

**Commencement 2009**  
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### **Presentation**

Good morning, and congratulations, to you, our graduates, you, our graduates parents and family, and to the faculty and leadership at this university whose efforts have made this moment possible.

All of you are a part of this “**commencement**” this “**beginning**.” Today marks a significant inflection point on the trajectory that each of you are shaping. It’s the next chapter; the nexus of a professional and personal life.

The course on which you will travel into the future will of your making, by design and default. It is “**your**” path.

To be sure, there will be some bumps and detours along the way, hopefully some rest stops, and maybe even some radical midcourse corrections!

Your road is filled with the unknown and uncertainty, but that’s the real fun of it. It is in the space of the unknown and the uncertain that you will find the challenges and opportunities, if you allow it... That’s where the magic happens.

My personal path has had a number of bumps, detours, and corrections. But so far, so very good.

I honestly believe that I lead a charmed life...

After I graduated I wanted to maintain my Water Safety Instructor’s certificate, something I worked hard to get while at this university. I minored in Physical Education and Psychology.

I went to the Red Cross Office in Chicago to see if there were any opportunities in the city to teach swimming and water safety. There I unexpectedly met Lynn a former university classmate who was working there as an intern. She told me that about a request for an instructor at a place called “The House of the Good Shepherd, a 1970’s “reform” school for high school-aged girls.

With some hesitation, and perhaps because a bit of a dare from Lynn, I went to Good Shepherd, meeting one Sister Mary David who was teaching her girls how to swim. She did this from the side of the pool in her full nun’s habit.

Needless to say, she needed help...

Being in my early twenties, I must say that I had visions of being assaulted by a group of confined, depraved teenage girls – but the good sister assured me that all would be well.

#### **I took the detour...**

That decision led to a series of events that I could never have imagined, and experiences for which I will always be grateful. The people with whom I worked, and from whom I learned so very much, were dedicated to something bigger than themselves.

In addition to teaching most of those girls to swim and some of them to be life guards, I had the privilege to be part of an extraordinary group of people.

I met and worked with Sister Margaret Mary, a tireless social worker who wanted her girls to have the confidence and the skills with which to get jobs after they left Good Shepherd. Inspired by her vision, we “Designed” and opened an afterschool program through the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, where we also taught art classes and setup a volunteer vocational mentorship program. We did that for several summers.

With that success fueling our optimism, we, naively, wrote a proposal to the Illinois Law Enforcement Commission to provide for the girls support after they left the institution, another one of Sister Margaret Mary’s dreams. Unbelievably we received a multi-year grant from the ILEC for over 1.2 Million dollars (1974 dollars). With it we ‘created’ “The Other Side” a community-based Aftercare Center that we staffed by the most wonderful and eclectic group of social workers and psychologists that anyone might put together, and work with.

**Yes - I started out as a community organizer!**

As a board member and activities director from the onset, I ended up co-directing the aftercare program, an immersion experience that would serve me well in the years that followed...

I left "the Other Side" learning that:

- By passionately working with others toward a "**good**" end, I was really able to make a difference...
- That the best way to learn is to "learn-by-doing." Dive in!
- Opportunities present themselves at "moments of serendipity" – happy accidents...
- Seeing the connections and "**Pushing Serendipity**," is very important, and rewarding...

But the most important learning was what I learned about myself. I did not want to be a typical social worker, or typical anything, for that matter. I did want to work **with** people who cared about something that really matters and that in the end will make a person, a community, or the perhaps the world, a little better.

Those people are out there, in abundance. They are in every profession, and every community. If you allow it, you will find them through, what Margaret Wheatley calls the power of "strange attraction." They will infect you with their energy and enthusiasm. They are **not** typical.

Ever since, whether working in industry, doing government policy, creating other centers and associations or teaching; seeing and "pushing serendipity" has made my journey unimaginably rewarding.

I have more stories than time, but believe me it works...

Seeing potential and realizing that potential in an effort for others, with others, that's magic!

I believe that the potential to play with the uncertainty and make magic happen is well represented by this graduating class. You can make it happen with faith in yourselves and the confidence that you can see the unseen and make it real – that's what art, design and creativity is all about!

Each of you is more likely, than not, a core "Cultural Creative" It's the label that sociologist Paul Ray and psychologist Sherry Anderson explain in their book: *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*

Cultural Creatives are those within our society that are a bit restless. They are a part of a cross-demographic of change agents who like to play in the space that's in front of the curve...

Cultural Creatives get to define the curve!

**YOU get to CREATE the world!**

Each of you will participate actively and passively in making the future what it will be.

Some of you will make things happen!

Some of you will watch things happen!

And, undoubtedly, some of you will **wonder** what happened!

In truth, most of us do a little of each over the course of a lifetime...

I've been on my road - my trajectory - for a while now. If I look into my rear view mirror, and spot that period in time when I was graduating, I see a world that was defined by a reality that, in many ways, has diminished to a vanishing point, yet, it shaped the present...

My reality included:

- A Cold War between two Super Powers and a tenuous nuclear threat
- A Europe that was largely defined by The Iron Curtain - No European Union and No Euro
- A China that was a mysterious closed country where unknown millions of people played ping-pong.
- An India and Pakistan that were at war, each being backed by one of the two super powers...
- A United States engaged in a war based on conflicting ideologies that had lost favor and clarity of purpose.

My simple Texas Instruments calculator cost about as much as a loaded MAC does today in equivalent dollars...

Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were 15 years old! – I didn't know them...

Al Gore had not yet invented the Internet...

We had been to the moon and back. We witnessed - for the very first time – an Earth Rising over the horizon on the moon, discovering not just the moon, but Earth as a finite planet in space.

The US Congress, and President Richard Nixon, had just established the US Environmental Protection Agency to clean up our nation's environment...

Many of us graduating in 1971 were apprehensive. After all, there were 3.7 Billion people in the world - soon to be 4 Billion, It was getting crowded, inspiring Paul Ehrlich to write his best-selling book, *The Population Bomb*...

The probabilities of getting a job after graduation were "iffy." As I recall there was only one Industrial Design graduate that had secured a firm offer by the time we graduated, while the graduates in the prior year were flush with possibilities... *Sound familiar?*

All of these realities and my consciousness of them shaped me and informed me - leading to opportunities to “push serendipity...”

This reality and your consciousness of it will shape you...

But what does your consciousness include?

What do you see?

What do you want to see?

What might you make happen, watch happen, or end up wondering about?

Only you can answer that question. So, start going down that road on the path of your own making. Take some selective detours, they can be very rewarding. The rest stops are worth the time, and when it comes to those midcourse corrections; follow your bliss, get infected with energy and enthusiasm.

Lastly and very importantly, don't forget to look into that rear view mirror from time to time... The continuity you see may surprise you. Things do get connected and make sense...

But remember to read the warning when looking into the rear view mirror: **“things are closer than they appear.”**

Enjoy **your** journey!!!

Thank you.

*Post Script:*

*The rewards are real. They are hard to predict, and impossible to calculate, but they are most serendipitous.*

*One of those young women that I had the privilege of working for at Good Shepherd is also here at the graduation ceremonies this weekend, here at the University of Illinois.*

*After leaving Good Shepherd, she went to college, furthering her education, married, had two beautiful children and, very importantly, has been a tremendous contributor to her community for over the past twenty five years.*

*She's here to celebrate the graduation of her son from the School of Business...*

*I do lead a charmed life...*

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