

President Vaughn.... Distinguished guests and members of the Board of Trustees.... my faculty colleagues.... Families and friend of the graduating seniors and of course, the University of Tampa graduating class of 2017.... what makes this day extra special is not just the presence of your families (although that is wonderful)... but also the fact that many of you are sitting with friends you've made at UT, friends who, if you're lucky and you work hard enough at it, should be close to you for the rest of your life.... I am fortunate that I have one such college friend present here today, Kenny Schwarz, along with his wife Lois and his son, a Fulbright Scholar, Matt. Almost 40 years ago Kenny and I were sitting through our own graduation ceremony ... through the years we've laughed and we've cried together (although he will deny that last point), we've discussed and we've debated (he'll claim victory on most)... I danced at his children's weddings and tonight he will dance at my eldest daughter's wedding... as in six hours, Shayna Bachman, UT class of 2010, will be getting married....so it is indeed a memorable day for all of us...

When I received this humbling award last spring I immediately started to think about what I possibly could share with you, the class of 2017, that you would see not only as relevant, but also helpful.... I played around with all sorts of angles but everything I came up with sounded either like your grandfather talking about the good old days or that annoying neighbor yelling at you to get off his lawn and get a job.

Then I had a thought. Just maybe it would be a good idea to turn to those who not too long ago were in the same seats you now occupy –graduates from the University of Tampa. Maybe they could share some relevant, helpful insights as you take your first steps out into the world as UT alums. So I gave myself an assignment over this past summer. I reached out to more than sixty graduates with whom I have had the pleasure of maintaining contact and asked them simply this: what lessons have you learned that you could share with your soon to be peers? And what do you know now that you wish you knew then? Yes, I crowd sourced this address. I received a flood of responses, and even though some wondered if they would have been receptive to this kind of advice when they were graduating, they all thought it a worthwhile exercise.

Through the intervening months as I collated the responses I recognized that there were some recurring themes and it is these I have organized into this address, which I am calling: Four Lessons From Your Future.

Not surprisingly, many of the respondents talked about practical matters relating to issues that you, and certainly your folks, find near and dear: work and money. And I'm here to deliver the news that most of what your parents, mentors and teachers have been telling you is actually true. You need to be personally responsible. You need to show up early and be ready; appearances DO count, so dress accordingly.

Many of your bosses are not going to be nice. They'll be slow to praise and treat you in a manner to which you may not be accustomed. But keep your eyes on those bosses; learn from them what not to do in your future.

Be responsible and do your homework – oh, yes, homework doesn't end with graduation; if anything it just gets more complicated, because you're going to have to figure out your own assignments.

And sooner or later you will no doubt discover that you will draw on your UT experiences in unexpected ways. Jennifer explains it this way: "I am a Chef," she writes. "I did not major in "chefing" at the University of Tampa. I majored in Communication and English. So I understand this ever-present question: Why don't you use your degree?"

My answer? I use my degree every - single - day.

She goes on to explain that her years at UT taught her how to analyze, process, and criticize; how to think independently, logically and creatively. Then she writes: "My husband describes it as learning to "think around corners in a round room.""

But even if, after all of your self-assigned homework, you are still unsure about something, be humble, and don't be afraid to ask. No one will think less of you for doing so, especially if you actually listen to the answer. Yes, many alums stressed LISTENING. And in their own words, not mine, they urge you to " Put those damn phones down," make eye contact, and LISTEN.

And you'll be surprised to learn that those to whom you DO listen will be not only impressed but flattered. And then John in Washington reminds you to: "always express your thanks and gratitude to those who have helped you in any way, shape or form."

And be responsible to your future self. That's a lesson stressed by the older alums. Because, God willing, you will all one day become older alums, closer to the end of a working life than to a beginning. This is one of those critical "I really wish I knew then" moments, so listen up. Many of the Alums don't want you to make the same mistake they made, by stumbling out of the starting blocks of saving for retirement. What? Here you are graduating and I'm talking about retirement? Times flies by. It's a scientific fact that the older you get the faster time passes (it has something to do with math and physics, I think, but that's not my field). As an example, though, just look how quickly your years at UT went by. So even if it's just a few dollars every week, forge the habit of saving for your future self. Start with your first paycheck; do it with every paycheck. Your future self will thank you. Profusely.

So Lesson #1 is to be responsible, for yourself and also to yourself. And don't worry about how others are getting along. Alex put it best: "Some of the least put together people I've (ever) met have had some of the most put together Instagram pages."

Lesson #2 is to be patient.

There are those of you who believe you know exactly where you are headed and you're eager to find that perfect opportunity. Lauren got caught up in that and she warns that there are no "perfect opportunities," there are just opportunities, and when they don't work out the way you imagined, then move on and take the next one, and the one after that.

Take the pressure off yourself. Be patient.

And keep realistic expectations.

Many alums recall their disappointment in not making the big bucks immediately. But don't give up. Don't turn down those low-paying jobs, they advise, because they are the steppingstones to your career... "Stepping Stones." I like that analogy because Stepping Stones are seldom laid out in smooth, straight lines, and that resonates with one of the most significant overriding themes that your peers want you to know.

Kori expresses it this way (quote): "I wish I had known that there is no direct path to a career. We have these expectations when we are in our early twenties - ones that say we must get to these certain points at specific times in our careers or lives. But it just doesn't happen that way. And the inevitable stops, the changes in directions, the mis-directions and the subsequent adjustments you make along the way, even if they seem to take you farther from what you thought were your goals, are actually what make you who you are in the long run.

Clea echoes these sentiments. “I wish I would've known how the unexpected detours were meant for my growth,” she tells you. “I wouldn't be who I am today without them.”

As Tyler sees it, you will gradually stop living your parents' dreams and begin to discover, and live, your own.

Powerful stuff. Those dreams will reveal themselves, but you must be patient. That's lesson number 2: patience.

So we have responsibility and patience.

Now we have lesson # 3: balance.

“There is more to life than a career,” an alum writes. “I spent most of my twenties working 16+ hour days. I wish I had left more time for other pursuits.” Another alum advises: “don't miss out on life experiences, friends and family for the sake of work.”

Tim in Chicago recalls that: “Many people frame goals around careers, with the implication that a career is the key to a happy life. But that is just one facet of your life... a “career” simply doesn't touch on the many things, the many values, which are as, or even more, important.”

Greg up in New York City agrees: “Make time to do what you love to do, especially if you're not doing it for a living,” he writes. “Make that time. And keep going and don't let anyone tell you any different.”

Find the passions that sustain you outside of the work environment, because if a job goes away through downsizing, market adjustments, reorganization, relocation...or even retirement, you will still have a sense of purpose, a grasp on who you are, a reason to keep moving forward. Your job, your career can't and should never define you; only you can define you. The danger in making your job the one defining element of who you are is that if you lose that job, you lose yourself.

So find, maintain and sustain that balance. That's lesson number 3.

So we have: be responsible, be patient, be balanced.

Now the final lesson:

Your fellow alums want to remind you of the incredible advantages you've enjoyed at the University of Tampa. A few even went so far as to describe attending a private university as living under an umbrella of privilege. It's seductive to remain under its protection, but it casts a long shadow and your peers urge you to do everything you can to get out from under it. This takes work. This takes effort. This takes commitment.

Scott reminds you to recognize and accept that you are a part of a wider community and always be on the lookout for opportunities for selfless acts without the expectation of anything in return. And he assures you that whatever you do – helping out a sick neighbor or a person without shelter, maybe working with physically or emotionally challenged youths...

... these efforts will mean more to the people who will benefit from them than you'll ever know. Scott knows this as a fact for he had been on the receiving end of such selfless acts at many points in his younger life.

To say we live in tumultuous times is underselling what is happening both here and abroad. Just this semester we've suffered through all sorts of storms, both natural and man made, hurricanes and hate, earthquakes, fires and tsunamis created by tweets.

Modern communications have shrunk the world while, at the same time, ironically insulated us from the thoughts and experiences of others. Many choose to happily live within their own echo chambers, their own bubbles of comfort and similarity.

Your fellow alums urge you to not only step out of your own respective echo chambers and but to also actively avoid, to work against, the unfortunate American pastime of the "dislike of the unlike." Think about what YOU are saying; pause before those re-tweets, reconsider before you cut, paste and repost. If you find that you are merely repeating the thoughts of others with little reflection, take some time to re-evaluate.

And move away from the familiar. Actively seek out people who have different perspectives. Not to change them, but to listen, to consider, even to understand.

Be civil in your discourse.

Be examples through your actions.

Carlin quotes Martin Luther King: Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. So please, she asks of you... work to be the light.

And that is lesson number four: be the light.

So your fellow alums urge you to be responsible (to and for yourself); be patient, be balanced and be the light.

I, and your peers, hope this has been helpful.

I, and your peers, wish you, the graduating class of 2017, all the best.