

Owen Commencement Speech – Neil Ramsey

Thank you all for being here and online. Graduates, Families, Faculty and Staff.

I'm glad you guys finally showed up, I've been waiting here for almost a year. I must admit that this feels a little anti-climactic. However, it's not! This is still a big day and just as important to celebrate your accomplishment now as it was a year ago. This is a very big day for me also. I am honored to be here with you to celebrate this day.

I have to at least mention the last year of Covid and how it has shaped our lives: Let's look at some of the positives.

1. I can now say I'm the only commencement speaker to be asked to speak at back-to-back commencements.
2. You guys have had a full year to prolong the Owen experience and now have a great excuse to reconnect with your friends with your belated graduation.
3. You have become ZOOM experts

Of course, there's downsides too.

1. You have become ZOOM experts
2. A lot of you guys have started new jobs and barely been able to get to know your coworkers.
3. And maybe the biggest downside, I now have to say I'm the only commencement speaker ever to be uninvited to speak.

I have had the pleasure of being involved with Vanderbilt for 44 years and Owen specifically for 41 years, as a student, as an alumnus, as a Board of Advisors member, as the parent of two Vanderbilt graduates, and now today as a commencement speaker. Thank you, Dean Johnson, for trusting me to speak to these graduates and their families.

Thank goodness you get to publicly celebrate your great achievement last year. Congratulations!!

There is a statistic that says only one in three graduates listen to their commencement speaker;

Before I start, I want you to look to the person on your right and now... the one on your left. Can you please tell both of them what I said after I finish?

Maybe if I say something really provocative or of value, you will only have to explain it to one of them.

So, my challenge today is pretty much the challenge we all face every day of our lives. How can we be valuable to someone else?

Since every great speech starts with some key point and drives it home; I guess I'd say my main point is just what Ricky Bobby and Cal Naughton, Jr. said in Talladega Nights:

"98% of us will die at some point in our lives. The darkness is creeping towards you whether you like it or not. So, A little planning can go a long way."

Of course, Ricky is not well-trained in statistics like all of you. He forgot to mention the +/- 2% margin of error with a very strong right skew.

Next now never:

As I forced myself to think about what you graduates are feeling and how I could say something of interest, I thought the best place I should start is what I felt 38 years ago when I sat in your very seat. Simply put, I did not feel enough.

I do remember a lot of things about my time at Owen. I remember my Strategy Case Study class. We had a case on Lincoln Electric. I walked into class in a very precarious position as I had failed to read the case. I knew I would be called on so the key was to ask to speak before that happened. I carefully listened to the class discussion awaiting the perfect opportunity to weigh in and give my well-reasoned input judging from the comments already made. I made some obvious recommendation. "I don't know why they just don't ... blah blah blah" The professor just looked at me and said "Because, Mr. Ramsey, the case clearly says they can't do that". Caught! My friends loved that moment.

As I prepared, I came across something I wrote to myself 5 years ago. I called it Neil's 3 N's for living.

Next, Now and Never

Here was my perspective in a nutshell. *"Most of the time we have to look forward to what we should do Next. Sometimes we just reflect and savor Now. And we should Never look back unless it helps Next."*

When do you savor Now?

- *You savor NOW when you can't know next. Sometimes, you simply are stuck. That's not the end of the world.*
- *You savor NOW when you achieve something. Don't move to quickly to NEXT.*
- *When you feel extreme joy. Take it in! Enjoy it.*
- *When you feel extreme sadness, it's important not to move away from this too fast.*
- *When you are caring for someone else. You cannot stay present long enough.*

However, Extreme fear or worry or angst should force Next. Do something!

I concluded in my written journal:

Never dwell in the past except to improve your Now or Next. Your past successes can motivate future success or give peace of mind today. Your failures and missteps are only good if they can help you motivate or learn for the future."

That's what I wrote 5 years ago. I over-emphasized NEXT. Having lost my mom a year ago and watching my dad at 93 and the fact I remember so little about me being where you are today, I believe more strongly that NOW is much more important than I understood. **All of your positive NOW's, that you truly savor, will be like money in the bank for your future. NOW is really important, and it's more than just being present.** Enjoy today. Today can truly enhance your peace of mind in the future and it's what allows you to build deep lasting bonds with the people you are with.

However, I can't keep from thinking about NEXT. One of my favorite quotes about purposeful planning for NEXT is from Richie Norton, he said:

"Dig a well before you're thirsty, but dig over water."

It's a pretty simple concept, think about what you want in the future, **TODAY!** because if you don't, it won't be there when you need it. Also, put yourself in close proximity to the things you want.

You are in an amazing time of your life. You are neither young nor old and you get to stay in that state for at least another 30 to 35 years. Then you will get to be my age where you can at least see what old might look like.

You have 35 years to go very deep and build very special ties and constructs. There is so much for each of you to be looking forward to.

Whether you are preparing for Next, savoring now, or in the appropriate moments reflecting on the past, I have an important message that you always need to be aware of...

You WILL be humbled at some point in your life. You will be brought to your knees.

You've heard the saying that only death and taxes are for certain, there's another one. You will be humbled by something in your life, you will be brought to your knees plenty of times along the way. I know I have.

I remember one Sunday morning back in the late 1990's. We were investing heavily in technology and building our Systematic Trading business. We had just had a couple bad months and I had just made a big trade in Japanese convertible bonds and they were collapsing. It truly felt like I was simply going to fail in the investment management business. I was talking to my dad on the phone and I verbally admitted that I did not know if I was any good at what I was doing and did not know if I was going to be able to stay in business. I really felt like I was going to have to start over. But it really wasn't a terrible thing because as humbled as I felt in business, I told my dad, "At least I know I'm a good dad." That was enough for me despite feeling like a failure at that instant. Fortunately, things turned in our Stat Arb business and we had a lot of success there. Unfortunately, we took a big loss in the Japanese convertibles.

Given your inevitable humbling, you better know what you want to be, who you want to please, and what purpose you want to serve.

My wife asked me a really good question a couple days before Dean Johnson asked me to speak at this commencement. She asked. "if you could ask for one thing for our grandkids, what would it be?"

I might let you just think about that for a second. One thing.... I actually instantly had an answer.

I said "That they find their authentic self that God put them on this earth to be. Free of ego, self-pride, self-doubt and any desire to be anyone else but themselves. This is the only way I can imagine a person can find true joy and contentment in life." This is true humility.

Think of the most joyful, loving, gracious, humble person you know. I would venture to say they meet these criteria: **Free of ego, self-pride, self-doubt and any desire to be anyone else but themselves.**

Knowing who you are is the greatest gift a person can have in life. It's the armor that will protect you when you are humbled, the motivation you need to get up when you are brought to your knees. Know who you want to be, who you want to please and why. Know what you want to emulate. The primary blind spot most of us have and where we most lack perspective is what metric we choose to measure our success.

I've had so many people I've been able to learn from in my life. My wife has shown me the most selfless giving spirit I have witnessed. My mother showed me what it means to be kind to everyone you meet. My dad taught me the importance of focus and detail. I have had so many people believe in me and help me get ahead in business. Inevitably, my best examples and best advice has come from a friend honestly telling me to look at myself more closely and helping me find a better way to see another person's viewpoint.

If you think back to your business strategy classes, good strategy always starts with a value proposition. If we all lived our lives thinking of our strengths and constantly striving to differentiate ourselves from others not just to win but to serve a purpose, we would live happier lives.

If it's marriage and family, no other relationships can get in the way of your commitment and responsibility to your family. If it's your business career, don't flit around watching everyone else get ahead and think they are more successful or more interesting. Do your thing. Work hard, work purposefully and learn everything you can about the area you decide to work in. Go deep and be all in. If it's exercise or sports or hobbies, be steady and constant. If it's your spiritual life, don't sporadically commit when it's convenient. Commit always.

It's very important to keep balance in your life. Be the best at your one thing, but don't lose sight of the other things that matter.

Be brutally honest with yourself on how well you are serving these ends. And have the humility to realize you picked the wrong master, and be willing to pivot.

Clayton Christensen, A Harvard Business Administration professor wrote a paper on humility. He wrote:

"It takes a lot of self-esteem to have real humility. Humility is not always being self-deprecating. Humility is always knowing the truth about where you fit into life."

There's a lot of talk about what's wrong with the world? Most of what I read seems to be telling someone else what they need to fix.

I'm sure many of you have read what G.K. Chesterton, a 20th century theologian and essayist said when asked, "What's wrong with the world today?" He mailed a fully addressed letter and answered simply with two words:

"I am"

He was thoughtfully saying that most of our problems are caused by us not wanting to fix ourselves.

You will be humbled and you will be faced with a decision: to either grow and be better or be left broken and bitter. It is a choice.

We have a lot to do with the way the world presents itself to us based on how we choose to see it.

Christensen continued:

"Don't worry about the level of individual prominence you have achieved; worry about the individuals you have helped become better people..... Think about the metric by which your life will be judged, and make a resolution to live every day so that in the end, your life will be judged a success."

My hope for all of you here today is that you find YOUR authentic self that God put you on this earth to be. Free of ego, self-pride, self-doubt and any desire to be anyone else but yourself. My Now, Never and Next discussion is really stated very clearly in an adaptation of the Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change,
the courage to change the one I can,
and the wisdom to know that one is me.

If you can master this prayer with a true awareness of your authentic self, you will most assuredly find true joy and contentment in your lives.