

Ron Chernow

Remarks

Skidmore College 101st Commencement

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Let me start by thanking Skidmore College for this splendid honor, and expressing my special pleasure at sharing the stage today with the talented Terence Blanchard and Suzanne Corbet Thomas.

In preparing my remarks, I thought back to my own graduation day in 1970 when I was a dreamy idealistic young English major at Yale College, more or less completely ignorant of the world. George Bernard Shaw once said that, at age twenty-one, he knew Shakespeare's characters better than his own contemporaries and that exactly describes my naïve younger self. What I didn't understand that day was the role that fate and chance, yes, even failure, have in shaping the happiest lives and most productive careers. And that's what I'd like to talk to you about today.

I dare say that most of you are sitting here with very precise and vivid fantasies of what you'd like your life to be. At the very least you have a vague sketch, some rough blueprint, of the future drawn up in your mind. Perhaps you picture yourself as rich and famous, beautiful and accomplished, eminent and renowned. The darling of the news media, the toast of high society, the envy of academia.

In American society -- for better or for worse -- success is the enchanting goddess that we all worship and adore. And I hope that as you venture across the magical threshold that separates you Skidmore years from your imminent new careers that you will achieve dazzling and instantaneous success. And some of you will indeed have the very lives that you picture here today.

But it's my sad task to tell you--and I hate to be the one to break the bad news---that for many, if not most of you, your lives will bear scant resemblance to the lavish daydreams you harbor today. For many of you, your lives will take forms almost unimaginably different from the plans you now possess. Fate is a merry prankster that likes to twist and shape our lives into forms radically divergent from those we had originally conceived.

For many of you, there will come a moment when it seems as if nothing is working out and that all your grand graduation schemes are going up in smoke. You dreamt of being a concert pianist or founding an internet start-up or being a daring Wall Street financier. And the world will have mocked all your finest hopes, shredded all your fondest dreams.

Now I say this not to be a spoilsport or some graduation day sadist, throwing cold water on your plans. Quite the contrary. For that seemingly bleak moment of fear and failure, of doubt and despair, may turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to you. Crises can be cleansing, crises can be liberating. They can teach you many useful things about yourself. When you're in the spotlight, when you're the glittering star, all sorts of self-serving people will soothe your vanity and lure you away from true self-knowledge. They will conspire to trap you in a looking-glass world. But when your dreams seem to fade, there won't be any sycophants around to cheer you up and you will see yourself and the world quite coldly and clearly.

Take advantage of such adversity to enrich your lives. You may suddenly have time to read a new author, to haunt the local museums, to take that long overdue trip abroad. The vital lifelong task is always to keep

building your personal culture, to feed that inner storehouse of ideas and impressions. Louis Pasteur once said that “chance favors the prepared mind” and indeed it’s precisely when you’re down and out that you may have the most time for that all-important preparation.

What I also suspect will happen to many of you at that moment of supreme crisis is that, by choice or circumstance, you will suddenly find your life spinning off in new directions that are actually far richer and more rewarding than the ones you contemplate today.

Let me speak autobiographically for a moment. When I graduated from college, back in misty medieval days, my ambition was to be a novelist and literary critic. To my everlasting shame, I did not take a single history course and took only one term of economics, which I found the most boring subject under the sun. So what happened? I had zero success as a fiction writer, wrote an unpublished novel and heaps and heaps of unpublished stories. But I did end up belatedly finding success – you guessed it – in writing history and biography, with a special emphasis on economics and finance. The tide of events steered me in the direction in which I had been stubbornly and mistakenly heading. We often turn out to be very poor prophets of our own lives and our own potential.

The most interesting lives are filled with such improbable plot twists, with baffled intentions leading to new syntheses and a much deeper fulfillment elsewhere. The would-be actor who ends up as a lawyer – the would-be lawyer who ends up as an actor – each will bring a unique perspective to bear on his or her new work. Life has a wonderful way of disrupting all our tidy plans and, just when we thought we had hit bottom, bringing something newer and fresher and better into being. The main point is that no experience in life, however disastrous it may seem at the time, is ever truly wasted. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said (and what would a graduation speech be without a quote from Emerson?): “Nature is a rag merchant who works up every shred and end into new creations.”

The larger pattern of our lives, the figure hidden in the carpet, will only emerge as the years go by. So don’t prejudge your life. Don’t give up too soon if things don’t seem to be working out exactly as planned. You’re not expected to be omniscient or clairvoyant as you’re sitting here today. Destiny may well have something lying in store for you that goes far beyond the wildest hopes that you have on this, your glorious graduation day. Take it from one who knows.

Let me end by offering my deepest and most sincere congratulations to all of you graduates and your families. And thank you so much to Skidmore College for granting me this tremendous honor.