Keynote Address: Keith Williams

Fall 2014 Commencement

To all of the parents here today – congratulations and thanks. While this day may be only a step along the path to your independence, it is an important step.

To you graduates – congratulations. This day marks a major milestone in your lives. Indeed, for more than half of you this is the last graduation you will attend where you will receive a diploma.

Getting here came with a cost. Collectively, you represent more than half a billion dollars spent on university education; a bit more actually if you add in the cost of football tickets, pizzas and adult beverages. It is a good investment; for you and for society. It means, for example, that you will, on average, earn about a million dollars more over your lifetime than had you stopped your education after high school. That is what you earned with your work here. That said the immediate question given you’ve graduated is - now what?

What happens between now and your 40th Reunion in the year 2054?

That’s the question that your life will answer. The solution is a mystery and the unwrapping of your life is the solving of that mystery. While we all want to read ahead and see the answer, the real fun of life is in its living and in the surprises within each chapter.

Today, you are in the position of Carl Sandburg when he said

“I’m an idealist. I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m on my way”

Perhaps some of you have a master plan for your life. Probably most of you are trying to figure it out. Those of you in the latter category will take solace from a 2nd thing Sandburg said:

“Nearly all the best things that came to me in my life have been unexpected, unplanned by me”

I’m a guy who just passed his 40th reunion - where you will be in 2054 – and I can say that Sandburg had it right. All of the best things in my life have come to me unexpectedly and unplanned.

Sitting at my graduation at Orchestra Hall in Cleveland in May 1974 I was happy to simply have a diploma and a job; a life plan was the farthest thing from my mind. I was a kid who had never traveled more than 500 miles from home; had yet to get a passport and had only been on an airplane. If you had told me then that I would live a decade of
my life in Asia, that I would find the love of my life in a coffee shop in Tokyo, that I would be so lucky as to have the opportunity lead an iconic, 120 year old American company or that I would have had the chance to see as much of the world as I have seen I would have said that you were mad. My dream at that time was to be self-supporting … a pretty modest ambition that was in keeping with the family values of Depression Era parents. Great things happened to me - unexpected and unplanned – because I was willing to embrace them, and the attendant risk, when they were presented to me.

My wife, Kaori, is the best of those great things. She is an opera singer; the ‘right brain’ and balance in our house and she always reminds me that “Life may be only one time so enjoy it”.

She is absolutely correct. Having a 401(k) for your money is responsible stewardship. Putting your time into a 401(k) is to fritter it away.

The most important choice of your life will be how to spend that time. Many people in your life will offer you their helpful suggestions.

“You should do this.”

“You should do that”.

“You should, you should”

My recommendation is to avoid letting people “should” on you … make your own decisions. You know your values. You learned them from your parents. You know your interests. You’ve lived with them for your entire life. Choose wisely about how – and with whom - you’ll spend the precious and relatively short amount of time in your life.

I would like to share with you the story of a good friend – Savio Kwan. We’re the same age and from very different places. Savio grew up in Hong Kong and attended Catholic schools there. Upon high school graduation the Brothers told him “Savio, good news! We have arranged a university scholarship for you in London”. Savio was thrilled and, at the same time, was unable to afford transportation from Hong Kong to London. So, the Brothers found a job for him working on a freighter ship to London as a way to earn his passage. After graduation he worked at Philips, EMI and then GE where we met and worked together for several years. Savio was a great guy, devoted to his wife and daughter and building a solid career in GE and then later with a UK auto-parts company. It was a life that your family would admire and approve.

One day in 2001 I received an email from Savio telling me that he had left his employer to join a start-up company as Chief Operating Officer. It was a small company – just a few dozen people – and a huge risk to take … especially with a daughter now at
university in London and a financial future yet to secure. Honestly, few people I know would have had the courage to take that risk, to turn that page in their life. Thanks to great support from his wife Rita, Savio took the risk and, for the next 10 years, was the COO of a little company that you know as Alibaba.

In my business experience I’ve found that most people look for safe choices. They like to stay close to the center of their box where the risks are small. I always remind them, though, that the rewards and fun of life are at the edge of the box and the greatest fun – and of course the greatest risk - is often found outside the edges of the box. We grow when we take risks. Every job choice I made had a clear risk of failure in that every new job required a skill, capability or knowledge that I had yet to develop. Every move to a different country brought an uncertainty that was initially uneasy. And every one of those decisions enriched my life; including the ones that could have been better.

You may wonder – how will I know which choices to make, which risks to take? You’ll know that by knowing what you value. The most important thing in life – and in leadership – is to have a constant and durable value system around which decisions can be made. In a nation is it the values of its leaders. In UL is it our Mission. In your life it is your values.

Strong character and a positive attitude seem to be common characteristics of those people who successfully navigate the unexpected and unplanned nature of life. The people who have made the greatest impact on me have embodied a willingness to learn, an ability to work across cultures and a strong desire to help others succeed. Your relationships with other people through the course of your life will define your success. Nurture your EQ.

You live in a totally unique period of human evolution.

You are the first generation that is always connected to the world – 24/7 – with no ‘off button’ to your life.

You live in a world that has totally redefined the concept of a neighborhood – the entire world is now your neighborhood.

Like Sandburg you are on your way – just at a much faster pace in a much smaller world and with amazing opportunities to find the unexpected and unplanned in your lives. They are yours to embrace

Congratulations.