

Elder Graduation Speech

Man, it feels good to be back! And if I remember correctly, it feels real good to be done, doesn't it?!

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Tom Otten, Chuck Knepfle, and all the Elder faculty for inviting me to speak here today – it's a tremendous honor, and really a pleasure to do this.

To the class of 2005, I say congratulations! You made it! You're now official graduates of Elder High School! However, after my last few visits, I'm more inclined to call you graduates of Elder University. As jealous as I am, I must say it's really nice to see the incredible improvements since the ever-lengthening time since I graduated (turf now in the Pit?!) – some of you may actually be disappointed in your college accommodations.

My graduation also took place here – already eleven years ago – but I can still remember what I was thinking while sitting out there: “Thank God school's finally over!”; “Do I really have to start from scratch again this Fall?” If you're anything like I was, you've been ready to be done with school for a while now, but looking ahead, many of you see four, five, and maybe even (cough) ten years of college still ahead.

Of course, there's more going on than just that. As exciting as graduation is, it always comes with the endless barrage of a single question: “So what are your plans for next year?” often with the complementary questions of “What do you plan to study in college?” or “What do you plan to do for a living?”

However, all of these questions are just variations on the age-old question of: “What do you want to be when you grow up?” We’ve all tossed that one around starting when we were little kids, coming up with answers ranging from “a fireman” to “the Hulk” to “the Donald.” Eventually, I think we all have that moment when we look in the mirror and realize: “Hey, I actually am grown up – I thought I’d be better looking.” Oh wait, maybe that was just me.

By now, that moment has likely come to all of you, but I doubt everyone has answered “the question” already. Some of you may already have a good plan in place, but I have a feeling many of you still feel a long way away from one. Personally, I was one of those who thought he had it all planned out. In ’94, I was sitting right over there. Being the math geek that I was, I had wild dreams of becoming “Supermathematician.” Of course, I had the timetable for my personal life set up as well. I’d find The One sometime during college, and be preparing for marriage when I graduated.

Four years later, I was sitting in an apartment in Maryland fresh off a failed relationship preparing to change my entire career path.

So what did I learn after all that? Don’t worry about your plans! There’s still a lot more experience to gain before you try to “figure it all out,” but make sure you experience it – successes, failures, everything!

Now, none of us knows what experiences lie ahead of us; the best we can do is put ourselves out there and prepare the best we can. And, as graduates of Elder, in ways that are obvious and ways that are subtle, you’re prepared for what’s to come. When I think of the ways Elder has prepared you and me for life’s challenges, three in particular come to mind.

First is the Elder Die Hard Spirit. We all have our stories about great Elder sports teams, from the '93 basketball team during my time to the great football teams, and looks like a pretty darn good baseball team, during yours – they wouldn't quit, and they made it to the top. But the Elder Spirit is even more than that. It's the mediocre teams that gut out the upset, or those that go down swinging even though the chance of winning is long gone. It's the Pit standing with fingers in the air at the end of a game, regardless of the outcome, knowing their team laid it all out there. My favorite expression from my cross-country days always was: "If you can't pass the guy ahead of you, make him break a record." That's what the die hard Elder spirit is all about, and it transcends way beyond sports. It drives you to do your best in everything you do – schoolwork, your job, relationships, service. It makes everything you do that much more fulfilling, and over time, inevitably earns the respect of your peers.

Second is the Elder Character. So what does it mean when I say that Elder instills "character" in its students? I think the best way to start is simply to look up the definition of "character." Any more, I'm too lazy to look it up in a dictionary, so I just pulled it up online. The "Web" definition of character is: the inherent complex of attributes that determine a person's moral and ethical actions and reactions. This was followed by a quote from Herbert Spencer, a 19th century British philosopher: "Education has for its object the formation of character." (repeat) In my opinion, this sums up the Elder philosophy on education. You've all spent time learning in and out of the classroom, forming friendships (even with those very different from you), interacting with your teachers, doing community service, being active in clubs, providing leadership, playing sports, and competing in all kinds of contests. All of these activities have served to build

your character by establishing a strong sense of right and wrong, a greater perspective on life, and a better understanding of other people and yourselves. This kind of character will help you to experience life's future triumphs and hardships with dignity and class.

Third is the Elder Community. You're all now lifetime members. Over the upcoming years, college, jobs, relationships, and who knows what else will pull you all in different directions. You'll see much less of each other, but you'll always have something very strong in common. This applies for all alumni – all of us can relate to your experiences here, and you can relate to ours. As someone who has spent a great deal of time living out of town since graduation, this aspect of Elder is especially important. Elder is part of my definition of home, and no matter how stressful or difficult life became, it was always comforting to know I had love and support back home. That was my experience, but I believe, in many ways, this is the case no matter whether you stay in town or move away. So let this be an encouragement; if that next opportunity seems scary or impossible, take a shot – we'll be pulling for you. The Elder community is your community: support it, enjoy it, and lean on it when you need it.

Elder has prepared you for what's to come in many ways; I've mentioned only three. Let the preparation, love, and support from your family, your friends, and from Elder be your impetus to put yourself out there, and take your shots!

In the upcoming years: Read a classic for no reason at all. Try some nasty looking ethnic food. Take the “killer class.” Go places you’ve never been. Consider philosophies that seem to make no sense. Dance like an idiot. Ask her out. Talk to strangers – you never know what you could learn. Run the route with more hills. Take the lead, even if it scares you. Make your own choices, even when they’re unpopular. Make mistakes, and own them. Sign up for something different – even if it’s early in the morning, even if you don’t know anyone. Gut it out when it’s something you really want, even if it seems impossible. Don’t quit – make them stop you. You’ll meet a lot of new people in the upcoming years – show them someone they’ve never seen before!

I’ve heard a lot of incredible stories from a lot of incredible people, and none of them began with, “So I was sitting around on the couch watching TV the other night...” Make your stories incredible! Make your life exciting! You’re ready – it’s all in your hands.

I’d like to conclude with a simple phrase that I’ve found to be true time and time again in my life. It simply reads: “success is never final, failure never fatal.” I’ve had a lot of successes and a lot of failures since I left Elder, and so will you. Relish them both, and don’t let either stop you from accepting the next challenge.

I wish you all the best of luck as you move on. And if your travels ever take you to upstate New York, look me up...I’m sure we’ll have plenty to talk about. Thank you and Congratulations!