

New Bedford High School Graduation Address

June 14, 2012

Mayor Jon Mitchell

Mr. Kulak, Mr. Shea, members of the School Committee, parents, teachers, guests, and members of the New Bedford High School Class of 2012.

Thank you for inviting me here today. Delivering a graduation address is one of the great traditions in public life in America--an opportunity to reflect and impart at least some wisdom to young men and women as they embark on their journey into the wider world.

This being my first graduation address, the class of 2012 and I will always have this memorable occasion in common. On the other hand, if I drone on too long, you might wish we didn't!!

So with that in mind, I will get to the point and start off by telling you what I think is most significant about our gathering here tonight.

Tonight, we celebrate the culmination of years of hard work.

We live in a time where many things happen fast—days, hours, seconds, milliseconds are often the units by which we measure our activities and lives.

But the core important things take longer. Much longer. Real achievement, real change has to be counted in months and in years.

You are here after four years of sustained and focused effort toward an important goal.

It was no walk in the park. You've had to sacrifice to keep your grades up, had to choose studying over going out with friends, had to deal with peer pressure, and had to pass the MCAS.

You've done it. You deserve our praise today. We don't hand out diplomas like they are candy. You have achieved something very real, and you have every right to be proud.

But you of course didn't do it alone. If you haven't read it yet, you will at some point read a poem called *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, by the English poet John Donne, in which he famously declared that "No man is an island." We all depend on others in different ways. You share this day with a network of people who supported you along the way.

While there are too many to list, two groups deserve your highest gratitude. You sit here today in part because your

teachers stood up and delivered for you every day. They worked hard for you not because there was something in it for them. They don't get rich doing what they are doing. They stayed up at night correcting papers, gave you extra attention, and asked for nothing in return because they were devoted to your development as young men and women. They wanted to make you better.

The other group is sitting out there. It will be years before you come to recognize how much your parents have done for you. Mark Twain once said that when turned twenty-one, he was amazed at how much his parents had learned since he was fourteen. Teenagers don't always see eye-to-eye with their parents, and sometimes think their parents just don't understand, but mark my word, in time you will realize that your parents have always had your best interests at heart. They have supported you, and they are so proud of you. And today, they, too, deserve to take a bow.

You may be thinking that this ceremony is the end of a *long* road. Your parents, I assure you, are thinking that the last four years went by in a blink of the eye. They cannot believe that their little baby is graduating from high school. Graduates, *you* may think that you are going through a big transition right now, but parents, they have no idea what *you* are enduring as you sit here tonight.

But the reality is, graduates, that you *are* about to enter a new phase of your life. You are leaving behind certain comforts, habits, and experiences.

You're leaving behind your classes for sure, but there's so much more. You leave behind your morning routine that seems second nature. You leave behind seeing your friends in the hallway. You leave behind your assigned house, your home room and your locker. You will leave behind proms and the bonfire before the Durfee game. You will even leave behind the cafeteria meals you just love, like the veggie burger (okay, certain things you won't miss about high school).

This is the last time you will all be in one place as a group. Not everyone goes to class reunions. In fact, rarely more than half ever show up. There are people here today that you will see for the last time, ever. So you are now moving on to something different, armed with the education you received here at New Bedford High, the values you learned from family, and your God-given talent.

I would like to share with you my thoughts about what might lie ahead. My expectations are grounded in the awareness that most people don't remember who spoke at their high school graduation or exactly what that person said.

What will never leave you is the feeling you had today. Beyond that, my hope is that you might hang onto a few nuggets of wisdom that will serve you at some point.

Perhaps the biggest cliché in graduation speeches is for the speaker to encourage graduates to follow their dreams. And it's often used for good reason. It is appropriate advice. Realizing one's dreams tends to make a person happier than one who doesn't, and we are blessed to live in a country where we have the freedom to choose our own way.

But "following your dreams" is incomplete advice. It doesn't really get at what lies ahead. The reality for most people is that your dreams, your aspirations, and your path will change.

I began college as an applied math major. I liked math, and I thought I was good at it. Yet now, twenty or so years later, I'm a public official. What do applied math and running for elected office have in common? Well, nothing. There is no meaningful connection. And that's the point. I once thought I could use my math skills to pursue a career in engineering or finance perhaps. But over time, I came to see my skills and my potential differently, and that led to me making different choices, and my pursuing a different path.

Some people always know exactly what they want, and it never changes. But for the vast majority of us, our dreams

change. It'll likely happen to you. And that's okay. Just think about what your aspirations were four years ago as you entered high school, and what they are now. They've changed in at least some small way.

Course changes often come from a growth in perspective that comes with learning more. But the biggest changes come with failure.

Another over-used line in graduation speeches is, "Don't fear failure." Well, I fear failure. I fear it a lot. You ought to fear failure a bit too. My point is: If you are indifferent or unaffected about the potential outcome of an endeavor, you're probably not trying hard enough to succeed. Channel the doubts or hesitations you might have into something positive—use them as a reason to try harder and aim higher.

So I'm here to tell you that you will fail at times. Everyone does. Take advantage of the teaching power that comes with failure. Success itself is not nearly as useful as failure. Failure clarifies, and with clarity comes new conviction, and with new conviction comes renewed purpose.

The pitfall for you, graduates, is not failure per se, but your reaction to it. *Adjusting to failure* is not the same as quitting. You must never quit. Never, ever. Failure, properly understood, means one of two things: either a bump in the road, or the opening of a new road. The better course may be

to persevere and continue to follow the same dream, or wisdom may direct you toward another dream. But choosing to stop where you are *is* quitting. And when you quit, you stop living.

Quitting has many faces. It isn't always the face of despair, of someone who has lost everything. More often it's the face of those who don't even know they've quit. This is the face of someone who embraces the illusion that they've already made it, and there is nothing worth working hard for any more. In my experience, many who fit this description appear to be successful. They luxuriate in the material trappings of modern life: the nice house, the new car, and vacations, and have checked all the other boxes: the family, the dog, and a healthy 401K, but along the way have lost sight of how they got there. All the acquisitions mask the underlying spiritual poverty of their lives.

I've been inspired in my life by many people. One of them was my uncle, Billy Kruger, who owned Kruger Brothers Ship Supply on Union Street. Some of your grandparents may have known him. He began working in the store when he was a kid after his older brothers opened the store upon their return from the First World War. Bill left school in eighth grade and worked there until his death two years ago at the age of 93. For over eighty years, except for his service during the Second

World War, he ran the store and loaded fishing boats with provisions. Until his dying day, he woke up at 4:30 in the morning to load delivery vans for fishing boats. He did this *every day*. Fittingly he died at work, setting up to load a truck.

I relate his story not for the sake of pity. Making it to 93 is pretty darn good. Nor am I suggesting that you should literally work yourself to death.

My uncle's example inspires me rather for his unwavering choice not to shut down. Waking up every morning at 4:30 at the age of 93 to load trucks speaks volumes about the way he decided to live his life. And he died a happy man.

Graduates, dreams will change in unexpected ways. The key, to me, is never abandon the pursuit. There is always something within your reach that is worthy of your full devotion. When you hit a bump in the road, drive on, *or* accelerate down a new road. But never turn off the engine, as there is happiness and fulfillment to be found in the pursuit itself.

Congratulations to the class of 2012 on a job well done, and good luck in your pursuits.