainly impressed, but the biggest surprise came when she gave me a big smile and told me that she had been my page turner and had picked me up 20 years ago, while in her teens as a volunteer, to help me travel to this small festival in the south. I was certainly glad I had made a good impression on her 20 years ago! This should teach you to never underestimate who is around you, and you should always be kind to everyone you encounter—not only for your own good, but also because it’s simply really fun just to be nice. That is just the beginning. My real wish is for all of us to be nice to our families—and that is hard. Be kind to your family because they are your family and you don’t get a new one every day. So be nice to your parents, be nice to your siblings—just be nice.

So, here is the big finish, courtesy of Mark Twain: Always work like you don't need the money. Always fall in love like you've never been hurt. Always dance like nobody is watching. And always—*always*—live like it's heaven on earth.

Congratulations to you all, and I look forward to seeing you again at some point—you never know, right?!

© ArtistLed 2019