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May 9, 2009

O'More College of Design
2009 Commencement Speech

Let me first begin by saying congratulations. To the students for this great day of achievement. To the parents for helping to prepare your children for this day, what a great mothers day present. And to the faculty and staff for continuing to uphold the vision of Eloise Pitts O'More.

I have to admit that this is my very first commencement address. When Amy Shelton asked if I would do this, I said yes and then I asked her what I should talk about. Her answer was simple but scary, "Oh" she said "whatever you want to, you will do great". I spent days trying to think of a relevant topic for you. I knew you did not want to know what was going in the City of Franklin. What college graduate would? The closest thing I know about any kind of design is watching Project Runway with my kids. I looked up other commencement speeches and found great speeches from the likes of Barack Obama, John Kennedy, even Bill Gates. All inspiring but on subjects I know little about. I then became extremely worried that I would fail at my very first Commencement Address. It was then that I realized that I should talk to you about a subject that I know more about than anything else. FAILURE.

I have a PHD in failure.

I discovered that all commencement speakers quote famous people to get their point across, so I thought I should too. This quote is from one of my favorite characters.... Homer Simpson. "Kids, you tried your best and you failed miserably. The lesson is, never try".

From the very beginning of children's lives we as a society try to protect children from failure. We are afraid it will lower a child's self esteem. So we put them on teams where no child can be cut and no score is kept. We try not to give grades in early years because we don't want them to think that anyone is smarter than they are. We get them to wear school uniforms so that the children won't know that other people have more money than they do. So that when the time comes when you fail... as you will time and time again, you have not been taught to embrace the failure and learn from it.

Michael Jordan once said "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. and that is why I succeed."



I started failing at an early age. I remember vividly a spring afternoon at Hebron Elementary School, Fifth grade tryouts for the baseball team, I was ten, my mom and dad were not there, they were working, I so wanted to make that team. I practiced and practiced. But I was small, slow and fat. when they called out the names of he boys who made the team, my name was not called. It was a lonely, embarrassing, tearful walk home.

In 1970 at the age of 18, I was on top of the world. I was a sophomore at Indiana University, I had just pledged a great fraternity, I had lots of friends, a new girlfriend and I was on the varsity golf team. Life was great, I was having fun... Too much fun. Who had time for classes?? That 0.65 semester GPA was the final straw of my first college career. Embarrassed, facing the possibility of being drafted to go to Viet Nam, I went home to look at the disappointment in my parent's eyes.

Eight years later, after being readmitted to IU making the deans list every semester and having completed my MBA and graduating with honors I was on my way. I had a great job with one of the big banks in Nashville, I was making more money than I thought possible and was married with a small son. But my career became my life and I had my biggest personal failure, I failed in my marriage. That was the first time my failures had an impact on someone other than myself because I also failed my wife and my son.

Those were dark times for me and to cope I threw myself even more into my business. I started a real estate development business in 1980. In 1982, I met and married Marianne, still today, the love of my life . In 1985 we had our son Luke and in 1987 my company was named the 70th largest Shopping Center development company in the United States. So everything again was great in my life and then the real estate market crashed. I owed \$85 million and couldn't lease any space or sell a single lot. I had to file, at the time, the largest personal bankruptcy ever filed in Tennessee. I lost my business, my house and was as far down as I had ever been.

Henry Ford once said "failure is only the opportunity to begin again, only this time more wisely." So what did I learn?

In the fourth grade I learned I should play golf and not baseball.

In college I learned I should study and not play golf.

In my late twenties I learned how to be a good father and husband

In my late thirties I learned that material things could be quickly taken away and that I should focus on other things. So far the past 20 years I have put all my emphasis on the six things in my life that no one can take from me.

1. My family
2. My Faith
3. My friends
4. My intelligence
5. My sense of humor
6. My golf Swing



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So if you can take something from this day please remember that you are going to fail. And as you get older your failures will get bigger and bigger. Embrace them. They will make you stronger, smarter and much more confident in your life. The worst failure you could have would be listening to Homer Simpson and not try.

When my son Luke was in the first grade there was a project at his school to see who could drop an egg off the roof of the school without the egg breaking. The kids were to put the egg in something that would cushion the egg enough to keep it from breaking. I believe in letting my children do their own assignments so Luke came up with an idea to wrap his egg in rubber bands. On the day of the event they needed some help and I was asked to drop the projects from the roof. As I looked at all the intricately designed contraptions it was obvious to me that most of these projects were designed and created by parents. Luke's had the craftsmanship of a first grader. As I dropped project after project from the roof with few of the eggs breaking I kept putting off dropping Luke's, I was sure that his egg would not make the twenty foot drop. Sure enough when I dropped his project and the judges opened it up the egg was smashed and the look on Luke's face was one of complete devastation. I immediately climbed down the ladder and went to try to console my sobbing son. The only thing I could say to him was "Son, sometimes in life your egg just breaks".

So, I will say to you as I did my son eighteen years ago, remember, "sometimes in life your egg just breaks."

Thank you.



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