

## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS: A MODEST PITCH

Good afternoon -- trustees, faculty, staff, family, friends -- and of course, you the class of 2011. What's up, MPH?!

It is an honor and a privilege to come home – and yes, it feels like home – to speak here today and wish you well on your journeys.

Okay - a commencement address. This is what we call in show business a tough gig. There's an oversized venue, there's a huge, distracted crowd full of know-it-alls. And there are family members of various ages who I might offend if the rap gets too honest.

So before we go on, let's all loosen up and get to know each other. I'd like you all to do something for me. Very simply — so everyone can just kind of get to know everyone else — on the count of three, I want everyone to turn around and shake hands with the person sitting right behind you. One, two, three — right now, everybody, please do that . . . okay, I see we all still have a few things left to learn.

To be honest, the invitation to deliver the commencement address came as something of a surprise. When Baxter Ball – whom I, like you, remember fondly on this day -- when Baxter Ball called me to ask if I'd speak, my first response was “. . . but don't you need someone OLD for that?” . . . “OH.” It was quite a testament to the power of denial. But once I got past the horror that someone saw me as “seasoned,” I was delighted.

I will always see MPH as the institution that most deeply influenced me and shaped who I am. When I began here in seventh grade, I was shut down, frustrated, bored. I remember being overwhelmed by the openness, the variety, the intellectual stimulation that this place had to offer – both inside and outside of the classroom. MPH was a smorgasbord of treats to sample: from the soccer team – which I hear has done remarkably well since I graduated, or perhaps because I graduated - to Model UN to Dr Davis's Shakespeare class to musicals in the barn, I explored just about all of it.

Speaking of the barn: I think of the theatre there often. Not just because it's technically where I got my start in show business; but also because there are many skunks in my neighborhood in South Pasadena – and I swear, every time I smell them it takes me right back to backstage at our production of *Oklahoma*.

In any case, what began for me as acting in the middle school musical *Our Miss Brooks* led to directing theater at Harvard, then eventually to producing television and film. You never know when something you show up to one day will come to define your whole life.

Speaking of Hollywood – in the work I do, coming up with ideas, constantly selling them, convincing others how brilliant they are – in my world, we are always trying to pitch concepts in simple, exciting ways. It's *Inception* on a cruise ship, or *The Office* meets *The Jersey Shore*. I'll give you another example. Not long ago, my assistant Jeremy told me he'd been working on a screenplay in his spare time: he described it as *Little Miss Sunshine* meets *The Bourne Identity*. I told him it sounded silly, smiled

supportively, and asked him to get back to work. A few months later, he sold that movie to Warner Brothers for ten times his annual salary and promptly quit.

So as I sat down to figure out what to tell you today, I boiled my message down to one Hollywood pitch: it's *The 40 year old Virgin* meets *Transformers*. Hear me out.

First, let's talk about *The 40 Year Old Virgin*. Okay, so it's not really about being a virgin, though there's no harm in that. What I really want to speak to is that sense of innocence and wonder and hope that comes from being young and inexperienced.

You are at a time in your life of discovery and promise -- an era of first times. First time reading *The Merchant of Venice*. First job. First time breaking a 6 minute mile. But as you grow in experience and knowledge, and you are met with success and reward, it's easy -- and natural -- to become comfortable with the known, to stop asking difficult questions, to assume that you already know the answers that matter. Don't do it.

My message is: wherever your life's journey takes you after MPH, don't stop learning or trying. If you face a challenge, don't retreat to safety: you grow when you fail, not when you succeed. Don't follow conventional wisdom: try things for yourself. And keep looking for firsts. Even when you're -- God forbid -- 40. And beyond.

And along with preserving your innocence, make sure you keep your sense of humor as well. In one of my favorite old movies, "Stripes," a tense recruit announces during his platoon's introductions, "My name is Francis. But no one calls me Francis. Anyone calls me Francis, I'll kill them. And I don't like to be touched -- anyone tries to touch me, I'll kill them." And the sergeant responds, "Oh, lighten up, Francis." So make sure you surround yourself with people who laugh at themselves and at the silliness of the world around us -- who remind you to lighten up.

The other half of my pitch is *Transformers*.

What on Earth do I mean by this? Clearly I'm not suggesting that you all go out and get badass cars that turn into robots. Though that would be cool. No, this part of the pitch is about *transformation* -- transformation of yourself, and of the world around you.

You have a golden opportunity right here and now -- as Annie Lamott once said, a chance to take the reins of your own life. So here's the proposal: right now and for the neverland of the summer, who you were, who you are, doesn't count. Sure, cheerleader, science-geek, soccer-midfielder, tuba-enthusiast, Brussels-sprouts-hater, Twitter-fiend, is who you have been. But forget it. Leave it behind. You are about to experience the first taste of freedom in your life - and that won't be freedom from your parents, like most of you are thinking. You are about to be free from yourself, your old self, the self of your childhood. You are, in many ways, about to love Brussels Sprouts. So start dreaming a new you. And with that new you, dream a new world; all of our futures depend on it.

So that's my pitch to you. Keep that sense of wonder and newness, look for more first times, keep it light, and don't be afraid to reinvent who you are and transform the world around you. That's my pitch. And in case you're wondering, I've already registered it with the Writers' Guild. Gotta catch up with Jeremy.

So, my obnoxiously young friends, you've heard a lot of advice from me today. It probably sounds like a tall order, huh? Especially now, at this moment, when you've already come so far – you've aced the tests, nailed the extracurriculars, secured a place at college or devised another plan for what to do next. You're on your way, and good for you. But sorry, no resting on laurels allowed. MPH has given you tremendous tools: critical thinking, knowledge, worldly sophistication, even the manners that maketh you. Use them, and make the world a better place.

Oh yeah, a few more things to remember . . .

- Keep your hands and feet to yourself.
- Try to get some exercise.
- Be nice to dogs.
- Wear comfortable pants.
- To quote Garrison Keillor – “be well, do good work, and stay in touch.”

And one last thing: for the love of God, don't go into show business. I'm already competing with Jeremy – the last thing I need is more smart young people in my job market.

Thank you, congratulations, and good luck.