

CSS Graduation Ceremony, June 2, 2006

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First of all, let me begin by saying how honored I was when Claire Swinford asked me to come and speak at this exciting ceremony, your high school graduation. I have had the opportunity to meet and work with some of you during ECS 2 years ago, and it is truly an honor to take part in this transition for you all.

You know better than I that you are now moving onward, taking a step from one phase of your life to another. Now, logic would say that my job here today is to impart some of my experience, some of my erudition and wisdom upon you...But, unfortunately, I am a climber, and have killed off most of my brain cells at high altitude...And, last year my good friend Aaron Schubach gave the commencement address, and I *know* I could never top him...But, I'll do my best to share some of my life experience with you.

As many of you know, much of my life has been focused upon mountains...climbing them, studying them and the people who live amongst them, photographing them, and generally spending as much time as possible in the hills. The mountains have been my passion in life, the spring of energy and stimulation from which I draw inspiration, strength, and vigor. For me, my love of the mountains all began with a dream, a crazy kind of dream that only a young person would have.

As a kid growing up in Massachusetts, I decided after climbing a mountain in New Hampshire – and note that in New England we call lumps of granite “mountains” – that I wanted to one day climb Everest. Kind of a crazy dream, especially coming from a kid who had not the slightest idea of *how* to climb, nor did I know anyone who *did* climb, nor was there any climbing to be had near my hometown. But, I had the dream, and was sufficiently stubborn to not let go of it.

I hung a poster of Everest over my bed. Every night I fell asleep staring at the mountain, and awoke each morning with it staring back at me. It came with me to boarding school in New Hampshire, and later made the 2000 mile journey to my dorm room at Colorado College. It was a constant reminder of my dream, of where I was versus where I hoped to someday be. And, it was the catalyst for my pursuit of climbing. That poster, trivial as it may seem, was the force which propelled me to learn to climb, to develop my skills, gain

knowledge from mentors and teachers, and to keep going year after year, month after month, day after day.

17 years after the dream was conceived and implanted onto my brain, I found myself staring up at the slopes of Everest....although this time I was not in my dorm room, but at 17,000 feet in Tibet on my first Everest expedition. No more poster...the vision this time was reality, my dream had come true. Granted, it took 17 years. Nothing overnight here, no Fed-Ex dreams, emailed ambitions...17 years of hard work, effort, learning, successes and failures, triumphs and tragedies...but finally, I was there...

So the first nugget of wisdom I'd like to throw your way is to dream. And dream big. Don't settle for the summits you know you can attain. Shoot higher than that, look to the lofty goals which scratch the sky, the objectives that you know will push you to your limits. Because it is only these goals which, in the end, are truly worth the effort of pursuit. The goals which push us the most also teach us the most and allow us to grow the most. So, again, dream, dream big. Envision that Nobel Prize, the Gold Medal, the 4.0 GPA, finding the cure for cancer. Gain inspiration from the words of James Lane Alle: ***Dream lofty dreams, and as you dream so you shall one day become.***

But, remember, the path to the top is a slippery one, with pitfalls at every turn. On that first expedition to Everest, I worked hard...toiling on the mountain for 2 months, up and down, carrying loads, putting in camps, carrying food, supplies, and oxygen. On summit day, as I gazed to the Southwest, I looked at an oncoming wall of monsoon storms moving in our direction. It was getting late, too late for us to reach the top and return to high camp before nightfall. I was 700 feet from the top, from my goal in life, and yet I knew what I had to do: turn around. Go home. Come back another day. It was the hardest decision I have ever had to make in the mountains.

But I did come back, 2 years later, for another expedition and crack at the top. On May 7, at the beginning of our summit bids, my team and I got involved in a rescue. We had to carry 2 sick glaciologists down off the mountain, piggybacking them on the Rongbuk Glacier. At one point, with one man on my back, I heard a loud POP in my right knee:

I had torn some cartilage, and my expedition was finished, my dream thwarted once more.

So, this brings me to my second point: While you are pursuing your various dreams in life, moving toward your goals, never be fooled that the road will be easy, that security will be possible. It isn't. Again, the joy of aiming for the lofty summits in life comes from the challenges inherent along the path...But that joy comes with a price, and the price is lack of security. And lack of security doesn't mean certain death, but it does mean trial and tribulation, struggle, and sometimes pain. In 560 BC, Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, wrote ***to exist is to suffer***. Not a very uplifting statement at first glance. But, what he was getting at was not that existence is devoid of joy and instead full of hardship, angst, and struggle. But, rather, that even joy must one day come to an end, that everything is transient, that security is simply not a reality. Had he lived to hear the comedian Dennis Leary, he would have liked his line: **Life is tough...get a helmet.**

But, again, it is this challenge, this inherent transience of life and dreams, the risk of failure, the struggle of pursuit, the growth which emerges from pushing ourselves to our limits which gives us the greatest joy in life.

I did finally reach the top of Everest in 2002, and was fortunate enough – or just stupid enough, depends on your perspective – to make it there again in 2003. I had always expected the fulfillment of my dream would bring with it some epiphany, some sort of enlightenment replete with bells and gongs and a bucket of Gatorade dumped on my head. But, once I got there, I found the summit – surprise, surprise – was really just a tiny patch of snow on top of a big hunk of rock. There was nothing really special about it. What I remember most from my journeys on Mt. Everest, from my pursuit of my dream, is not the 30 minutes I spent on top, but rather the experiences on the sides of my mountain, of the emotional, physical, and mental challenges I was faced with and had to overcome. It was the process of pursuit of my dream, not the realization of the end goal, that was the poignant part.

And, so now my final point...and probably the most important...Enjoy the journey. Yes, you've heard the cliché a million times before...it's

the journey, not the destination that matters. But, you know what? Clichés are around for a reason...they contain truth.

So, as you find yourselves pursuing ever more challenging goals in life, striving for ever higher summits, remember that it is the side of your mountains, the path to the top rather than the top itself, which you will remember days and years in the future. Relish these moments: the thrill of the challenge, the lessons learned about your abilities, the joy of overcoming obstacles.

And remember to retain your humanity. A week ago on Everest, a British man, David Sharp, lay dying an hour below the summit. Other climbers – 40 of them to be exact – passed by the dying man. Not one of them lent a hand. Not one of them was willing to give up their dream to help this person. To those climbers, the summit was worth more than a fellow human.

Well, having had the good fortune to go there, I can tell you they were wrong. The summit is just a patch of snow. Yes, it is essential in order to establish the entire goal, to set the stage for the whole endeavor, but if we focus solely upon the top, the end goal, we'll miss the sides, we'll miss the journey, and we'll sacrifice some of ourselves in the process.

So, again, I congratulate you all on a fine job very well done. You have earned the diploma you will receive today, and I know that each of you will continue to grow and challenge yourselves on the mountains yet to come. Please do it – aim for the lofty summits, overcome the physical and self-imposed obstacles in your path, revel in the process, reach out to others, and most importantly, dream, for as Mark Twain once said:

20 years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.