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Gary Cowger Commencement speech

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LINDENWOOD

Gary Cowger Commencement speech

Parents, students, faculty and honored guests, it's a privilege to be here.

I used to live very near by here. I helped build the Wentzville Plant and was the first plant manager there.

So I've been associated with this university for more than 20 years. Watched it grow. Watched it prosper. Watched it develop into the incredible institution it is today.

And when Dr. Spellmann invited me to speak, I asked him... what should I speak about?

And he answered, as only he can: "About 8 minutes." "Six," he said, "would be even better." And when I asked him if, speaking for so short a time, some of you might, you know, feel like you weren't getting your money's worth... Dennis reminded me that, since I wasn't getting paid... that would technically be impossible. And absolutely no one would mind.

– I think Dennis remembers the last time I was here and talked about "quality" for 30 minutes. Great speech. Wrong setting. I still strongly believe in quality... but I don't talk about anything for 30 minutes anymore. At least, not in public. So I promise I'll keep my remarks brief. Before I begin I want to give credit to someone who's never gotten as much credit as she deserves. A lot of commencement speakers have been inspired by a column written by Mary Schmich of the Chicago Tribune.

Five or six years ago she wrote a column that someone later posted on the Internet and said was a commencement address delivered by the great reclusive author, Kurt Vonnegut. It was called "Wear Sunscreen" and it was so thoughtful and so beautifully written, that not only did people believe it was by Vonnegut, the words went on to become the lyrics of a hit song. It was that good. Now... when you think about it... people probably should have figured out pretty quickly it WASN'T Kurt Vonnegut. Public speaking engagements kinda blow that whole "reclusive author" gig.

But what Mary wrote was very special, and I'd like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the influence she had on me – and a lot of other commencement speakers – ever since. Ladies and gentlemen of the Class of 2002. If in fact there is a single piece of advice I can give you that I know will serve you well, throughout the years... and throughout your lives, it is: Change your oil every 3000 miles.

Really. The benefits of changing your oil every 3000 miles are well-documented. Whereas the rest of what I'm about to tell you...is really just a collection of opinions... which I encourage you to regard with deep suspicion. And you will notice, I'm sure, that my advice has been formed by being a car guy. Just because somebody's the President of a big company doesn't make them a great source of career advice. A good friend of mine back in Kansas told me recently that my being named PRESIDENT meant a lot to him... because it validated one of his earliest and most deeply held life lessons.

I said, you mean the one about good guys always winning in the end? No, he said. The one about how anyone – and he went to what I took to be extraordinary pains to emphasize the word ANYone – can grow up to be President. You give us all hope. But there are some things that I've learned that I'd like to share with you.

Some I've learned the hard way. Others I've picked up ALONG the way. But they are all things that have worked for me and, hopefully, will work for you as well. First, if you're married, always put the top back on the tube of toothpaste. Always.

If you're married and you don't care if you STAY married, feel free to ignore this advice. Second, exercise. Always. And it's never too late to start. But be careful about it. When my mother turned 60 she started walking five miles a day. Today she's 85 and we have no idea where she is. You can never over communicate. In your personal relationships or in business. Saying nothing communicates louder than you will ever know. In any business or organization... it's up to the leader to paint a compelling vision for his or her people to follow. The number one job of a leader is to offer their people... hope. Without fail. In the myth of Prometheus, people think the great gift to mankind for which he is punished by the other gods is fire. But fire was just the party favor.

The real gift was hope. And it was the gift of hope that elevated mankind and gave purpose to their lives. It's what gives purpose to all of our lives. And I assure you that you will be rewarded rather than punished for bringing it to the lives of others. Try to make someone happy every day. You will be much better off for it. Treat people fairly, they will always remember it. If you're ever in a celebrity golf tournament with Tiger Woods, never say, "I'll bet you 50 bucks you can't make that putt." Trust me on this. Engage people's hearts and minds...and their hands will follow.

You can force people into adequacy, but people must want to give you excellence. You have to inspire your people. And give them the hope that will enable them to excel. Laugh. It's good for the soul. Cry. It's good for the tear ducts. Hugs are a VERY good thing. And as Spike Lee said, Do the right thing. At every opportunity. Life is not a dress rehearsal. Have fun at work. Have some balance in your life. Surround yourself with people who take their work seriously, but who don't take themselves too seriously. Be with people who give you positive energy. Spend more time on the gas than on the brake. And at least some of that time at wide open throttle.

Don't wear brown shoes with a blue suit. To be on the safe side, you might just want to avoid brown shoes altogether. Don't worry about whether your competitors are about to pass you. I guarantee you, if you take the same energy and put it into making yourself better ... and your organization better... you'll be just like Jeff Gordon. You'll pass everybody and be a mile ahead at the checkered flag. Have passion in EVERYTHING you do. Don't go to work to get a job, go to work to fulfill a passion within you. I mean it, it's a differentiator. You'll see it in your career. And if you can spread that passion to the people around you, all the better.

Avoid - at all costs - vending machines. Respect your elders. They once knew everything too. Trust your instincts. Don't be afraid to look under the hood. Keep looking below surface appearances. ESPECIALLY if you're worried that you might not like what you're going to find. Keep your focus on the future. The past is a lonely place to live. Learn from it. Build upon it... But don't dwell in it. The future is in the windshield not the rear view mirror.

Be proud of your achievements. But not your pride. No matter what you accomplish. No matter what records you set. Someone will come along and do better. And if you bungle something on a colossal scale, not to worry, I guarantee you, someone will screw up even worse! And finally, don't be too proud to accept the advice of others – at least from people who actually know what they're talking about! – but don't be afraid to reject it either. No one has all the answers.

But trust me on changing your oil. And don't forget your wiper blades and windshield fluid either. Thank you very much.

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