

Senior Last Lecture
Miami University
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Please know that standing before you is an emotionally fragile being who at any moment could quickly disappear into a formless puddle of nostalgic goop.

In less than a week, I cross the half-century mark. My daughter, our first born, sits among you. Within 2 weeks, she'll graduate into rightful independence from the very institution at which her mother and father met, fell and stayed very much in love. I stand at a podium amidst storied grounds that carry indelible memories for me. I share this podium with the University President whom we revered as students – at a time when very few college presidents were revered across the nation. A man who still brings me to tears anytime he's handed a microphone and asked to regale an audience with history of Miami University or the sovereign state of Ohio. Further, I look out at you knowing of the high standards and credentials that today's graduating class embodies, and I feel such a sense of pride that My Miami has never been stronger.

Now, those are a lot of emotional soft spots. All I'd need right now is a stanza or two of "Old Miami, New Miami," and you could cart me off to some rest home blissfully chanting in tongues.

Courtney Green, your enthusiastic chair for this evening, suggested I speak to you about leadership. Specifically, what I've learned by simply being so dog-gone much older than you. (Okay, that's not exactly what she said, but it's what they meant.)

Actually, she said you'd all be hanging on the edge of your chairs to hear what I've gleaned from my career which might be applicable to you ... so that each of you could consider what I've picked up from all my worldly experience and then set out to do things exactly your own way anyway. (Okay, she didn't say that last part either ... but, hey, we've had three teenagers.)

Courtney pointed me to the University website, where, for inspiration, I could read transcripts from prior Last Lectures. I did, and was really impressed. First, that I could find the website without needing the usual assistance from my 13-year-old son. And second, by how speakers from previous years had approached this challenge.

One-by-one, I read how some pretty distinguished alumni were able to distill their life's lessons down to these really cohesive, finite and highly relevant lists – the 5 C's of character-building, 6 tenets for team-building ... that sort of thing. I'm always amazed by people with that talent, and presume they crank out textbooks for doctoral students whenever they have a few minutes to kill.

Me. I'm still working on which months have 30 versus 31 days. Class of 2002, I apologize. At a stage in life when I always assumed I'd have etched my personal philosophies in stone somewhere ... and enjoying the privilege of being cantankerously set in my ways ... I'm still trying to find my way.

In defense, however, you must realize I was launched from campus with only a modicum of off-campus advice. As I recall, upon my graduation from Mother Miami, only one older sister had

remembered to impart any everlasting wisdom on my formative psyche. Her counsel? “Don’t take yourself too seriously, Little Brother, or no one else will.”

“Don’t take yourself too seriously, or no one else will.” Very cute, I thought. But then it wasn’t too long thereafter that I recognized she wasn’t just being funny. In fact, damned if she hadn’t been downright profound.

Like many, or possibly most Baby Boomers back then, I absolutely reeked with self-importance. We were a generation hell-bent to change the world. We were determined to change government, to change commerce, to change education, to change society ... to change everything in our path. Then for about the next 10 or 15 years we mostly managed to change our minds ... moving from Woodstock to Disco ... from Hippie-dom to Yuppie-dom ... from selling hope to selling out. What we lacked in experience or humility, we more than made up for in numbers ... all 76 million of us. Never has a generation with such critical mass moved across America’s timeline ... that is until yours.

Social scientists like to lump generations into your standard 20-year increment; and, according to most, yours started with those babies born in 1978 ... and will top out at more than 80 million once the final impact of immigration is determined. So whether you knew it or not, since birth, you’ve all been pioneering for the very group that will once and for always unseat your parents’ generation, my generation, as the center of demographic power in this country. I, for one, resent you for that.

But as such distinguished pioneers, I would have thought the least you would have done by now was come up with a name for your generation that might stick. Generation Y ... The Millennium Generation ... Echo Boomers ... the 14th Generation ... The Ritalin Generation ... The Self-Esteem Generation ... and on and on. Every time I go to read about you, or more importantly, try to market products to you ... I have to keep checking to see if you’re still the same ones who used to be called something else. If you’re not careful, you’ll ultimately be remembered as “that generation with the massive identity crisis.”

Anyway, in 1975, I came bounding out of graduate school into the management-training program of one of the world’s largest & most prestigious ad agencies – convinced the profession had been awaiting my arrival and that there was a sculptor somewhere already shaping my bust for the eventual Advertising Hall of Fame ceremony. I was a tad ambitious.

The first rung on my corporate ladder was as account executive on the agency’s IBC client ... which did and still does stand for Interstate Brands Corporation. Based in Kansas City, IBC is a large baked goods company recognized nationally for Dolly Madison snack products, and regionally for a variety of popular breads. (Butternut)

Throughout my early months on IBC, I did what all new account executives do. I crunched numbers in relative obscurity. Market research data. Market-by-market sales data. Media data. You name it, I crunched it. Column after column, table after table, day after day ... hoping to hit some magic key on my calculator that might generate the least little bit of numeric interest from the layers of bosses above me.

Yeah sure, “paying one’s dues” was okay for the other trainees, but certainly the agency’s brain trust must have grander plans for me. Then one day, my ship came in. The executive assistant

for the senior vice president whose group I was in, stopped by my office. She said Mr. Welch needed to see me about a trip he was sending me on.

I was euphoric. My first business trip. Dan Welch, a guy with a corner office that had actual living trees in it, wanted to meet with me personally. I set a land-speed record to his office ... and was waved into his hallowed space. **“Mitch, come in, please. We have an unexpected problem.”** (“This must be HUGE,” I thought. “What marketplace crisis required the insight of the agency’s newest secret weapon ... me?”) Dan, I mean Mr. Welch, continued. **“You know we’re filming a new television commercial for one of the breads here in Chicago tomorrow.”** (“So what’s this have to do with my trip?” I wondered.) **“The cameras roll at 7AM, and it’s absolutely critical the loaves of bread be as fresh as possible for the close-ups in the storyboard.”** (Now I was completely puzzled.) **“This particular bread is baked out in Lawrence, Kansas ... and unfortunately someone forgot to make special arrangements to fly in the bread ... and it’s too late to postpone shooting without eating the studio charges.”** (“Ugh.” My heart sank.) And you guessed it, later that evening I was flying United Airlines to Kansas City.

All the studying, all the preparation through four years of college, then grad school. All the job interviewing. And, yep, I was finally on my first real business trip. To pick up bread. (“Heck, I might as well pick up some milk and toilet paper while I’m out there.”)

A car and driver met me at the airport and drove me a couple hours into the middle of Kansas. At 2:10 AM, a dozen perfect brown loaves were pulled from an oven and carefully packed in a protective, temperature-retentive crate. The driver delivered me and my important cargo back to the KC airport in time for the 5:30AM departure to Chicago. Checking in, I learned the agency had arranged a first-class seat for my 12 travel companions – and I would be allowed to sit next to them. In Chicago, I was met by another driver who took the thirteen of us directly to the studio, where we arrived miraculously at 7:00 AM.

Having pulled an all-nighter on short notice to salvage a day of costly film production, I anticipated at least a modest hero’s welcome. And, indeed, there were cheers when I walked in. But only for the royal loaves as a production assistant rushed to relieve me of them ... or perhaps more accurately, them of me. Someone else quickly phoned Mr. Welch at home to inform him the bread had arrived safely. And as best I could tell, he didn’t think to ask about me. I quietly slipped out, hailed a cab and headed to the agency to spend another day with my trusty calculator – some eight or ten hat sizes smaller.

Twenty-six years later I wish I could tell you I was exaggerating this story for your benefit ... but I’m not. And it wasn’t until I had related this story to friends a few times that I could laugh and appreciate how my all-night bread run had allowed me to actualize my sister’s worldly advice to not take myself too seriously. It was a great lesson in humility. And countless times since, I’ve learned I have much to be humble about.

Over my 27 year career, I’ve been fortunate to have some things go my way ... heck, a few of my offices have even had living trees in them. Likewise, many friends and peers with whom I’ve worked have had their share of successes.

But it’s a funny thing. When we end up together reminiscing, it’s never about big client wins ... ad campaigns that won awards ... promotions or accolades that one person or another earned.

Instead, we talk, we tell stories, we laugh, about the near misses ... the screw-ups ... the foul balls ... or even the complete strikeouts.

And that **is** where I direct your attention tonight. The bumps in the road. The setbacks. Probably the last thing in the world you want to think about when you're on the eve of jumping into your own "real world" of choice. But guess what? Those setbacks are out there waiting for you. They lurk amidst your daily routines as well as your special projects. Your personal life as well as your professional life. You'll be breezing along fine, then BAM ... you drop a ball ... you misread a situation ... you go chasing down a blind alley. And life as you know it comes to a temporary halt.

A sad truth about many professions is that the day-to-day universe is often populated with more "no's" than "yes's." Throughout my career, it has been fascinating that so many folks have viewed advertising as a somewhat glamorous field. And maybe it is, if you're a masochist. Consider that if you're a relatively successful ad agency, for every account you pitch and win, there were at least 4 or 5 times as many you pitched and lost. Not to mention the many other companies you contact in an average year, who aren't interested in hearing your pitch at all. For every ad campaign you successfully produce for a client, there are dozens and dozens of concepts that died somewhere along the line ... paper and cardboard corpses put to rest in waste baskets, file cabinets or on conference room floors. And guess what, for every one of those pitches or unsold campaigns ... or media plans, or new product ideas, or whatever ... there were literally scores of people who gave up late nights, weekends, even holidays ... from relative newcomers to seasoned veterans who invested their talents, hearts and souls. People across every department and support group who, more often than not, saw their high hopes dashed by the mere horizontal motion of someone's head in a meeting.

In advertising, like many jobs, one experiences a steady diet of rejection. That doesn't mean you learn to like it ... at least I hope not. But to be successful, one must learn to make the most of each one of those glorious failures ... to inwardly search for the lessons and use them as your own rally point to bounce back.

Name the career ... sales ... research ... treating patients ... turning young minds on to the power of education ... writing ... painting ... handling legal cases ... investments ... whatever. No one gets to bat a thousand when you turn pro. For many, like baseball ... bat over .300 and you become an all-star. Miami seniors, to ready yourself for the success you so richly deserve, you must also ready yourself to cope with the many seeming failures that are about to come your way.

Sometimes you'll be the victim of circumstance ... at the wrong place at the wrong time ... or not lucky enough to be at the right place at the right time. Sometimes good, even great, won't be good enough. Sometimes you're going to run into somebody who's better in a given situation. And sometimes you'll just flat screw up.

Throughout 16+ years in classrooms, you've had the lessons of Abe Lincoln, Babe Ruth, Albert Einstein and loads of other historic, almost clichéd, figures tossed your way. Individuals who allowed their "willingness to fail" propel them to greatness. Well, the rest of us who will never make it onto the pages of any history texts will still be judged by those around us by how we handle our day-to-day adversities ... big and small. More importantly, this ability may

ultimately be the single biggest determinant in how we judge ourselves ... how our self-confidence builds or wanes ... how passionately we're able to throw ourselves into any situation.

I don't know about you, but the folks I admire most are the ones who always seem at ease with themselves. And usually, they're the ones I'd consider most successful ... whether measured by personal accomplishment, contributions to others, or by personal fulfillment and contentment. They're the ones that seem willing to live a little ... to take some chances. It would seem they've never known failure, but that's simply because they don't allow the potholes to consume the joy from their journeys.

They stand as living testaments to the ultimate expression of the scientific method ... unafraid to acknowledge that life is a grand, joyful experiment ... a laboratory of trial and error ... of learning then applying.

And with that, you may consider yourselves "lectured last."

Good luck and God's blessing to each of you in the journeys, in your grand experiments ahead. Be certain, there will setbacks along with successes on the road from Oxford, Ohio. May you openly celebrate the lessons from either ... and remain willing to smile – and yes, even laugh – about both. Thank you.