

Thank you for having me here today. It is an absolute honor. I feel lucky that I had the opportunity to attend Topeka Collegiate. It is only from the teachers, staff, and community here, that I learned to believe in the limitlessness of my own potential and the work ethic necessary to realize it.

I want to start with congratulating the graduates on this awesome milestone. It is important to celebrate every victory you have now and in the future. So let's give the graduates another round of applause.

Walking in here today, I was immediately swept with nostalgia. I remember walking down these very halls. They seemed much bigger back then. Or maybe I was just smaller. I remember how nervous but excited I was for high school, college, and everything ahead. I also remember how stressful it was. So I hope you clear your head, and be present in this moment.

When I was deciding what to talk about today, I asked a close friend of mine what I should do. His advice was “to be funny.” I asked him what he meant. He provided me with the following joke. “Why was the math book sad?” I painfully asked “Why?” He responded, “Because it had too many problems.” I paused, and quickly realized that if this is all I had, only Mrs. Hoyt, myself and mother (who frankly has to laugh) would be the only ones amused. So I politely declined his advice.

Today, I want to tell you three stories from my 27 years of life. Someone once told me, “you don’t learn anything from someone’s successes,” so today I would rather share with you some of my failures. After all, those are much more interesting.

So lets get started with my first story. Who here has seen the movie the “Social Network” based on the creation of Facebook? Raise your hand. Do you remember Justin Timberlake? If I don’t see every

single woman's hand raised in this room, I will be in utter shock. The guy he was portraying was based on a real person. His name is Sean Parker. He was the one that said to young Mark Zuckerberg, "A million dollars isn't cool, you know what is cool? A billion dollars." Today he is worth more than 2 billion dollars. I remember sending him an email when I was twenty-one sharing a random idea I had for a business. He sent me a one-page email back telling me why it was terrible. But that wasn't it, he also told me how to make it better.

The point of this story is not that he was absolutely right. My business idea did suck. Rather it is about "asking for help". Having the courage to put yourself, your weaknesses, and your ideas out there. The worst that can happen, is you end up right where you started. In my case, I ended up working for him for a year. Although, I still sometimes I wish I worked for the "real" Justin Timberlake.

The ability to “ask for advice” was something that did not come naturally. Take my AP Euro class at Topeka High School. It was the only class I didn’t get an A in. Instead of reaching out to my peers, and my teacher, I locked myself up in a room, with some hot Cheetos, and convinced myself that I could figure it out myself. Even worse, when I didn’t, I blamed it on the incompetency of my teacher at the time. My arrogance, was the difference between becoming the Valedictorian and not.

Throughout a series of experiences similar to my AP Euro class, I started second guessing my stoic “do it yourself” attitude. This changed during my first job. I remember asking my boss a question. It took a lot of courage. He answered back, “that was a good question.”

I realized, then, that the people I admired most, like my first boss or Sean Parker, were themselves the most open to receiving feedback and guidance. I

should follow suit. I now apply this “philosophy” to everything, and I encourage you to as well. Whether it is A’cing a final in a hard class or preparing for your dream college.

It is human nature to help others succeed. So don’t be afraid to ask for help. My motto this year has been, “don’t worry if you don’t know something, just ask someone that does.”

Ok, one story down, two more to go. I have been a follower most of my life. At TCS I participated in several activities because my childhood friends did. I even wore the same clothes as them. Fifteen years ago, it was white bubble coats from the GAP and wide legged jeans from the Vanity in the mall. I don’t recommend either of those fashion trends to make a comeback. In high school, I did debate and forensics because that is what the “smart” kids did. I did drill team, because that is what the “cool” girls did. In college, I was an economics major because my three

best friends thought it was a good idea to get a job in finance. And these are just the things I followed, that I am not totally embarrassed about!

Most of my life was built on “what I should do” versus “what I wanted to do.” I did this for a few reasons. I feared not fitting in. I was convinced there was a formula for success, and if I did not follow my peers I would be behind. And finally, I honestly didn’t know what I wanted to do, so instead of digging deeper, it became easier to just follow the people around me.

It wasn’t until a big bank crashed, and the entire financial industry flipped upside down, right before I graduated college, that I was forced to contemplate what I wanted to do with my life. I do not want this to happen to you. I want you to discover who you want to be, much earlier.

So, how would I have done this differently? Here are five tips I wish I would have known.

- Start thinking about your interests, and your career now. There is no such thing as too early.
- Be in touch with yourself. Think about what you stay up at night thinking about, or what you like to do naturally. Do you find yourself helping out your classmates? Do you enjoy math or English? Do you envision your life a certain way?
- Ask people around you what they imagine you to be. You don't have to always listen, but people observe you quite differently than you perceive yourself.
- Try a bunch of activities if you don't have a clue. But make sure to be reflective.
- Research career paths. For example, if you have an idol, Google that person and figure out what they did to get to where they are now. OR if you have an innate strength like public speaking develop a list of careers or interests that really leverage that skill.

The goal here is to be in touch with your interests early, so you can then spend your time in high school and eventually college, focused and diving deeper around them. Eventually making a career from them. Finally do not stress about fitting in, you will always find a tribe, that gets your dreams, even if they aren't the people immediately around you.

For me I discovered my love for entrepreneurship, creativity and problem solving. I hope you find yours too.

On to my last story, when I was your age, I was very competitive. I derived value from being the best. As a result, I was very stressed out. I remember being absolutely distraught about not qualifying to regionals in History Day in the sixth grade or not making the MathCounts team. Thankfully, Mrs. Hoyt made me the first alternate...and Mrs. Zachritz calmed me down with intense art projects around Van Gogh's Starry Night. Otherwise, I might have flipped.



I feared failure more than anything. I, unfortunately, took this fear with me to college and my first job. When I graduated, most of my friends went down really typical career paths - lawyers, doctors, consultants etc. I decided that I wanted to try to start a tech company. What I didn't know at the time is that 95% of start-ups failed.

At this time, my peers were living the life. They had solid paychecks, which enabled them to buy fancy things and eat out at the top restaurants. Meanwhile, I shared an apartment with my four business partners, made almost no money, and ate Ramen Noodles and pizza way too often. During this period of time, my mind was consumed by thoughts like...

- “Did I make the wrong choice?”
- “Ugh, I can't buy anything, will I have to wear this ugly hoodies for the rest of my life?”

- “Was my Stanford degree worth it?” ...and
- “Crap, this Ramen noodle package is really bad.”

My insane fear of being perceived as an absolute failure, made me approach my business rashly. I took shortcuts, and wanted results immediately. Well it turns out that my company did fail, and it was only then that I had a moment to reflect.

Patience with yourself is critical. I wish I knew this. So I urge you to be kind to yourself when you head into high school. If you don't make the team, or aren't the best in your class on day one, be patient and allow yourself the room to grow at your own pace.

I also found that, failure is liberating if you can grow to learn from it. It allows you to live your life creatively and passionately, because you aren't worried about

what others think. It is why I think children are so creative, because they just don't fear being judged.

So that is it. Those are my three stories. Story one, is about asking for help. Story two, is about discovering what you are meant to do by trusting yourself. And story three, is having the patience to realize your inner greatness.

I hope they can serve you well, when you face some of your own obstacles. Whether it is tomorrow, in high school, or the future.

Congratulations, 2014 graduates. You have so much to look forward too!

#