

Embry Riddle Aeronautical University Commencement Speech October 9, 2010

Mr. Thompson, Mr. Lawson, administration and faculty, distinguished guests, friends and loving families, and most of all, the Embry Riddle Aeronautical University Class of 2010. It is an honor to stand before you this afternoon.

My initial response to be invited to speak to the graduating class at Embry-Riddle was one of great delight. I am very familiar with the outstanding contribution that this institution has made to the aviation industry. Only 22 years after the Wright Brothers' first flight did Embry-Riddle emerge as a guiding light for all future flight. You should be proud and honored to be passing into the enviable society of the graduates that have come before you, and who have distinguished themselves so notably in every branch of aviation.

Embry-Riddle has a rich history in all aspects of aviation, an enviable rostrum of graduates, its commitment sustained over the years in making a difference in the world. An extraordinary record—and I was delighted to be asked to participate and be here on this campus today.

As the theme of today's address I would like to speak to you about two important ideas that will challenge you, pursue you, and frustrate you throughout your career and life. These are the concepts of success and happiness, and the caution that you pursue total success at the risk of happiness. Along the way I would also share with you qualities that you may not be aware that you possess, but that by being here today you have demonstrated you have.

The first point I would make about success and happiness is that they are similar in that neither can be pursued directly "A joyful life is an individual creation that cannot be copied from a recipe. It is by being fully inspired with every detail of our lives, whether good or bad, that we find happiness, not by trying to look for it directly," writes Mihaly CST, the noted author of the book, *Flow*, the psychology of optimal experience. Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist, summarized it beautifully in the preface to his book *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Don't aim at success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue...as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself."

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi returns to write of happiness: "Contrary to what most of us believe happiness is not something that simply happens to us. It is something we make happen and it results from our doing our best. The feeling of being fulfilled when we achieve our potentially motivates differentiation and leads to evolution. The experience of happiness in action is enjoyment. The exhilarating sensation of being fully alive."

As for success, when you stop and think about it, there is no better or more important measure of success than happiness. We pursue all manner of things in the pursuit of happiness: more money, better looks, prestige, fame, a fancy car, corner office, you name it, we pursue it in the name of happiness. But we pursue happiness for itself and for no other higher, greater reason.

So let me tell you something about yourselves, about a characteristic you all possess. It is about a quality called 'grittiness'. This quality is what psychologist refer to when they speak of an individual's ability to stay with something, even in the face of difficulties, adversity, challenges, boredom, fatigue, even depression. There was a study conducted that attempted to discern what it was that made for West Point graduates to make it through to completion and graduation for there is a very high level of dropout at West Point among the freshman class. What made for success in this case? Was it intellect, or physical stature, was it sociability. No, it turns out the most important quality, the determiner of success in this case, was simply "grittiness".

I don't know what brought you to the field of aviation. I don't know if you are passionate about it. Or, at this stage in your life, in your career, whether you know what it is you wish to pursue, what it is you are passionate about.

I am the Director of the Houston Airport System, a manager of airports. I love my job. But let me tell you a quick story about the path I have travelled to get here.

I acquired my interest in aviation from my older brother. He was a career enlistee and worked on aircraft in the Air Force. He would send me photos of aircraft on which he worked. This was many years ago, but I still remember one of the photos being of an F102 Delta Dagger All Weather Interceptor. Wow! That aircraft today probably couldn't intercept anything save perhaps for a Cessna or Piper, but back in the day it was state-of-the-art and I loved it. And it put the hook in me to pursue a career in aviation.

I didn't exactly know what I would do: perhaps follow a career in the Air Force, become a commercial pilot or something else. I remember discussing careers with my friends in high school just before graduation and telling them I was going to pursue aviation, while they talked about the kind of money you could make in law or medicine or by becoming an engineer or accountant. But none of those disciplines interested me.

Eventually, I decided I would pursue a career in airport management, perhaps because it was the path of least resistance toward accomplishing something of value and lasting, and at the time I lived in the New York metropolitan area and realized there were quite a few aircraft flying around and they must have taken off and landed at airports in the region.

But the idea of flight persisted to tug at my heart and I decided to learn to fly. Now, everyone of us has his or her particular student pilot story, so let me quickly tell you mine.

I had at the time about fifteen hours of flight time, no time as pilot in command. It was going to be my very first opportunity to fly an aircraft by myself. I had been cleared by my instructor to practice touch-and-goes at the local airport in Wayne, NJ at Caldwell Airport (CDW). I was having a great time and it was on the fifth touch-and-go that things changed dramatically. I was cleared to land closed loop and did so, launching back into the air after barely touching down. I had turned crosswind to the downwind leg when I heard an urgent plea from the air traffic controller: "Do you see the Cessna, do you see the Cessna!" It immediately occurred to me I was in a Cessna and began an intense scan of my immediate surroundings. It was then that I saw at my five o'clock position the propeller of the Cessna 172 that would strike my aircraft on the right side at an elevation of 1200 feet above ground level. I survived; the two pilots in the approaching Cessna did not.

I tell you this story because it made me petrified to think about ever flying again. But fly again I did. That very afternoon with my instructor, who made it clear to me that if I did not go back up and confront my fear, I would never fly again. "Grittiness." I did. And I went on to complete my flight training and obtain my license.

I remember running to my instructor and showing him my signed license with the definite sense of accomplishment I felt. He simply looked at me and said, "Congratulations, you have just earned the privilege to continue learning about flight with the potential now laid out before you to accumulate no less than at least 20 more ratings."

I tell you this story to make the point we all know that happiness is not found at the destination. It is encountered within the journey we undertake.

But, that journey can be difficult. Indeed it is difficult. But that is exactly what every motivational psychologist will tell you has to be done; has to be accomplished. Happiness is found at the boundary between what capacities we have and the challenges we take on. If the challenges are too great, we become anxious; if they are not strong enough, we become bored.

Daniel Pink, in his book “Drive, the Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us,” tells us that there are three things to bear in mind as you think about your next career move.

Think Autonomy. Think Mastery. Think Purpose.

Daniel Pink points out that Autonomy is one of the three most basic human needs, and of the three it is the most important. It is the sun around which the others orbit. The opposite of autonomy is control. And since they sit at different poles of the behavioral compass, they point us toward different destinations. Control leads to compliance, autonomy leads to engagement, and only engagement can free us to be creative, to be innovative.

You should seek the greatest autonomy concerning what it is you do, when you do it, how you do it, and with whom you do it. This leads to the greatest expression of freedom. But remember this too, the individual is truly free only to the extent of his self-mastery, while those who will not govern themselves are forever destined to find a master who will govern over them.

Next, you should seek mastery. Here is what Pink says about mastery—the desire to get better at something that matters.

First, Mastery is a mindset. What we believe shapes what we achieve. Believe in yourself, and the idea that you can improve at anything you decide to undertake.

Mastery is a pain. If you select a profession in which you enjoy even the most mundane, tedious parts, then you will always be happy. But it takes perseverance, persistence, and yes - even grittiness. Especially grittiness.

Mastery is an Asymptote. You can get ever closer to mastering something, but you can never become the master. It will always remain just beyond your reach.

Then there is Purpose. Purpose motivates us to do our best day in, day out. Our connection with something greater than ourselves, the desire to contribute to society; our country; humanity or the cosmic order are the true everlasting motivators.

If you pursue autonomy, mastery and purpose - you will make yourself, and you will stay relevant in a business world that as Thomas Friedman says, is getting ever flatter and smaller.

Thomas Friedman, in his book, *The World is Flat*, writes: "What is flattening the world is our ability to automate more work with computers and software and to transmit that work anywhere in the world that it can be done more efficiently or cheaply thanks to the new global fiber optic network. The flatter the world gets, the more essential it is that you do what you love, because, as Daniel Pink notes, all the boring, repetitive jobs are going to be automated or outsourced in a flat world. The good jobs that will remain will be those that cannot be automated or outsourced; they will be the jobs that demand or encourage some uniquely human creative flair, passion and imagination. In other words, jobs that can only be done by people who love what they do.

You see, when the world gets flat everyone should want to be an untouchable. Untouchables in my lexicon are people whose jobs cannot be outsourced or automated. They cannot be shipped to India or done by a machine. So who are the untouchables? Well, first they are people who are really special

-- Michael Jordan or Barbra Streisand. Their talents can never be automated or outsourced. Second are people who are really specialized -- brain surgeons, designers, consultants or artists. Third are people who are anchored and whose jobs have to be done in a specific location -- from nurses to hairdressers to chefs -- and lastly, and this is going to apply to many of us, people who are really adaptable -- people can change with changing times and changing industries."

So as you lift off from this wonderful institution to explore and discover whatever mysteries life may hold, I ask you to remember to keep in mind the distinction between success and happiness and understand the priority. And always remember to think Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose.

Congratulations and Godspeed to all of you.