

University of Toledo
Commencement Address – **AFTERNOON CEREMONY**
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What to take with you. What to leave behind.

Good afternoon everyone. Thank you, Chairman Zerby, for that kind introduction. My appreciation also to the members of the Board, and a very special thank you to Dr. Naganathan. Nagi, it has been my pleasure to get to know you as we have worked together on several projects here at the University. You are truly an amazing leader, educator and person. I've valued your support and friendship over the years.

Of course, I also want to especially congratulate the more than 1,000 graduates who are the reason we are here today! Being a parent, I would be remiss if I did not ask each of the graduates to give a big round of applause to your parents, family members educators and friends—especially the Moms who are celebrating Mother's Day with us today. Grads, give these folks a hand...they deserve recognition right along with you.

As I prepared to come here today, I thought about how I felt back in 1975 when I was in your position. I had just completed my mechanical engineering degree here at UT, and as I sat for graduation, I had an odd feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's a feeling some of you may find very familiar right now ... a cross between total elation (It's Miller time!) and desperation (What the heck am I going to do now...will I make it in the world...will I end up happy and fulfilled?)

For me, this feeling was perhaps even more intense. My graduation was just about four months from my wedding day to my wonderful wife Marcia. Now, 40 years of marriage and two sons later, Marcia was the best decision of my life. UT was a close second, though.

Big life transitions have a way of forcing emotions and questions to the surface. Whether it's graduation, marriage, career choices, retirement, or whatever, when we hit a major pivot point, we often take a mental inventory and decide what things we will take with us on the next leg of our journey and what things we can leave behind. That's the theme of my talk today as I share my thinking on what you'll need—and what you won't need—as you go forward into your future.

What to Take with You

First I'll start with what to take with you. At the top of that list is your **Connections with People**.

While you've been devoting everything you've got to your studies, I trust you also made time to connect with people—fellow students, professors and others you've shared your UT journey with. Some of

these people have become very important to you ... they supported you academically, emotionally, or inspired you in some way.

Some of you may have even found your life's mentor here at UT. I know I did. My mentor was a UT graduate after whom the College Computing Laboratory is actually named. I first met Bill Marohn when I was nearing graduation and looking for the right career opportunity. Bill had earned his engineering degree here at UT about 10 years before I did, and was working for Whirlpool Corporation. But he was on campus here recruiting, and eventually persuaded me to join Whirlpool as my first job out of college. He later became President and Vice Chairman of that company, spending 34 years there.

Once I arrived at Whirlpool, Bill was always there for me...helping me achieve my goals and giving great advice. It was not always what I wanted to hear, but it was always honest feedback with my best interest at heart. Because of his guidance, I stretched my capabilities in ways I would not have done on my own. Today, we still talk from time to time and he remains a positive force in my life.

So, keep the connections you've made with people here—they represent unique ties that you may find valuable and irreplaceable later. When it comes down to it, the world is about people. Keep your connections with those who have been part of your journey here wherever life takes you.

The second thing I want you to take with you is your **Integrity**.

As you've studied for your degree, you have been immersed in the theoretical—you've been taught the professional way to do things and the ethical considerations in your field of study. Yet, you have not yet been tested in the world of work where theory can clash harshly with reality. Ethical lines can become "blurred," "compromises" can be made and "gray areas" can appear.

While I'm certainly not suggesting that you become an inflexible autocrat, I am telling you that blurry lines, compromises and gray areas can very easily become **ill-advised decisions**, questionable ethics and even unlawful actions. I've witnessed how easily even some of the best people have been undone ... not because they set out to do the wrong thing ... but more often because they **slid** into it. It can be surprisingly easy to justify things based on success pressures or financial lures if you do not keep your head on straight and your integrity intact.

So, please, take with you the clarity you have today in what you know is right and what you know is wrong. One of my favorite sayings—used often by my mentor—is that there is "no right way to do a wrong thing." Even after decades in the work world—I often call on this phrase as a touchstone. Never compromise your integrity.

A third thing I recommend you take with you is your **Guts**.

Most ski instructors will tell you that it's easier to teach children to ski than adults. Why? It's because kids have not yet learned to fear falling—or failing—the way adults do. Kids are uninhibited, enjoying the process of falling (and failing) as they take on new challenges.

As we become older, we let things like doubt, fear and even worse—comfort—creep into our lives. Just like a thick fog, these feelings slide slowly under our door until we are surrounded in haze and terrified to take another step in any direction. The more successful we become, the more we have to lose, and the hazier things can get. The guts that we had as kids, the guts you have today as college grads, can become replaced over time by fears that can hold you back ... so much so that even the most promising talents can stay on the bunny hill for their entire careers rather than take a risk and someday master the black diamonds.

A quick story related to this ... about midway in my career at Whirlpool, I was being encouraged to move into a leadership position at a facility that was about 10 times the size of the one I was currently leading. I was running a 300-person organization and was being asked to take on a 3,500-person operation. I did not think I was up to this task so early in my career. I did not feel ready for it and thought it was way too much for me.

In fact, my boss at the time joked that at any given moment, more people at the new facility would be in the restroom than the total of the workforce at my current operation. Even though every fiber in my body told me to run from this assignment, at the advice of my mentor, I ended up pushing past the fear and taking on the assignment ... and I succeeded. I cannot tell you how valuable that experience was for me. It taught me a big lesson ... take steps forward and embrace risk even if you don't know exactly what's ahead. Be fearless and confident... be bold and stay gutsy.

What to Leave Behind

OK, now that we've talked about what to take with you, when you wake up tomorrow with your diploma fresh in hand, what should you leave behind? I have two thoughts for you.

The first is **Selfism...in other words, the "me...me...me"**

There are multiple meanings of this word, but the Oxford dictionary describes selfism as "a concentration on one's own interests or self-absorption." Now, before you boo me or throw rotten tomatoes, give me a chance to explain. Like most things in life, this has positive and negative aspects. Or, better put by Dr. Phil, "No matter how flat you make a pancake, it still has two sides."

Anyway, up to this point in your life, most of you have been rightly concentrated on yourself. You've been focusing on your learning, what you want to do with your life, how you fit in with others and what makes you happy. At UT, you've worked incredibly hard for the best grades you could get, taken internships or co-op experiences, and anything else that positioned you for the best job after graduation. This focus on yourself has been a natural, and even admirable, part of your existence.

But on the flip side, our culture today has an obsessive focus on self that I fear could get in the way of you becoming all you want to be and can be in life. I cannot believe I'm saying this to the generation who invented "selfies," but in all honesty, this is a great time for you to leave selfism behind.

Here's why ... when you land your dream job, you will be working with and for others. This time, it won't be temporary like working together for a class or during an internship. Now, you'll be working long term

with people who are not like you. There will be older people, people of different ethnicities, people you find weird or intimidating, people you love, people less talented but with more power, and people much smarter and more accomplished than you are. Trust me, you are going to derive some form of benefit—even if it is learning what not to do—from working with every single one of these people if you put yourself aside and see others more completely as individuals with something to offer.

Most important, you'll need to figure out how you are going to work with these wonderful and yet very different people to solve problems and be successful as a team—without you at the center of the universe. It may sound trite, but the power of teamwork is a lesson you learn only when you change your focus from an inward perspective to an outward perspective. Companies are looking for and recruiting talent that can work the best in teams and appreciate the diversity of the individual.

As you do this, also include the idea of giving back to your communities as part of your outward focus. Many of you already do this in some form. While you are the generation of selfies, you are also the generation that demands companies “**do good**,” and you care deeply about the environment. I encourage you to keep this up and amplify it as you become more established. Select at least one cause that means something to you and find a way to support it throughout your life.

For example, when I was a student here at UT, my father had renal cell cancer and passed away at the early age of 46—I was just 25 at the time. This had a profound impact on me, and it is one reason that Marcia and I recently funded a new cancer care center that's under construction where we live and work in Findlay, Ohio. This center will mean so much to patients and their families, and it means even more to us. Give your time, give your energy, and give your ideas to your community. When you are able, give cash too.

The other thing I think you can leave behind is what I call **Smallness**.

I know that UT is a major, vibrant university full of diversity with talented students and educators from all over the world. But, being a kid who spent my younger years in a small Tennessee town and then relocated to Toledo before high school, I also know there are plenty of you who are like me.

You come from a place where character and work ethic are big, but where your view of yourself can actually be quite small. It is not a matter of brains, skills or confidence ... it's really a matter of perspective. After working hard and completing my studies here, I knew inside that I was as smart as many, but I still was not really thinking big for myself. Somehow, really big dreams and big lives seemed to be for other people.

Well, that was obviously pure bunk. Here I am today, at age 63, honored to serve as the CEO of Cooper Tire & Rubber Company, a multi-billion-dollar global company. In my career, I've lived all over the world and been privileged to lead thousands of multi-cultural people. I received my degree from UT, not Harvard or Stanford. My co-op experience was right here in Toledo, not in New York or Southern California.

I'm here to tell you that you can do anything and go anywhere regardless of where you came from or the circumstances you came out of. You do not have to have a high powered resume to end up as the leader of a major organization where you do amazing things. You just have to change your perspective and believe you can do it. I never set out to be a CEO ... I did have a vision of running my own business someday, and my career took me in this direction. In fact, there's an 80-90 percent probability that what you plan to do today will be achieved differently than how you envision it right now. So, above all, have confidence in your core abilities and seize every opportunity to learn more than anyone else along the way.

What I'm talking about is actually what led to the Engineering Leadership Institute (or ELI) here at UT. This was launched in 2009 by Dr. Nagi with involvement and support from me and Marcia. The goals of this program are many, but at its foundation, this effort is about students seeing themselves as potential leaders—with no boundaries on where they can go in life. ELI also backs it up with education and experiences to give students the skills and tools, but it's very much about broadening the perception students have of themselves.

There's nothing you can do about what happened yesterday, but you have everything to do with what will happen tomorrow, next month, next year, and throughout your life. The future is up to you.

With that, you've got my shortlist of what to take with you into the future and what you can kick to the curbside and leave behind:

- Cherish the people you've connected with
- Never compromise your integrity
- Stay bold and gutsy
- Forget the "me" and learn to celebrate the "we"
- Drop small thinking and dare to dream BIG!

If this list doesn't resonate with you...make your own list. The important thing is that you think about it. Because as you get ready for the next leg of your journey, you'll want to pack lightly, taking only the right stuff along with you as you leave the rest behind.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today. Congratulations faculty, parents, and especially students. The world's waiting for you. Now go get 'em!