

University of Minnesota, Duluth
Commencement
May 15, 2010
Duluth, Minnesota

Chancellor Martin, Regent Baraga, Regents of the University, Distinguished Faculty, Class of 2010, and friends.

I want to express my deep appreciation for the honorary degree which the University has bestowed upon me.

Chancellor Martin's call early one morning, telling me that I had been selected to receive this honor, tops the list of special surprises that I have experienced in my lifetime.

While I never anticipated receiving this honorary degree, my days at UMD, and then the Minneapolis campus, gave me an important launch on the path I have followed since.

I feel compelled to note, however, that a friend familiar with my academic record commented that the two regular degrees which I previously earned from this University were also best described as honorary.

Today, I would like to share 3 observations with you.

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First, you are likely to live and work longer, and therefore your career - or likely careers - will be more varied, than those who came before you.

To put this in perspective, when the first graduating class of the Duluth Normal School - the original predecessor of UMD - took place in 1903, the average life expectancy of an American was 51 years.

By the time the Normal School became the Duluth State Teachers College in 1921, the average life expectancy was 61 years.

When I was born in 1939, the number had risen to 64 years.

By 1947, when the State Teachers College morphed into the University of Minnesota Duluth, average life expectancy had grown to 67 years.

And, when most of you were born, around 1990, life expectancy had climbed to 75 years.

Think about what you are going to do with an "extra" 24 years in your life - as compared to those born in 1903.

As a result, it is very likely that you will have the great opportunity of more than one career in your working life. You may start in the business world, then bring your experience to government, and when that gets "old," you'll share your expertise and experience with the non-profit world. It will keep you engaged and productive.

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Second, there is almost no chance that predictions made today will turn out to be any more accurate than those made 60, 90, and 108 years ago. And, something you hear over the next year that seems unbelievable will turn out to be true.

Here are some predictions from by-gone days:

From 1903, just over 100 years ago:

"The horse is here to stay, but the automobile is only a novelty - a fad." That was the advice a Michigan bank President gave to Henry Ford's lawyer. And,

"Flight by machines heavier than air is unpractical and insignificant, if not utterly impossible." Simon Newcomb, an American astronomer.

From 1921:

"The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?" David Sarnoff, who founded NBC and RCA.

From 1947:

Talking about the first digital computer, IBM Chief Tom Watson declared, "I think there is a world market for maybe 5 computers." "Popular Mechanics" magazine declared that someday computers would weigh as little as 3,000 pounds.

Henry Ford declared that the VW bug was so small and ugly, it was absolutely unsaleable. Then, VW sold 20 million bugs.

On the other hand, would you have believed:

a UMD commencement speaker who said in 1991 – the year that the first text message was sent – that

4.1 trillion text messages would be sent in the year 2008, or

the commencement speaker, in 2004, who said that

an internet service started that year, called Facebook, would have 400 million people connected worldwide by 2010, and that 200 million of them would connect daily, or

the speaker in 2006 who said that by 2010,

75 million people monthly would send out 1.2 billion, 140-character, messages called "tweets," on a system called Twitter?

But, all of those things did happen....most of you use them, and so do I.

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My third observation is that - life's paths, including yours, will be serendipitous. With a little luck, curiosity, and an appetite for experience, good usually comes of it.

In 1961, when I sat where you are sitting, I certainly never planned or anticipated that I would work in the office of a Minnesota Attorney General, a United States Senator, or a Vice President of the United States...but, by chance, at the age of 25, I met Walter Mondale, who is here today with his wife, Joan. He gave me my first job out of law school, when he was Attorney General.

At the age of 50, I took a chance. A new friend suggested we start a firm to provide government relations and lobbying services. Within 10 days I resigned from my partnership in a major law firm to join him. The chance we both took has resulted in a great, 21-year partnership.

Because I made that decision, I had the time to volunteer to ultimately be:

part of 10 Presidential campaigns, and to manage the program for 6 national Democratic conventions,

and, to assist with the hearing preparation of 4 people who were nominated and confirmed as Justices on the United States Supreme Court.

In 1998, I was invited to join the board of The Human Rights Campaign. 6 years later, at the age of 65, I became co-chair of the Board of the largest gay and lesbian rights organization in the world. As a straight man, I have not had a more rewarding experience.

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Finally, as you go forth with the next phase of your lives and careers, let me suggest the following:

Don't hesitate to explore and follow the interests about which you are passionate. If your passion can be satisfied in your employment – great! If not, carve out some time to volunteer.

Be willing to take the risk and advantage of serendipitous opportunities.

If you are seeking a particular opportunity, show how interested you are in being considered. If that means sitting outside someone's office for 48 hours seeking an interview, do it.

And...perform each job that you have, paid or volunteer, whether or not you think it is worthy of your talents, as if it was the most important job you will ever hold. Your diligence will be rewarded.

Good luck! - Opportunity awaits you.

(as given; rev. 5/17/10)