

UMKC

School of Computing and Engineering

Commencement Address

May 17, 2013

**I remember your chair. I've sat in it....looked up....and thought 'oh no' I have to get a job.**

**At the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology...a very small school...about 1000 strong when I attended we combined a lot of things into assemblies like this.**

**That's WHY I remember your chair. I ran sprints for the track team and as I was always a pretty quick starter, I led off the 4 by 110 yard relay team. I was there that day to see my name and that of my three teammates go up on the all-time records board.**

**The very next week at Districts, I slightly pulled my hamstring in the 100 finals and had to sit out the relay....out team was so small they actually had to pull a guy from pole vault to fill my spot...you guessed it...they broke my school record again. It was ok though....seeing my name on the Board just that one time really made me feel I did something that mattered.**

That same lesson hit me again the next week and has stuck with me ever since. My favorite teacher in Engineering School was easily my Calc and Differential Equations professor Dr. Ronald Weger. Doc Weger was nearly blind, was prone to losing his place on the chalk board and had easily one of the worst looking wigs you have ever seen. If you saw him near the end of each teaching day, he would always, not sometimes, but always have chalk on the end of his nose from reading the board at close range. And yet, he was brilliant, he taught calculus like it was life and he cared more about his students than anything else in life.

I wanted to see Doc Weger before Deanna and I moved to Kansas City. When I walked into his office he said "Well hi Greg." And I couldn't help but ask him how he knew it was me (it certainly wasn't from seeing me). He told me he could recognize most of us from our shuffle coming down the hallway.

After about 10 minutes, I said my good bye but he stopped me as I left. "Hey Greg, the only thing that matters in life is to matter in life."

Chancellor Morton, Dean Truman, parents and family, graduates...thank you for inviting me today. I can't imagine anyone feels completely worthy to have my role here today but I want to tell you one thing: Doc Weger was right.

Before I get into any heavy stuff, let's all take a quick minute to do something important. Graduates....find your parents or significant others in the crowd (I know you know where they are). Now...tell them thank you. Parents....find your son, your daughter again. Tell them how proud you are.

Go ahead.....we'll wait.

See....you already matter.

Parents....I know how proud you are today. I was there to watch my Jessica cross the stage at Pepperdine, my Kristin at Kansas. Yes, you did hear that right....I went to school in South Dakota; Jessica went to Malibu....go figure. The feeling of watching your child having this great accomplishment is just not describable, is it? Pride, of course, but it's so much more than that.

**I was a typical engineering graduate....grew up the son of a science and math teacher, knew I wanted to be an engineer at 12. But would have never guessed that 25 years after graduating I'd be running a \$2B engineering and construction company.**

**Based on that experience, I'm told by many that I should now be offering some sage advice. Here's only one:**

**Computing and Engineering careers are more like entropy than anything else. You haven't forgotten entropy already have you? They are filled with random and expansive events that make too detailed a career plan a waste of time and energy.**

**So I beg you.....just be you....you are engineers, designers, creators.**

**In the early 1980s, America was graduating nearly 100,000 engineering graduates yearly. By early this century, the numbers were as low as 60,000. India and China....over 300,000.**

**You don't have to be managers, executives, sales reps on day 1. Your planet, your country needs you to matter....you will if you are you. Your country needs better transportation....that's you. Cleaner drinking water....you. Your country needs to stop polluting its streams....that's you. Better Medical Records...you. Energy, Process, Computing, aviation....all you.**

**You've arrived just in time. We need you.**

**And as for you Milo, Joshua, Sam, Eddie, Andrew, Aaron, Jared and Taylor...who are coming to work for me in the next few weeks, be ready...you are going to be busy.**

**Let's go back to entropy theory just one more time. As things expand, they tend to expand more rapidly.**

**I graduated in 1980. You weren't born yet but some important events took place.**

**January---First HP Personal Computer**

**February—Trouble in the Middle East**

**March—Voyager I reaches Saturn**

**April---Americans taken hostage in Iran**

**May---CNN Launches 24 hrs News Network**

**July---Saddam Hussein becomes President of Iraq**

**September---Engineers open largest ever transportation tunnel in Switzerland**

**December...Fitch and Cronin win Nobel Prize for Physics discovery proving matter and anti-matter both do exist.**

**December...Saddam Hussein begins executions using latest nerve gas technology.**

**You see....there's Good News and Bad News in Entropy. Our abilities are growing exponentially but can our humanity keep up. And so I remind you at this young age, it is just as important that WE...YOU...THE DESIGNERS....take a leadership role in WHO we are, not just what we are capable of.**

**I believe in my heart, not to mention my gut, that one of the greatest things Leo Morton is bringing to UMKC is its obligation to not just learning but to duty. Your years here have helped him and many other civic leaders achieve a monumental task for our town...you're transforming UMKC from excellent, nice, little, cozy mid-town school to Great Urban University. You are the place in our town for medicine, for law, for thought, for music, for theatre, and now, most important in my book, for design. Kansas City Strong...University Proud....now that's UMKC.**

**One more thought and I'll wrap up. A few years ago, I took a career success course from a Jesuit Priest....sounds funny....I mean after all what sort of business expertise are you going to learn from a Jesuit Priest. I was wrong. I still remember one of his most important lessons.**

He said there were three levels of happiness. The first is Physical Happiness. You can achieve it pretty easy with a bag of potato chips and a beer.

The second level is likely for each of you and it comes with personal success. It can be achieved through wealth or notoriety or even through political power.

The final level....I turned around to see if Doc Weger was in the room...and is achieved by only a few....it is to matter.

Now there is only one way for certain to matter in this life....And that's to be someone else's mom....then, well that's guaranteed.

But as computing and engineering specialist, we do have a distinct advantage over almost any other profession....we have a learned ability to matter.

And as graduates of this great school, it is not just your advantage, it is what Chancellor Morton has created in the institution...it is your duty. You will build the first driverless transportation systems, the first virtual hospital suites, and the first eco-villages.

You, more than anyone else, will keep our nation safe.

You will achieve medical device advances that will not only make lives safer and longer but better (in fact if you hustle a bit on that particular one, your parents and I would appreciate it.)

You will send man to Mars and next, quite frankly, I do not know...Entropy will decide.

If Doc Weger were still alive today....he'd be proud....not just for the success of his shy and skinny calculus student but because that student has always hoped to matter in a world where we need you to accept nothing less.

Thank you all so much for having me here today. Best of luck to each of you.