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Class of 1982
Senior Last Lecture 2007

Thank you for the great introduction. Thank you all for your wonderful welcome. It is such an honor to deliver the Last Lecture to the mighty Miami University class of 2007.

I have five children, including three in college, who can only dream of the day they will get their last lecture from me. In fact, one of those children is here today. Brooke is a junior at Miami, probably one of the only juniors at this event. I promised I wouldn't embarrass her, but I will anyway. Brooke, I just want to be clear: This is *their* last lecture; this is not *your* last lecture.

Believe it or not, 25 years ago, I too, was a senior at Miami University. I have to admit that as graduation approached, I was mildly panicked about the fact that I hadn't lined up a job. I wanted to be a newspaper reporter, so I gathered up my best articles from the Miami Student. I typed up a resume that listed my rather meager accomplishments and cumulative grade point average and so forth. And I made 100 copies of everything and sent out a mass mailing to the top 100 newspapers in the state of Ohio, which seemed like an awfully large place to me at the time. And I sat back and waited for the job offers to roll in.

The only problem was that we were in a recession in 1982, one that was deeper than any we have seen over the last quarter century. Lots of newspapers were going out of business, flooding the job market with reporters who had far more experience than a guy like me, who hadn't even graduated from college yet.

And so every day I went out to the mailbox in front of the house I rented with four buddies on East Chestnut Street across from the Rex Ox drive through. (It was very convenient for when we needed milk and juice and soft drinks.) And every day, I received not job offers, but rejection letters. Dozens and dozens of rejection letters. This is going to sound strange, but I got so many that I thought it would be funny—in an ironic, college humor kind of way—to tape them all up on a wall in our living room. Sort of a wall of rejection. And whenever we had parties, or someone would stop over, they invariably would be drawn to these letters, which they found fascinating. Because they all said the same thing, but each in a slightly different way. Some were impersonal form letters that began: 'Dear applicant: We regret to inform you...etc.' Others were individualized notes filled with helpful advice. They were all very diplomatic and polite. But they all said essentially the same thing—no.

And then one day I received a rejection letter from one of the biggest papers in the state, the Columbus Dispatch. It was a form letter, but at the bottom the editor had handwritten a post-script. I'll never forget this as long as I live. It said: "P.S.: You had better learn how to spell the word 'cumulative' on your resume, or no one in this business will take you seriously." I raced to my dictionary to discover that indeed I had managed to make not one, but two separate spelling errors in that single word. I was horrified to realize that instead of informing the editors of Ohio about what a great writer I was, I had instead warned them that I couldn't even spell.

And then, as if to add insult to injury, I received a call a few days later from a friend who happened to live in Columbus. She said: 'You're not going to believe this, but I'm sitting here, reading my Sunday morning Columbus Dispatch, and the editor has written a story making fun of you, Bill Sammon, for misspelling "cumulative" on your resume.' So instead of just 100 people, there were now a million people in the state who knew I couldn't spell my way out of a paper bag and therefore was utterly unqualified for a job in the newspaper business.

But eventually, I somehow managed to find work in the newspaper business, first in Ohio, where I ended up at the Plain Dealer in Cleveland. And then I moved overseas and became a war correspondent in Europe and the Middle East. Finally, I settled in our nation's capital, where I've worked as a White House correspondent for most of the last decade.

I'm one of those very fortunate people who truly love what they do for a living. After all, what's not to love? I get to work in the West Wing of the White House. I get to fly around the world on Air Force One. I get to walk into the Oval Office and interview the President of the United States about anything I want. I get to write books about the most historically significant events of our time—and we live in momentous times. Best of all, I get to go on TV and shoot my mouth off about all of this. I mean, I can't believe they actually pay me for this. Please don't tell my bosses, but what I do is actually fun.

You know, I recently saw a movie in which a guy described his career as "actually fun." It was the actor Topher Grace (best know for "That 70s Show") in a film called "In Good Company." Topher plays a hyper-ambitious 26-year-old executive who becomes the boss of a man twice his age, played by actor Dennis Quaid.

At the end of the movie, the two men close a major business deal that saves their careers. They work at a sports magazine and they convince a businessman to buy a bunch of advertising in the magazine.

After they close the deal, they leave the businessman's office and Topher says to Quaid: "That was amazing. That was unbelievable! That was actually fun!"

Quaid replies: "And you know what the best thing is? It's the right thing to do. It will improve his business."

Now this causes Topher to stop dead in his tracks. He's just incredulous and says to Quaid: "Wow, you actually believe in this stuff."

Quaid smiles and says: "Of course I do. Why else would I do it?"

I thought that was a rather profound exchange because it said a lot about those who have meaningful careers and those who don't. Dennis Quaid was having a meaningful career because he was not only making enough money to support himself and his family, but he also felt like he was helping others. He was doing the right thing. He was serving God. He was serving his fellow man. Call it what you like, but it gave some meaning to his career.

By contrast, Topher Grace felt empty about his career. Oh sure, he made more money than Quaid and was arguably more successful, at least on paper. But the job left him feeling unfulfilled and he eventually began looking for another line of work, perhaps as a teacher.

My hope is that each and everyone of you finds a career that is meaningful. And whether you're a teacher or a salesman, a stockbroker or a social worker, I'm convinced your career will have meaning if you at least occasionally make an effort to help others along the way.

Of course, a career is not the sole purpose of your college education. In fact, when you get right down to it, a career is a rather utilitarian use of your degree. Education is to be treasured for its own sake, regardless of whether you ever use it to get a job. It is intrinsically worthwhile, in and of itself, to be educated at a place like Miami University.

Why? Because Miami teaches us the greatest lesson of all, the ability to think critically. The ability to try and make sense of the world around us. The ability, as corny as it may sound, to seek the Truth. Yes, that Truth—the one with a capital T.

Let me try an analogy on you. When I first graduated from Miami, I had some down time, thanks in part to my spelling misadventures. So I took a road trip with a fellow Miami grad up to Canada and visited some friends of his on a remote island out in the Georgian Bay. At night I looked up at the sky and was just astonished by how many stars I could see. There were millions of them and at any given moment you could see several shooting stars streaking across the sky.

Now, I couldn't begin to make sense of all those stars. The only ones I could even identify were the Big and Little Dippers. I knew that only a trained astronomer could truly appreciate the magnificence of that night sky. That's because astronomers are able to get their arms around the totality of what they call the celestial sphere. They have divided that sphere into a grid of constellations and have mapped thousands of stars in each of those constellations. Of course, even astronomers cannot begin to know the full dimensions of the universe in all its vastness. But when they discover a new star, they are at least able to place it in the proper context of the celestial sphere.

The same is true of education. None of us can ever hope to know all of human knowledge. We simply don't have enough brain cells or time to learn all the facts and complexities of our existence. But when we come to a place like Miami University, really smart professors and administrators teach us crucial lessons across a broad spectrum of essential disciplines, from literature to mathematics, history to religion, philosophy to economics. We are able to divide up the sphere of knowledge, if you will, into a grid of individual disciplines and then see how they fit back together in a harmonious ensemble.

That way, when we graduate and embark upon that great continuing education program known as life, we can make better sense of new pieces of information that we encounter along the way. We understand how these new pieces fit into the entirety of human knowledge. We recognize the connections. We glimpse the patterns. We grasp the big picture, even if we can't possibly learn all the little details.

As I mentioned at the outset, I have five children. Two of them are Hokies at Virginia Tech, site of last week's tragic massacre. Ben is a freshman who was on the drill field when he heard the shots and ran for cover. Brittany is a senior with a German minor. She has taken many classes in the academic building where most of the victims were killed, including a beloved German professor that she knew.

Ben and Brittany came home the day after the massacre and my wife and I were able to hug them and hold them and spoil them rotten for a few days. We gave them lots of home cooking and took them on a shopping trip to the mall. And toward the end of last week, they learned that they did not have to go back to college if they didn't want to. They could take whatever grades they had so far and receive credit for the full semester. In other words, they could get an early start on their summer vacation.

And yet they both decided to go back to Virginia Tech to finish up the school year. I was very proud of them for making that decision. Now, to be perfectly honest, I think Ben had an ulterior motive. He has a couple of Bs that he wants to try to turn into As when he takes his finals.

But Brittany already has straight As. She just didn't want to end her college career on the terms of a mass murderer. She wanted to go out on her own terms, so she went back to finish her classes and take her last round of finals. And then she and I and the rest of our family will attend her graduation ceremony, which will no doubt be an emotional experience because Virginia Tech will be posthumously awarding degrees to the student who were slain.

Brittany, like her father so many years ago, is mildly panicked that she doesn't have a job lined up. But I'm not worried. To tell you the truth, I'm looking forward to having her around for a little while longer before she goes off to find her way in the world. And when that day finally comes, I'll feel a twinge of sadness as she says goodbye. But mostly I'll be joyful in the knowledge that she is ready to begin her journey.

And each of you will also be ready. Ready to make sense of the world around you. Ready to serve God and your fellow man. Ready to embark on your lifelong pursuit of that elusive concept known as the Truth.

Take it from someone who graduated from this incredible place a quarter century ago. You, the mighty Miami University class of 2007, have been superbly prepared to lead meaningful lives in these momentous times.

So congratulations, good luck, and thanks again for having me here today.