

Commencement Address (“Convocation”) to English Dept graduating class of 2010
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign
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Foellinger Auditorium

Thank you Curtis—administrators, esteemed professors, guests, parents... and thank you, Class of 2010. Go ahead... make some noise!

Yes that’s right, I graduated from this great institution—and in Rhetoric no less. Actually I was a townie—which means that my first time here in Foellinger Auditorium was probably in the ninth grade when my friend Forest and I broke into the steam tunnels somewhere around Engineering and got lost under this stage on our way to sneak in to the Journey concert over at the Assembly Hall.

So some of you may have been wondering why they asked me to come speak today. I mean who is this guy whose collected works are 21% twitter, 55% blog and a couple dozen dog eared college-rule notebooks packed away in a dusty storage unit somewhere. This guy who never even got a job in English. (does such a thing even exist?) I’ve been wondering the same thing. Clearly they didn’t go back and read any of my term papers.

Well, It probably has something to do with the fact that you have about a 2% chance of getting a job where anyone actually cares that your degree is in English, much less Rhetoric, whatever the hell that is. Join the club. The story has always been about the same as far as I can tell—though certainly the job market today could be straight out of some kind of Dickensonian plot from hell. Why sugar coat it?

The good news is that you’re English graduates, which means frankly you don’t give a damn. Obviously. Otherwise you would have been in Law, or Business, or Engineering or one of those majors where people start out knowing what they want to do with their lives. What’s up with that? I mean, I was once one of them. I started as a freshman in Mechanical Engineering and couldn’t believe I was actually going to be spending the next four years with those people—my god. So, I switched to LAS—where I took a variety of inspiring classes, like Billiards and Photography and then spent a year abroad smoking a lot of hashish in Nepal. I returned for my senior year, switched into English, and by god if they didn’t actually give me a degree. Like I said, clearly they didn’t do their fact checking.

Life after college was pretty much the same. I rode my bicycle across the country, then hopped freight trains back the other way. Worked on a salmon fishing boat, drilled deep sea cores on a research boat, worked construction for a couple years, traveled around as a vagabond rock climber, and racked up about \$20,000 in credit card debt.

Yes—a model English grad.

It was only when I was 26, one frosty morning in Ashland, Oregon at a job site where my boss dropped off a shovel and said, “Dig a hole for that sign”, when I really got it. There’s something about trying to

dig a hole in the frozen ground with a blunt instrument that clarifies the mind and feeds the entrepreneurial spirit.

So here I am, up here, talking to you now.

But why, you still ask.

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that I spend a fair amount of my time thinking about the future. Daydreaming is I suppose what you call it. Last year I was a coach of the Energy and the Environment program at an extraordinary new institution called Singularity University. Led by futurist Ray Kurzweil and Peter Diamandis, the head of the X Prize foundation, the University aims to try to train a new generation of young people how to come to grips with and get in front of a phenomenon Ray calls the Singularity, a point in time, only about 20 years in the future when the computing power and speed of a standard \$1000 computer will overtake human capabilities. For some of us, of course, that point in time will happen a lot sooner.

The portent of this event poses profound questions about the nature of humanity and about our future... what is the boundary between simple augmentation—the simple kind of human augmentation you get when you pick up an iPhone and tap into Google—and a more permanent kind of transhumanist future. What is the boundary between man and machine? And do we care?

You my friends, for better or worse, are our guides in this wild new frontier. More than any other generation of *homo sapiens* before. If that's what we still are-- and since it may fall to your generation to come up with a replacement name, you as well might start thinking of one.

So let's gaze into the crystal ball together. But first let's take a look backwards. Way back.

To the beginning of life.

It arose, early on via single celled archea, which knew neither past nor future. Truly living in the now.

Slowly organisms began reaching backwards and forwards in time. Applying the lessons of the past, via memory, to the future—first with simple means, later with cognition, reason, logic. We began to choose the future branches of our multiverse intentionally.

Mammals evolved to care for their young, and the connection between generations was made.

Of course, it was language that began our most radical transformation. With speech we passed on wisdom, told stories, used myth to answer uncomfortable questions for which we had no easy answers. Then came writing, later Gutenberg and the big bang event of the printing press. With it we syndicated knowledge... forward in time, and outward in all directions. And created modern media—from which we are still trying to recover.

Slowly we began to compete more with information than physical force. Even today, though our military dominates our budget and projects force around the world, it is the pen which gives it license to

do so. The pen is mightier than the sword? The pen guides the sword is perhaps more apropos. Remember, without the cover of a Judith Miller story, the occupation becomes harder to justify.

And the information revolution continues... even while papers like the Rocky Mountain News fold after 150 years, and Comcast buys NBC, the internet is changing the game fundamentally in ways we are only just beginning to understand.

So, where are we headed? I really have no idea. As William Gibson said, "I don't have to write about the future, for most people the present is enough like the future to be pretty scary."

I do know that last year I was facebooked in the space of two weeks by my entire kindergarden class. This may be the last generation where we won't be automatically hardwired to everyone we ever met from birth by default. Enjoy these last days of the horse and buggy while you can. Your kids will look at you with blank stares when you tell them that you ever lost touch with someone. Just as you look at us when we wax wistfully about 8 track tapes and Holley carburetors.

Back to the Future perhaps?

Remember we used to live in tribes. Everyone knew everyone else. Those of you who grew up in small towns know what I'm talking about... and are probably desperate to forget it, I'm sure.

You see, the social model that works best for us humans is the golden rule. Or, if you prefer, the Prisoner's Dilemma, as cheekily renamed by the RAND corporation in the 1950s. "Trust" by another name. It is built on time served. Time served with the people around you, the ability to look at them face to face, to hear the tone of their voice, to read their body language... to know how many times they lied or cheated on you in the past, to know their parents, their sisters, their brothers. It's our sanity check on what we're told, and the social model that evolution naturally selected for. Over the last several hundred years, and particularly in the last twenty five, we've broken that model. We no longer even know the names of those on the next block, let alone the same apartment building. And the anchorwoman that reads the news with a demeanor and a voice conditioned by years of training is completely divorced from the guy that actually writes the words she's saying—she literally has no idea whether what she's telling you is true or not... How perfect.

Facebook, and others like it, are just the stumbling, pimply-faced start to a new paradigm. But the challenge is clear: Can we re-engineer information, and re-inject trust into the distributed, far flung lives that we lead today before we hit the wall?

The tools are simple. Aristotle gave them to us first in 340 BC. The elements of standard rhetorical critique—assumptions, thesis, evidence, logic—are so straightforward they can be taught in a single semester of Rhet 105. Yet fallacies so old they go by their latin names still permeate everyday discourse. Clearly on the whole we've failed to make any progress whatsoever. Glenn Beck or Keith Olbermann—take your pick, in the end there's not much difference—it's all ad hominem, ad populum, ad nauseum. The fact that a large fraction of Americans get their news everyday from a service called Comedy Central is more telling than anything at all.

Yes, the traditional media is dying a slow tortured death. And good riddance. Of course, the medics in white lab coats at Apple are getting the clappers out to see if they can resurrect the ugly beast with this new gizmo called an iPad. I hear that the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times really think this is going to save their butts. I guess no one told them that charging for their content while the best stuff is available elsewhere for free is only going to hasten their demise. Like I said, good riddance. Meanwhile it's you that's going to suffer while this house is burning.

Of course the internet, such as it is, is no remedy. In fact, it's worse. There's a famous cartoon that came out about 15 years ago... it shows a dog sitting in a home office talking to another dog, saying, "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog." Well isn't that the truth. And we humans are well known to shop for point of view until we find one that suits us best. We accessorize with it. Its like bling or flair. And, on the internet, where you can find anything, its non stop shopping. Most web-only news sites, like the Drudge Report, HuffPo, the Daily Kos, Politico, Talking Points Memo, Free Republic... peddle a point of view and peddle it pretty hard.

Our lack of progress is no accident of course. Remember, we compete with language—truth is not the objective, victory is. And as long as these garden variety tricks remain effective, we will continue to do so.

Well we'd better fix the system fast. What's at stake is the future of our existence.

We stand at multiple tipping points... in climate, in energy, in raw materials, water... not to mention in economics and even civil liberties. Yet people with no technical background whatsoever will debate the evidence for these tipping points with arguments that fail under even the most modest analysis. With climate change, where I spend my time these days, the irony is that they will argue it is not a threat while using cell phones, the internet, and modern broadcast media to do so. All of them apex products of over a hundred years of humanity's most advanced science-based technological development.

Last week the scientists at the NOAA Storm Prediction Center gave an unprecedented 3 day advance warning of the tornado outbreak that happened in Oklahoma. They got the timing right down to the hour—which represents at least an order of magnitude improvement over what was possible even ten years ago. The governor thanked the scientists on live TV for saving lives. And next year, NCSA will throw the switch on Blue Waters, IBM's latest, right here at the U of I. A quantum leap forward—*faster than the 500 fastest supercomputers in the world put together*—it will allow us to peer even further forward. Yet, what is the use if we still cannot convince people that these same models, when used to predict climate change, are accurate enough that we ought to at least give them a modicum of credence?

I keep wondering why the people of New Orleans would leave town when models tell them there is a 90% certainty that the hurricane will hit their town, but a large percentage of the same people pay no attention when the same computer running a similar model tells them that there is a 90% certainty their city will be uninhabitable if emissions continue.

Our progress in computing, biology, neuroscience, materials, geosciences, physics and cosmology is advancing at an astonishing rate—yet our progress in knowing whether or not something is really true has essentially gone nowhere in 2300 years. In fact, one could make a very credible argument that we're losing ground.

As they say on the airplane—before you try to help your kids, make sure your own oxygen mask is on first. And... information is our oxygen.

We must reengineer information, we must rediscover the foundations of trust, critical thinking and argument. We must demand the truth, and then we must inject it like adrenaline straight into the heart of the patient before it's too late. We must crowdsource rhetorical critique *on what we read at the point that we read it*—a truth filter on the information we consume at the point of injection. By the time it makes it to Wikipedia, it's too late. All this is quite possible with the technology we have at hand—nothing more needs to be invented, it just takes simple application. If you're interested, find me later.

Which brings me to you guys. You see you guys have been given the keys to the kingdom. You understand language, logic and persuasion at a forensic level. And literature gives you the perspective to apply it. Nobody ever told me that. No one ever pointed out that English is like a secret weapon. A smart bomb in the Occupied Territory of Idiots.

So, I'm here today to ask you to use your special super powers to demand that the truth be told.

There is still time. If I've learned anything over the years, it is that disruptive change is, well, disruptive. The right leverage at the right point can move the world.

Whatever you decide to do, I have a few pieces of advice that have served me well. They've told me I can't let you leave without a few pieces of obligatory advice—so here they are.

First, Dream Big—and work backwards from there.

Back in 1994 I started the first e-commerce web site on the net. Later the next year, we launched the first travel booking web site. The first travel reservation ever made over the web was made over a server in my living room in 1995—and if you've ever booked travel online, there's a good chance you've used our technology. Over 6 years, we built that company, called GetThere, up from just a crazy idea with three people rattling around in a 10x8 foot office to a company with over 500 employees. Travel is now .40 cents of every dollar spent online. In 2000, that company sold for—well, lets just call it an obscene amount of money.

So, here's the secret: The bigger the idea, the more everyone else wants to be a part of it. Behind your back, the cynics will still lay even money on you failing, but if the idea is big enough, they might also just

have to say yes to your face on the off chance that you might actually be on to something. Start small and it's easy for everyone to say no—in fact they'll revel in it. Small ideas are a waste of people's time. Big ideas capture the imagination, and what's more they often require big budgets. Have a big idea and people start to smell a meal ticket.

Remember, history rewards those that throw caution to the wind. Of course, the history books don't tell you about all those poor bastards that threw themselves against the wall again and again and failed miserably. But, we're not here to talk about them now are we? Exactly my point.

Go big.

Second: Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never give in.

Those words were the entire text of Winston Churchill's 1941 commencement speech to his prep school. Oh, I think there was another sentence with some caveats for honor and good sense. It's actually the shortest speech on record. Or at least it was in 1941.

It's good advice. Nothing of substance that is worth doing is easy. If it was, by definition someone else would have done it first. The world is like that. Just be sure you revisit your prime assumptions occasionally—maybe once a year on January 1st... or maybe April 1st would be more appropriate. If they're still accurate, then the real question is: do you have what it takes to stick it out, to reinvent your approach, to improvise, adapt, overcome, and reorganize in the face of what only appears to be insurmountable opposition. Oh and yes it always takes three times longer than you first thought.

Just remember, when people tell you you're crazy, you know you're really on to something. As the Chinese proverb goes: "The person that says it cannot be done should not interrupt the person doing it." The Chinese were quick like that.

Third: Ask for help.

Lets face it—you can't do everything. To the compulsive obsessive control freak in all of us, this is nigh on heresy, but it's the truth. In fact, you don't even have all the good ideas. You're lucky if you even have a few good ones now and then. But we can all spot talent. Those are all the *other* guys doing amazing things. So invite them on to your team. Now this may seem pretty much impossible when you're starting from scratch, but that's where your impressive English communication skills are going to come in handy. See how that works?

Seriously. Never never never never ever be afraid to ask for help. For the gals, that comes naturally, but for us guys this can be just about as hard as getting to the top of Everest without oxygen in shorts and flip flops. You're going to have to practice. Once you get started, it's actually a lot easier than it seems. You see—I'll tell you another secret—people love to give advice.

Which, by the way, leads me to my next piece of advice.

Always ask for advice, never ask for money.

People can smell it a mile away when you're about to ask them for money. In fact, it's probably the reason they cancelled that last meeting on you. But if you call someone up and tell them you need some advice, oh and also can you take them to lunch—they'll almost always say yes. Then you lay it out for them—if this was your situation, what would you do? Who would you talk to? Would you mind making that introduction for me? Can I call you again? If you can keep people saying yes around you, it's amazing the things you can do.

Believe me, they'll figure out what you're there for, and if they're inclined to fund your crazy idea, they'll let you know. After all, if they were stupid, you wouldn't be asking them for advice in the first place, would you?

Last: Start at the top. And if you can't get the personal intro, then Fedex the CEO and offer to take him to lunch.

As a CEO myself, I can tell you that if I got a fedex from someone that wanted to take me to lunch, I think I'd be so surprised, I'd have to take them up on it just for the hell of it. I mean, how often does that happen? Now that might seem like an expensive way to get a hold of someone, I mean, emails are cheaper, right? But the CEO is probably never going to return your email, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out. Now, 5 fedexes are going to cost you fifty bucks—which may seem like a lot of money, but if they're the top 5 companies that you're looking for a job from, then it probably makes sense as a budget. And I guarantee you're going to get at least one or two responses. You have to stand out—you have to do what no one else is doing. Swim upstream. That's what guys like me are looking for—someone just crazy enough to buck the system and smart enough to make sure they get in front of you. Persistence and audacious creativity get grudging respect.

Also, remember that only the CEO can say yes without hesitation. Everyone else is basically paid to say no—It's their ass on the line after all.

Ok... so here's the final thing.

Tell the truth. No, don't just tell the truth. DEMAND THE TRUTH. And start with yourselves.

Registered as a democrat, a republican, a libertarian--green? Probably not—actually the stats say that nearly 30% of you, and increasingly more, are just plain ol unaffiliated independents. But if so, ask yourselves why. Remember the hardest frame to get out of is the one you box yourself in from the very beginning. And here in Illinois where you can vote in any primary regardless of whether you're a

member of that party, what's the advantage to you? I know what the advantage to those other guys is—I'm still struggling to figure out why any of us would ever choose sides ahead of time. When you walk around in life with a big sign on your forehead, its always easier for everyone else to shoot spitwads at you.

So—after you've gone down to the DMV and unchecked that box, then start demanding some answers.

Demand to know why Hamid Karzai is still the president of Afghanistan, why he's still backed by our bullets and our soldier's blood, while his brother (in the employ of the CIA) is the biggest heroin dealer in the country.

Demand to know why we are still fighting a so-called War on Terror—a war we can never win, but for which the price tag continues to escalate unfunded outside the budget. The only people getting rich in this whole business are the oil companies, the bankers and the defense contractors.

Demand to know why the Federal Reserve, a private corporation that exists beyond the control of the US Federal Government, still resists our efforts to conduct a full audit of its activities. An audit called for by congressman Ron Paul and a majority of his colleagues in the US House this last year.

Demand to know why our government still has not released half the classified documents from World War II, the Vietnam War and the Kennedy investigation. And why the ones they do release are still 50% redacted.... Which basically means that they leave all the parts that we really cared about. By the way, have you ever wondered how on earth can anything from World War II still be classified?

Demand to know why we're not shutting down Guantanamo despite the fact that most of the several hundred detainees that remain, imprisoned now for nearly 10 years, still have no formal charges filed against them, and that many of them, by our government's own acknowledgement it has no evidence whatsoever to prosecute. Habeus corpus anyone?

Demand to know why Tucker Carlson at CNN refused to air the video of Building 7 collapsing the day of 9/11.

The list is long... this is just a few from mine—what are yours?

Whatever you do, try not to fall in the biggest trap of them all—as we fuddy duddies get older, we get more reluctant to speak out for fear of the repercussions in our professional lives. We don't want to make waves—because as you get older, you're not supposed to do those things. You interact with the world in a different way, and all of a sudden everything and everyone are somehow precariously connected to your meal ticket. Please, don't fall into that trap. And remember that maybe the biggest secret of them all is that other people are jealous of those with most the courageous voices. Be thoughtful, speak your mind—but first be able to articulate the other point of view even better than they can. It's the ultimate trump card.

So, I'll close with a quote. It's actually, a sign that reads:

“We were once what you are. You will become what we are.”

That sign is above the entrance to the crypt of an unassuming little Roman Church on the Via Veneto that which is covered with the skulls of about 4000 Capuchin Monks.

Don't believe the hype. We bred like rabbits, we screwed up the planet, we wrecked the economy, then we saddled you with more debt per capita than an IMF bailout to pay for a state education that should have been free in the first place. Are you kidding me? Don't be anything remotely like us. The future is yours, and thank god, because you're the only ones that can fix it now. You're our last best hope. And I know you can do it. You're from the best damn school in the United States, and god damnit, you're English majors.

So load your bandoliers with number 7 gel ink ball rollers and over the ramparts with you!

So--- I have one last special favor, I need you to help me with something.

We're all here for one reason and one reason only—and that's because our high school English teachers were gods. And one amongst them stands taller than the rest. He's an extraordinary man named Ray Stoia. Ray, are you here? Will you stand up, sir?

Ray—you gave me a gift that I will never be able to repay. Above any teacher that I can recall, you inspired me. It was your passion, your intellect, and your ability to stand there and take those relentlessly crappy papers I spewed at you week after week that made me the man I am today. You do all of us credit, you do me more credit than I deserve, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Ray retired a few years ago from Urbana High School, where he taught for 30 some years and where he was a cubs fan for longer than that. How has survived this long, I have no idea.

Will the rest of you all stand with me and give him an incredible round of applause, for a life well lived, and for many well deserved years to come filled with pina coladas on far away beaches. When you're rich and famous, don't forget the English teachers. They are saints every one of them.