

Paul Heth
Commencement Speech
University of Tampa
May 11, 2019

President Vaughn ...

Members of the Board of Trustees ...

Members of the administration ...

Distinguished members of the faculty ...

Proud parents and families ...

And—above all—members of the Graduating Class of 2019

Thank you for inviting me to deliver this commencement speech today. As a proud graduate of the University of Tampa, I am humbled and honored to be here, and I am beyond gratified for the trust you have placed in me.

To be honest, I'm also a little stunned. That's because, twenty-nine years ago, I sat among you, as a member of the Class of 1990, about to receive my diploma and embark on my own life journey. On that day, I would have never, in my most sun-baked dreams, envisioned myself one day standing on this stage as a commencement speaker.

Our school motto, “Esse Quam Videri”—“To Be, Rather than to Seem”—has inspired the recollections of my journey that I am privileged to share with you today. I don’t have to pretend to know what it feels like to be you—because I once sat in the tenth row of this audience, filled with the same anticipation, fear, insecurity, excitement, ambition, and energy that you all possess today. Twenty-nine years ago, I *was* you.

As I reflect upon my time on this campus, I realize we’ve all spent our formative years enlightened by an educational philosophy that encouraged us, first and foremost, to *be* good rather than to *seem* to be good. To strive for a life of substance, rather than a life of superficiality. At the time, of course, I had no idea how much the ancient call of our school motto would inform my life. But it was the desire for authenticity—*for genuine connection and continual improvement*—that provided me the roadmap for cultivating a rewarding professional and personal life.

So today I thought I’d tell you a little about my life and my career—and I promise to make it the CliffsNotes version.

I grew up in Southern California in the 1970s. My father was out of the picture early in my life. Yet I actually learned a lot from my dad. His lack of help in providing for us gave me a sense of resiliency and ambition—I was always the kid who wanted more because we never had much.

My mother raised her four children on her own, scraping together enough money from her job in a bank to provide for us and keep a roof over our heads. Don't get me wrong—there was always love in our home, if not lots of money.

At school we qualified for the free breakfast and lunch programs. My sister and I were never offended about accepting these meals. But we did want to show our appreciation. And so each day we got to school 30 minutes early to work in the cafeteria, serving breakfast to our classmates whose families were also in need of a little help. To escape our day-to-day challenges, my sister and I went to the movies, where I was transfixed by the powerful stories being told on the big screen.

I left home at a young age and eventually enlisted in the United States Army. During the waning days of the Cold War, I was stationed in West Berlin,

Germany. From Checkpoint Charlie, I could look across the Berlin Wall into Soviet-occupied East Berlin. I could see for myself how different life was on the other side of that wall, and I think those images seared into my brain the value of giving every one of us the chance to live our fullest possible life.

That experience affirmed how grateful I was, as an American, to live in a country where we could achieve our ambitions. So here's the first lesson I'd like to impart: Always remember to count your blessings—and give back when you can.

Several years into my enlistment, my company commander suggested I had the leadership skills to be an officer, and he helped me apply for a college scholarship competition. I won the scholarship, and I applied to the University of Tampa, which graciously offered to cover my room and board. Our University has been recognized as a “Military Friendly College,” and I am among thousands of current and former members of the United States Military who are forever indebted to Tampa's commitment to support both veterans and young people who wish to serve in the defense of our great nation.

I know many of you graduating today also received scholarships to help pay for your college costs. And I know you will never forget that your undergraduate experience was made possible by unknown donors—strangers to you—who were wise enough to believe in the value of a college education and generous enough to follow through on those beliefs. Another reason to count your blessings.

So I enrolled in the University of Tampa. Now this is the part of my speech where I'm supposed to tell you I spent all my free time in the library, I made the dean's list each semester, and I graduated at the top of my class.

But I will tell you the truth instead.

The truth is that here at Tampa, in addition to offering tremendous academic programs, there were lots of great parties, beautiful beaches nearby, and a huge swimming pool in the middle of campus that was frequently occupied by my classmates and me. Enough said. So while I was an average student academically, I did become the first in my family to graduate from college. I know we have graduates here today who are also the first in their families to earn a college degree, and to all of you I extend my heartfelt congratulations.

As I prepared to leave the military, the same officer who had recommended I apply for the scholarship suggested one day I should go into business. I never saw myself as executive material. But that officer saw something in me that I never saw in myself—and his belief in me provided another valuable lesson: Don't ever put limitations on your ambitions or your expectations.

In 1993, just a few years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, I found myself in Russia. I had a total of \$600 to my name. One night I was out with a friend at a bar in Moscow, and we decided to go see a movie. But we could not find a single movie theater in all of Moscow. We were shocked.

I soon learned the film industry in Russia was in full crisis. Without state support, the industry could not sustain itself. So I got this wild idea to fill this gaping need—my partner and I would open our own English-language movie theater.

I was able to secure the rights to a 1992 film, based on the seminal novel “The Plague” by Albert Camus. We opened our single-screen movie theater

in the lobby of the Moscow Radisson, and we showed the film each night for two weeks—and night after night, much to my amazement, we sold out.

Remember that advice I gave you earlier—about never putting a limit on your ambitions? This was a good example.

What did I know about the movie industry? But I saw a need, and in that need I saw an opportunity. So here's the lesson I learned firsthand: Be open to opportunity, and make sure you're ready for it when it presents itself—because it will. There's an expression attributed to the great French scientist Louis Pasteur: "Chance favors only the prepared mind."

While our Moscow theater became a phenomenal success, I knew we could do more, because I viewed the movie industry in Russia as one great big opportunity. Our big break came in 1996. And it began with a stroke of luck, when I met a Kodak executive at the Moscow airport. Talk about opportunity!

I asked him if Kodak might partner with me in building a state-of-the-art cinema in downtown Moscow. In time Kodak agreed to make a large

investment, and shortly thereafter we opened a truly grand cinema just a stone's throw from the Kremlin. We built it to resemble a theater from Hollywood's Golden Era, with a sweeping staircase and shiny brass rails, a huge marquee above the entrance, and a 60-foot screen complete with digital sound—a first for Russia. We called it Kodak Cinema World—or, in Russian, Kodak *Kinomir*.

Now all we needed was a blockbuster movie. Somehow I was able to get the Walt Disney Company to give us “The Rock,” starring Nicolas Cage—at the time, one of the biggest movie stars in the world. “The Rock” was a smash hit. Ticket lines stretched for half a mile. Within a year, the *Kinomir* became one of the top-grossing single-screen movie theaters in the world, launching Russia's modern cinema era—in which I am immensely proud to have played a part.

I believe my work in the film sector, both showing and producing films, has helped to build bridges between different audiences and different cultures.

And I think much of that is due to the bond we form when we share our stories—something I learned as a young boy in California. I especially like this quote from Walt Disney himself: “Of all our inventions for mass

communications,” Walt said, “pictures still speak the most universally understood language.”

When we share our stories we discover our common humanity. And that might be the most important lesson I’ve learned in my career and from my time as a student here at our beloved UT—the ability to make meaningful connections is the true definition of success.

In the two decades since we built the Kodak *Kinomir*, I’ve had the good fortune to partner with some of the leading figures in the film industry. Together we’ve built scores of movie theaters in the United States and Russia and produced some amazing motion pictures. As an example of our achievements, today box office receipts in Russia are nearly \$1 billion a year—of which nearly half are from companies I founded and managed.

Members of the Class of 2019: As you leave your campus today to make your mark on the world, I would encourage you to keep your eyes open—keep your minds open—to *all* possibilities, even possibilities you can hardly conceive of today. It’s entirely likely that some of you will enjoy long and prosperous careers based on technologies that do not even exist today.

That's because the world is changing all the time. Those changes will carry with them opportunity, and those opportunities will carry with them your best chance for a happy and productive life.

Before I conclude today, I want to express my appreciation to Richard Schmidt, the head coach of the UT's men's basketball team. Coach Schmidt has coached here for over 35 years, and during this time he has made a lifelong positive impact on hundreds of young men who have played and worked for him. I am proud to be among them. Thank you, Coach.

My beautiful wife Marianna—and my son Henry and daughter Stephanie—are also here today. I mention this because Marianna and I have heard many of your personal stories, as told by your professors. We would both be very proud parents indeed—as I am sure your parents are today—if our own children show the same resolve, determination, and commitment to success that you all have displayed on your respective journeys toward becoming members of the 2019 Graduating Class at the University of Tampa.

Again, my congratulations to you all. Thank you.