

Congratulations class of 2020 !

It is a great honor to be your keynote speaker today !

My faculty colleagues and I are so proud of you !

You have finished all of your homework, turned in your essays and presented your final projects at the University of Tampa.

As a mathematics professor, I don't mind celebrating with you that you may have taken **your last math class!**

Enjoy your day, enjoy your week, Celebrate for as long as you can !

If I could write a book, the title would be: It's O.K. to be Ordinary.

Now I know what you are thinking. Aren't I supposed to be telling you that you can **be** whatever you want to be? An astronaut, a neurosurgeon, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

You just have to work hard, stay focused and have a little bit of luck, and you can accomplish anything? Right?

So how can I start a graduation speech by proposing a book on being **Ordinary?**

Now I am a big proponent of hard work and setting goals
... and a little bit of good luck never hurt anyone.

But I want to talk with you today about those times when **what** you are **actually** doing and what you expect yourself to be doing may not be the same thing.

I grew up on a farm outside of a town with a population of 500. Like many of you, I couldn't wait to go to college – for the people I would meet, the experiences I would have and the opportunities a college education would afford me.

And college did not disappoint. The road was dotted with bumps and divots, and forks in the road when I could not decide on a major. I was an ROTC cadet, so the journey included carrying an actual ruck sack at

times. But, it was a worthwhile trek, and I made it. I completed my degree in computer science, and I was on my way ! ... or was I ?

There is not a time in my life when I struggled more with my place in this world and most importantly **my contribution to this world**, than when I sat where you are now... and the months that followed.

There I was, sitting in my cubical, eating my ramen noodles, and wondering “Am I doing this right?”

I had played up this fantasy in my mind of professional greatness, and the pages in the book of reality did not match these visions of grandeur.

I can see now, that my feelings of failure were unnecessarily holding me back,

and I want to share with you, how you can increase *your positive impact* on this world from wherever you are in your professional journey and your life plan.

And although I am still pondering, the current subtitle for my book is:
Living an Extraordinary Life.

Chapter One will be about Caring, Chapter Two: Growing and Chapter

Three: Taking Action

Here are some highlights.

Caring is not only a show of concern but also attaching importance to something.

It all starts with Caring. You can actually develop your ability to care and deepen your connections to this world.

A couple of things that I have found to make my relationships stronger and to build new friendships are **firstly**, investing my time.

Just as I did in college, I am sure that you shared many experiences with your friends at the University of Tampa that ran the spectrum from late-night philosophical discussions to **solve** the problems of the world to **pure fun**. These friends – some of whom may be sitting with you today - are worth the investment.

Secondly, I try to notice people, listen when they talk, and and make an effort to remember the things that are important to them.

Once I was listing for my family the chores that I do – either to encourage them to do theirs or admonishing them for not – but when I got to ‘I buy the groceries for this family’ one of my children said:
‘Wait a minute. That’s not a chore. You go to the grocery store to

see your friends.' This made me smile. It's true. I enjoy going to my local grocery store because of the people who are there

and this made me reflect on how **my personal community makes me happy.**

So as you work to build your personal community, which for most of you is going to be new, put some thought into your interactions with those around you and be intentional in creating a space that makes you happy.

The chapter on Growing is about increasing the breadth and depth of your reach.

It is important to meet people who live in other parts of the country and the world and traveling is a great way to accomplish this. I have had

a chance to talk (and listen) to people on a bus in Portland, at a flea market in Moscow and a restaurant in Guatemala City.

All of these experiences added new dimensions to my thought processes and deepened my appreciation and ability to care for the world.

My hometown had no stop light and no restaurants. In fact, when I went to college the only restaurants I had eaten at served steak, fried seafood, or had a buffet.

The summer after my freshman year, I went to Atlanta to stay with my cousin and she said ‘Hey, let’s go out to dinner. Where do you want to go? Chinese, Mexican, Greek?’

I said “No. I don’t **know** what to order at any of these restaurants and I may not like anything.”

But she insisted.

She said we'll find one dish at each restaurant that you can eat and then you won't have to tell your friends you can't go out or veto their choices.

We'll start with Chinese food. You can order sweet and sour chicken and get the sauce on the side. It's just like a plate of fried chicken with BBQ sauce.

And it was! And sweet and sour chicken became my dish.

But most importantly, she opened a door for me and nudged me across the threshold, ...

Her kindness changed the way I approach unfamiliar things.

Likewise, I encourage you to try new things: new foods, new fashion, new genres of music. Get out of your comfort zone, one dish at a time. The more you expand your view, the more beauty you will see in differentness.

The final chapter in on taking action.

When you care and are connected to your environment and you have devoted time to growth – you are naturally called to action to improve the world around you.

I admit, it can be overwhelming once you recognize all of the things that need to be fixed. **But don't be paralyzed by the perception that you are ineffective to create change.**

Edward Lorenz is the father of chaos theory. Chaos theory has implications for many fields to include mathematics, but perhaps the one most relatable after four years of living in Florida, is the unpredictability of weather systems.

Lorenz hypothesized that the motion created by the flapping of a butterfly's wings in South America could lead to a tsunami on the other side of the world. This is known as the butterfly effect.

Small acts of kindness, good deeds, that you do on a daily basis, create a domino effect that travels across space

- You touch one life, improve one person's day and they in turn pass that positivity on to someone they encounter – and the joy spreads exponentially.**

The positive impacts of your actions also spread through time – setting into motion positive events that happen in the

future. When I think back on how I made it from that small town in Georgia to be with you today - one of the greatest honors of my lifetime, I am reminded of the countless acts of kindness and support by others that propelled me forward –

from my undergraduate mathematics professor who called the financial aid office to have my scholarship extended by a year when I found out it was only meant to cover three years,

to my neighbor at Ft. Hood who took my son to daycare when my babysitter moved suddenly and I had a one-hour commute to graduate school.

Small acts of kindness that had an **outsized punch** and kept me in the game.

So I encourage you to ...

Do one thing – start with small steps. If there are twenty pieces of trash on the beach, pick up one.

While you might miss the other 19 pieces of trash, the seagulls won't miss your actions.

You will see, as I have found, that you don't have to have your career figured out today, you don't have to produce a blockbuster movie, win the Pulitzer prize for literature or the Fields medal in mathematics...

... to impact this world in a **huge** way.

If you **care** about your community – wherever that may be – you take time to **grow** and develop your perspective and you **act**, even in small ways,

you will have a **tremendous** effect on society that expands as you go through life.

Get out there and live an extraordinary life !!!

Congratulations class of 2020!