

My Commencement Speech for the Class of 2020.

Congratulations class of 2020. Every year during this time, people say things like, ‘This has been an unforgettable year.’ But actually this time, it’s true. Unfortunately, your class is unforgettable, in part, because of all the things you didn’t get to do. No final exams. No spring sports. No prom. And the list goes on and on. But another thing that you may have missed this year was the commencement speech.

I’ve always wanted to give a commencement speech, but if I waited for someone to ask me to give one, well, it’ll probably never happen. So I thought this would be a perfect year to do a commencement speech.

Maybe I should say, ‘I’m not representing any school district or any particular school.’ I represent one high school teacher and coach who is concerned about the future of young people in this world.

For some reason I love commencement speeches. As a self-ordained anthropologist of my own country, I find the custom of commencement speeches—fascinating. It is perhaps the closest thing we have to a ceremonial collective rite of passage into adulthood in this culture.

Commencement speeches usually boil down to a common theme. Ellen DeGeneres maybe captured it best in a commencement speech she gave in 2009, when she said, “My advice to you is to be true to yourself and everything will be fine” (Brooks, 2015).

As David Brooks puts it, the commencement speech theme is essentially, “You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself...Follow your passion. Don’t accept limits. Chart your own course. You [can] do great things because you are so great.” This is really the message not only of commencement speeches but it is also the gospel of our culture in general. Our collective childhood storyteller, Disney / Pixar, preaches his message in nearly every story. (Brooks, 2015).

But this is not the story we have always told ourselves.

In 1954, psychologists asked teenagers if they considered themselves to be very important people. Only 12 percent said yes. By 1989, this question same question resulted in nearly 79% of the teens saying that yes they were very important people (Brooks, 2015). Curiously telling ourselves we’re so great apparently doesn’t seem to make us any happier. The total number of suicides in the U.S. in 1981 was around 27,000. By 2016, it had climbed to 45,000. That doesn’t even include the explosion of desperation deaths by opioids in recent years.

However, there is something about growing up in the age of self-esteem centeredness that makes good sense. Abraham Maslow tells us that unless we have met our needs for food, shelter, security, love, belonging, and self-esteem we can never self-actualize and reach our potential. In other words to think highly of our ourselves is a necessary start. If we don’t feel special early in life, we run the risk of trying to narcissistically prove it to ourselves for rest of our lives. So it’s important to feel special. And all those commencement speeches are telling us, ‘Believe your special and Go out there and prove it.’

Great, go do that!

But eventually you might come to a place where you ask, ‘Is this all there is?’ So this commencement speech is about when you come to that moment in your life, when all that trying to prove you matter stops mattering and you wonder if there is something more.

The gospel according to DeGeneres, Disney, and Pixar, and this culture is off in one big way. It fails to help us live meaningful joy-filled lives. And that is a problem, if you're interested in living a meaningful joy-filled life. If education has any value, it should help us to clearly see and evaluate the messages our culture broadcasts. We are told, for instance, that the good life is about getting ahead, finding financial security, earning prestige in the eyes of others, and being able to indulge ourselves with various luxuries. My education tells me this may have some value in building up our ego, but it won't be enough if we're interested in having a deeply meaningful joy-filled life. So today, I'm here to tweak the definition of the good life.

For years, my message to students about how to access the good life was, "It's simple. Ask yourself what you want. Then go get it." But now, I'm pretty sure it's not that simple and it's certainly about more than what we want."

This DeGeneres commencement speech chorus line of 'find yourself and be you,' leads to a lot of navel introspection. This self-search thing can take years, assuming you have the resources to take that long to find yourself. If you don't have the resources to ask questions like 'Who am I really?' because you have to work two jobs to pay the bills or you have a child on the way, well, then this type of advice can be just another luxury you can't afford.

That traditional commencement speech, like the elusive American Dream, seems to be for someone else—who can afford it? People have to get jobs and pay bills. How long can I sit around and ask, "Who am I?" So maybe we should stop with all the high fluting existential Disneyland b___s ____. This isn't a fairy tale.

While we're telling our graduates to crawl into a deep navel introspective state and ask themselves what they really want, this country is burning down. We have George Floyd down on the pavement saying, "I can't breathe." We've got the full weight of this culture with its knee on the neck of blacks—who one out of three will be in jail at some point in their life. We have a system where blacks males make up about 6% of our population, but make up 40% of the prison population. We have a complete multi-billion dollar industrial prison complex system that goes by the code words: Law and Order. Translated: Put the blacks in jail. And the best our educational system can say is, "What would you like to do with your life Johnny. Oh, that's nice." The question itself is a sign of privilege and it may be a question we can no longer afford.

We have the full weight of this culture with its knee on the neck of five year old Latino children who are stuffed in cages and given aluminum foil blankets. We have Latino workers who are picking crops and cutting meat standing elbow to elbow in a pandemic.

And we have Trump threatening to use our sons and daughters in the military to put their knee down on us to squash out our first amendment rights to protest. (The same rights they were supposed to defend). And what is the educational system saying in response to all this? It's says, "You guys should think about yourselves and ask yourselves, 'What do you want?'"

An opportunity is staring us in the face. But few are talking much about the opportunity in the midst of all this chaos. If you change the question from, 'What do I want to do with the rest of my life' to 'What does the world need,' you set yourself up for a meaningful joy-filled life. I didn't say an easy life. I said, a meaningful deeply joy-filled existence.

First of all, nothing trips you up faster than thinking that at 18 that you're making a decision for the rest of your life. You're not. You will probably switch jobs, careers, identities, repeatedly throughout your life. So stop with all the self-imposed pressure that this is about the rest of your life. It's not.

Secondly, some of the best well lived lives didn't start from a place of 'But what do I want?' Rather they started from a place that asked, "What does the world need?"

Enter Frances Perkins.

One of the most influential people of the 20th century is probably someone you've never heard of—Frances Perkins. Here's a snip of her accomplishments. If you've participated in a fire drill, seen a sprinkler in a building, seen an exit sign, she was behind it. She took down sex trafficking rings and helped save tens of thousands of Jews who might have otherwise been killed in Hitler's concentration camps. She also, by the way, created Social Security, a minimum wage, an overtime law, unemployment insurance, and welfare for children in extreme poverty, abolished child labor, and fostered giant public works programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Public Works Administration that built things like the Lincoln Tunnel, Golden Gate Bridge, the bridge to the Florida Keys, and LaGuardia airport. Many parts of American life that we take for granted today, came into being because of this one woman.

But Frances Perkins didn't come out of high school or college thinking she was going to save tens of thousands of people from fires and concentration camps, hundreds from sex trafficking, and millions from poverty. She simply saw a need and did something about it.

You remember I said the world is on fire? Well, it was on fire in Perkin's day too. Literally. One day she was sipping tea with some friends near Washington Square in New York City. A ten-story factory across the square erupted into flames. She witnessed 146 people get caught between the fire and jumping tens of stories to their death. That day, the young Frances Perkins discovered her life's purpose. She hadn't asked for this to happen. But she was so moved by the horror of that scene that she decided to do something about it.

It was quickly discovered that this famous fire, called the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, happened because the manufacturer didn't invest in any safety precautions for their workers. Frances Perkins' mission was formed.

She didn't know clothing manufacturing. She didn't have any credentials or connections to take this on. She held no political office. She was just an ant in the giant hustle and bustle of New York City.

But she had a firm resolve that what that company did by having no back up plan—was wrong. Today, when you see buildings that practice fire evacuations, have sprinkler systems, and exit signs posted, all that came from Frances Perkins. If that were all she did with her life, her life would still be notable, but this was just the start.

I think it's strangely worth mentioning right here that she studied chemistry in college. The curious thing is that Perkins hated chemistry. She actually liked literature, but her college chemistry teacher, Nellie Goldthwaite, advised Frances to major in chemistry simply because it was hard—even if it meant she would get mediocre grades. Goldthwaite's line of reasoning was that it would toughen her up. It did. It has to be emphasized, that Perkins was as interested in studying chemistry, as she was interested later

in life about studying fire safety in industry. Which is to say--she wasn't! Not at all. But she saw people plunging themselves to their deaths, when much of it was preventable. And she knew she had to do something about it. Although it's impossible to know how many lives Perkins saved because of her fight to enact fire safety regulations, but it would be safe to say it's in the thousands!

By the way, I'm not advocating schools make students study things they're not interested in. But what I am saying is that we may need to do things that are hard simply because they're tough and they make us tough.

In other ways, more than I have time to share here, Perkins wasn't raised to ask what she wanted. She had developed a hard gritty edge to her that could take on challenging things and so when it came to taking on the textile industry, she was ready.

She wasn't ready to take on giant multi-'billion' dollar industries because she knew a lot and was an expert on the subject. She was ready because she had shaped her character in such a way that she could deal with the long drawn out frustrating push back that the industry was destined to give her.

When Frances threw herself into her work, she realized that there were other kinds of fires of injustice burning in America once she poked her head into the problems. One of those fires that was invisibly burning all around her, was how immigrant women were being forced into sex trafficking in order to survive economically. Immigrant women coming into Ellis Island would be told that they could stay at a certain hostel rent-free until they got a job. Then the ladies could pay them back after they found a job. But the system was intentionally rigged against them. It was designed to keep them indebted and to pay back their debts by working as prostitutes.

What did Frances Perkins do? She pretended to be an immigrant woman herself, and applied for these rigged loans and then confronted pimps. She exposed 111 sex trafficking rings. She could have easily been killed. But Frances' whole life wasn't about staying safe or even about what she wanted. It was about, "Hey, there is something really messed up about my community. What can I do about it?" If this was all Frances Perkins did with her life, shutting down 111 sex trafficking rings, it would be enough. But it was only the start.

As Frances was taking on these battles and winning, she became known as someone who could get things done. And people wanted her to join them—people like Al Smith who ran for President of the United States and introduced her to FDR. It eventually led her to become FDR's Labor Secretary. She was the first female to be in a Presidential cabinet and is widely considered the most influential presidential cabinet member ever!

As a pioneer, she had to figure out how to navigate being the only female in her line of work as Secretary of Labor of the United States. She used every situation as an opportunity to learn. She kept a notebook entitled, "The male mind." Once in an elevator she had an experience with a crude senator. She realized how men will honor their mothers but often dismiss young ambitious women.

Frances decided to change her persona. She started wearing black dresses with pearls and her hair pulled up into a bun—in order to look more motherly. It's worth noting that prior to this encounter in the elevator at about the age of 33, she was described as 'perky.' After this encounter in the elevator, she was subsequently described as 'matronly.' Her nickname became 'Ma Perkins.' She secretly despised the nickname, but she changed her style of clothing and hair to look more motherly. What she

was doing was re-shaping her persona she shaped her persona and her way of dressing because she thought it would help her get things done in a male-dominated world.

While in no way whatsoever, do I advocate doing what she did. I find it tragic that women like Frances thought this was necessary, but I mention it because it showed that Frances didn't live according to her whims and wants. She looked around. Found what was wrong. And set out to fix it no matter what it took to help millions of poor people in this country.

It should be pointed out that Frances Perkins didn't come from privilege. While she did marry into wealth, her husband eventually gambled away all their wealth and had to be put into a sanatorium due to mental health issues. Eventually her daughter also developed the same mental health issues and Frances had to support both of them on her income. She wore clothes that her parents bought her during her time in college, long after college was over. Many times she had to pawn her watch and later buy it back in order to make ends meet. She had to work until she was 85 years old to help support her daughter. She was not a lady of privilege who wanted to help out all these poor souls during the Depression from her ivory Victorian tower. Rather she was groveling to make ends meet herself—while she changed the world.

Nietzsche once said that whoever knows their why can deal with any how. Perkins always knew her why. And she took her 'how' into the realms of art.

So how did she do this?

Take for instance another cause she fought for—voting rights for women. Frances could not vote until she was forty years old. She found the fact that she couldn't vote as wrong and guess what she did? She did something about it. She didn't have money to throw at big lobbyists. She simply had a little wooden soapbox. She would go out on the street, stand up on her little soapbox, and give speeches about why women should vote. She said later that her ability to speak well in public came from those days when she got up on street corners and advocated for women's right to vote.

How she did this was very interesting. She would find a friend who shared her passion. Together the two would find a place in the city with a bar on all four corners. They would take turns giving speeches on how women should have the right to vote. Eventually semi-inebriated men would come out of the bars wondering what these two women were doing. And these guys would often start hurling insults at Frances and her friend.

Frances not only expected this to happen, it was actually a part of her plan. While the insults were flying, Frances would constantly scan the crowd to find that one guy who was bothered by the behavior of the others who were throwing out insults. Then she would make her way to this one guy and say, "My friend has been holding up this sign in the hot sun for a long time, do you think you could help her hold the sign." Often this compassionate guy would hold the sign. By the time Frances was done, she would often end up having other guys holding up signs. She knew that if two women were advocating for women's issue, the thing wouldn't gain any traction, because people expected women to fight for women's issues. But if men appeared to be joining in the fight, Frances thought it made her case seem more compelling. The funny thing is that many of the men holding the signs were doing it out of courtesy to Frances, not because they necessarily supported the cause. But this was just one way she leveraged her agenda.

It probably seems so obvious to us today that women should be able to vote that we can't even fathom why it'd take any persuasion to convince someone of this fact. But for pioneers like Frances Perkins, you can't sit still and hope the world wakes up and starts to agree with you.

Another way Frances got things done through a back door sort of approach took place in a story that became legendary in Washington. Frances was now the Secretary of Labor for the U.S. federal government. She had an enormous challenge. Even though she wasn't a lawyer, she had to figure out how to convince others that Social Security was legally constitutional. Many critics of Social Security were arguing that the program was unconstitutional. They said that it forced a government program on all people who may not want the program. Even though Frances had a team of the best and brightest lawyers working on the problem, she was the one who found the argument that won over support for one of our country's largest programs.

It happened at a tea party. Frances was invited to a party at the house of one of the Supreme Court Justices at the time. She didn't want to go, but she went because as she said, "I had to go." At the party the Supreme Court Justice was sitting alone sipping tea. She came over and the two small talked. He asked how she was doing. She told him that she was having trouble figuring out the constitutionality of the Social Security program. He said, "Oh, that's nothing. Just call it taxation. The government has the right to tax." The light bulb switched on and Frances realized that she didn't have to get bogged down in a huge messy debate over the constitutionality of the program. All she had to do was market Social Security as a tax policy. The program passed in 1935 and has become a staple of American life helping millions ever since.

But both examples, from the soap box on the street corner to the tea party at the Supreme Court Justice's house, reveal a lot about how this woman used power.

She didn't come in knocking down the front door with her ideas. She wasn't a demagogue who tried to advance her ideas like a zealot ramming all her progressive ideas down people's throats. Nor did she use the power of her office as a bully pulpit to advance her agenda. Instead, she found a way around things. She got her ideas done through the back and side doors. She didn't try to convince the Supreme Court Justice that she was right and that he better support her agenda. Instead, she humbly asked him an honest question. And it got him on board trying to help her. Just like she did with the woman's suffrage signs.

In an age when our political system is paralyzed in partisan gridlock, Perkins got so much done, not in spite of, but BECAUSE she was a huge compromiser. When a huge sector of industry would threaten a whole fire safety bill by not going along with one of her fire safety regulations, she would make an exception and get the bill passed.

She also got things done because she knew how to bend rules. If you looked at Frances Perkins you would think she was a strict rule follower. Not so. As Secretary of Labor, Perkins was also in charge of immigration policies. She had a chance to meet Adolf Hitler in the mid 1930s. She immediately knew that he was insane and would hurt a lot of people. So with her power over immigration, she worked within the law, but bent things here and there and saved tens of thousands of Jews from the concentration camps. She devised all kinds of loop-poles for Germans to be able to migrate to the United States. Eventually she got into trouble because I believe she helped a person who was considered a Soviet spy immigrate to the U.S.. She was put on trial and was nearly impeached in 1939.

While she wasn't impeached, the sad thing is that immigration was taken from her list of responsibilities and given to the Justice Department where it remains today. Had Perkins been able to keep working on immigration, she could have saved many more people who were eventually murdered in Hitler's concentration camps.

It is interesting that someone who irritated everyone could get so much done. To the idealistic progressives she was a sell-out. To the conservatives she was an all-out socialist. If anything ever went right, FDR got the credit. If anything ever went wrong, Frances got all the blame. She was surrounded by jealous men who couldn't stand that FDR paid so much attention to her. She even endured an impeachment trial. And FDR stayed out of it and didn't support her. All alone, Frances won her case and was not impeached.

Twice she tried to resign and twice FDR wouldn't let her. Even Truman asked her to stay on. She said No. When she finally got out, she didn't cash in on her fame by writing a bestselling memoir about herself. Instead, she wrote a biography about her boss—FDR. The same boss who left her for dead during her impeachment trial. The biography wasn't an attack on FDR, instead it was an honest biography that honored FDR.

So what? Who cares that some lady who was born in 1880?

Frances shows us not only what is best about our country, she also show us how to live a meaningful joy-filled life. But like so many things about her, it's not entirely logical. She shows us that you don't get happy by seeking happiness. You don't get what you want by getting everything you want. We live in the most prosperous nation on earth where it is more possible to get what you want than in many other places on the planet. Yet we lose more people through desperation deaths, i.e. opioid over-doses and suicides in one year than all the soldiers we lost in fifteen years of all out war in Vietnam.

There is a crisis of meaning, a crisis of purpose, a crisis of division, a crisis of racism, hate, poverty, hopelessness. We're in the midst of a pandemic with explosive protests fighting racial injustice.

Frances Perkins wouldn't have spent much time wondering "But what about me? What do I want?" Perkins saw people throwing themselves out of a burning building and committed to a cause of fire safety. She saw immigrant women getting led into sex trafficking and did something about it. She saw a country go into a major economic depression and she did something about it. She never sat around and worried about what she wanted? She asked, "What does the world need?" Then she worked her ass off to do something about it.

Oh, and while she was not prone to talk about herself, she hated reporters and getting media attention, which may explain why so few know about her. Nevertheless, at the end of her career Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfort wrote her a letter congratulating her on her successful career, noting that she had endured a lot of hardship along the way.

She summed up her life like this, "I came to work for God, FDR, and millions of plain forgotten common people of this country." About her last conversation with FDR, she could only say, and I think it sums up her life very well, "My cup runneth over and surely goodness and mercy will follow me."

This is the great nugget they may have not taught us in school.

The American Dream they've been talking about for the last 75 years—has been centered on getting. Frances Perkins, who lived the American Dream as well as any, showed us that the true American Dream and pathway to a good life isn't what can I get, but it's what can I give.

Frances Perkins wasn't raised on a steady diet of self-esteem building platitudes. Frances' life wasn't centered on Frances. Her life was about doing the right thing because it was the right thing. And she avoided receiving any attention for her work. Often the credit for all the good things she did, was claimed by others. And she was ok with that. Because Frances knew something that isn't talked much about. The reward of doing work she believed in, was in and of itself the reward. Her life was marked with a deep joy and gratitude. And it all started with a fire. The world is once again on fire, and I challenge you to risk living a life a deep satisfaction and inner joy by asking, not what do I want. But what does the world need.

Work cited

Brooks, David. (2015). *The Road to Character*. Penguin Random House LLC. New York.