

Graduation Remarks

By Michael J. Socolow, Ph.D., 2019 Fulbright Research Scholar, University of Canberra, and Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism, University of Maine [USA]

I'd like to begin by thanking Professor Saini, the Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Canberra, as well as Professor Burford, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design, for inviting me to make these remarks today. I'm truly honored. But I'm particularly grateful to have the opportunity to congratulate YOU – the 2019 graduates of the University of Canberra – on your fantastic achievements. We're all here today at this great celebration because YOU demonstrated the dedication, responsibility and commitment to completing all your required projects and assignments, and you've now finished the rigorous and demanding curricula that a world-class research university like the University of Canberra requires. That's a great achievement, and if it's not too presumptuous of me to speak for the University of Canberra, I can say this school is proud of you... and it's also very excited that you'll now go out to the nation, and the world, to achieve the careers for which you're now so well-prepared.

Now, I've been a professor for almost twenty years, and back in the United States I've attended graduation ceremonies for just about every one of those years. And in reflecting on those experiences, I think I learned there are three main elements to a good graduation address. Here they are:

First: A good address acknowledges both the official celebrants – that is, the actual graduates - AND those who might go unacknowledged but played such a major role in the success of the people we're celebrating today.

Second: A good address leaves the audience with something memorable. And...

Third: A good address is short and to-the-point.

Let's start with the first point. I acknowledged you earlier. But now I want YOU, the graduates, to take a moment and think about the people who made today possible. It might be your mother or father, or your grandparents, who paid the bills or consoled you on the phone when you were struggling or depressed. It might be a best friend, who supported you when things looked bleak and the work seemed just too difficult. It might be the professor who believed in you when even you doubted your own abilities. It might be somebody here in attendance today, or it might also be somebody who's passed on, and did not live to see your success... but knew all along that you'd achieve this moment. The point I want to make is simple: All success, in life, is collaborative. Support – whether it's educational, financial or emotional – is essential and I'm thankful that all of you received the support you needed to arrive here today. And I'm sure you are, too. So let's take a moment and have you – the graduates - express your

gratitude for the support you've received by applauding the people who've played such an important role in your success.

[Pause]

O.K., point number two: Say something memorable. Here goes: Failure is by far the most important ingredient for success – and FAILURE can actually be FUN if you allow it. The key is to have the right mindset. You probably think we're NOT all gathered here – celebrating your achievements – to discuss failure. But I know each of you had – at some point in your educational career – an experience of disappointment. Maybe you didn't meet a professor's expectations, or your own. Perhaps it was an essay you wrote, or an architectural design, or a sculpture or collage that just proved impossible to complete in the way you envisioned. And yet, you persisted and your resilience in the face of that problem is why you're here today. Moving past failure is probably the most important lesson you can learn in college and it's not something that's taught in a classroom or read in a book. It's a lived experience that makes you stronger and more confident. And you know what? Everyone on this stage up here's had that experience, and we all became better scholars, researchers, administrators, and even better people for having lived through it.

I've experienced a lot of failure. Maybe too much! My original book proposal was probably rejected by over 50 publishers and agents before it was finally given a contract and became an award-winning book. Or there were the mistakes I made while working under the pressure of instant deadlines as an Assignment Editor in CNN's Los Angeles Bureau. I can't honestly tell you how many rejections I received before The New York Times published my first column, but I assure you there were many. But here's my favorite failure: I wrote an essay in 2006 about an American cultural phenomenon – the disappearance of the idea of "camp," which is a sensibility of humorous irony and a comedy aesthetic that relies simultaneously on both subversion and over-the-top extravagance. I think in Australia it was perhaps best embodied in the comedy of Barry Humphries, and if you remember some of his most famous and hilarious and often cringe-inducing characters. Anyway, my essay was tied to a movie called "Snakes on a Plane," that starred Samuel L. Jackson and was about.... Snakes on a plane. Its very obviousness was a wink to the audience that we're all participating in the joke. The essay goes on to talk about how that summer the band Gnarl Barkley first popped into popular consciousness with videos that presented dancers in Fila tennis whites performing syncopated dance moves straight out of an old Busby Berkeley film. The routines in that first video could be both cringe-inducing and hilarious at the same time. The essay's titled "That Campy Summer."

It's by far the best thing I've ever written. I love that essay. It makes me feel good to read and re-read it.

And you know what? Nobody else likes it. It was rejected by all the big publications in the United States back in 2006. In 2011, on the fifth anniversary of "Snakes on a Plane," I updated it and pitched it out again. Nobody wanted it. Almost none of the rejections explained why it didn't work. And yes, in 2016, I again updated it and pitched it out. No dice. Nobody else likes this essay.... but I love it.

In the past two years, I've written for Slate, The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Globe, and many of America's top newspapers. I've written an award-winning book that's received wonderful reviews. My scholarship has been featured on National Public Radio, and in other venues. This is a record of success.... but, to me, nothing quite equals the fun experience of re-reading my favorite failure. I'm as proud of that essay – and enjoy reading it – as much as anything I've ever written. It sits on my desktop computer, and on Google Drive, waiting patiently for 2021, when, on the fifteenth anniversary, I'll be pitching it again.

I know it's a good piece, and whether any editor agrees or not doesn't change my opinion. On the outside, all those rejections look like failure. But as long as I can separate their judgment from my own experience, and as long as I remain confident in my work, this "failure" is really a success. Rejection – especially in the publication process – is never final. Nor is failure. Failure can only last as long as you allow it. I know you all already understand this because you have the reserves of confidence and the experience of persistence to know it. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here today. At some point, you demonstrated the ability to bounce back, to overcome adversity, and to take pride and confidence from your own abilities and skills no matter what anybody said. The key now, as you move forward in life, is to never give up that confidence and to draw upon the personal resilience you've experienced here. In other words: the obstacles and set-backs you've overcome might be the greatest gift the University of Canberra will leave you with.

Let me close by reminding you that the University of Canberra is proud of you today, and I hope you – like me - will go forth around the nation, and the world, and take pride in your relationship with this world-class research university.

I hope I've achieved my third point about brevity! Thank you very much.