

Convocation Speech

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Welcome to College and welcome to Missouri State University.

I'm sure you've heard that quite a few times already but it never hurts to hear it one more time. When I agreed to give this talk I shrugged and said "Sure, I'd be happy to" but then panic set in when I realized that I'd actually have to say something and I had no clue what that something should be. Yes, that even happens to those of us in the teaching biz.

But then I relaxed because the only thing I remember from when I sat in the same place you are sitting now about twenty three years ago is 9349112...oh yes, area code 507.

It was the phone number for the local Pizza place.

You have never seen so many bored Freshman scrambling for pens.

Okay, so the phone number for a local Pizza place here is...aw forget it, there's one in the Union or you can just Google it.

When my father entered college in 1962 the President of the University he attended told the incoming Freshmen to look around, that only 40% of them would be there in 4-years.

4-years later the same President told my father and the other graduating Seniors to look around, and congratulated them on being the 40%. And you know what? That's about how many there were.

Well I want you to look around because in four or five years, depending on your program of study, we want to see each and every one of you receiving your diploma from MSU. I want to be able to congratulate you on being part of that 100%.

For that to happen is going to require a lot of hard work...from the faculty, from the staff and, most importantly, from each of you.

Okay, so if you're going to tune me out at some point now's the time to do it...the next part is a bit preachy and I can't for the life of me make it less preachy.

Okay, has everyone tuned me out who's going to tune me out? That's not a problem, it just gets you in practice for my lectures...seriously, if I didn't blow stuff up occasionally in class I'd put *myself* to sleep...

I'm going to borrow an analogy from Lee Shulman, the former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

I want you to think of a game that best personifies America, and your own experience getting this far.

Some might say football...what better description of life than the mixture of sweat and violent meetings.

Some might say Baseball, or Golf...you know, whacking that little ball with a mixture of skill and frustration and then trying to find it, and then the right path when it goes in the brush...or some might say the board game 'Life' ...where the goal is to get as rich and famous as possible.

But there's a better one, and I thank Lee Shulman for providing it. I'm talking about the game 'Chutes and Ladders'.

It seems kinda funny but think about it...it's usually one of the first games you play as a child. Spin the spinner and move your piece the correct number of spaces...sometimes you hit a ladder and shoot upwards. Sometimes you hit a chute and go back down.

You hit Chutes and you climb Ladders.

That's what your college career is going to be like.

You're gonna hit Chutes...and then pull yourself back up using Ladders. And then pull yourself even higher.

I can guarantee that, no matter how gifted you are, you will hit the Chutes. I can guarantee that because we, your Professors, are going to put them in your path again and again and again. That's part of our job.

Do we do that because we're mean? Cruel? Out to make your lives miserable?

Well yes, we are. Or at least, I am.

We do it because we're doing you no favors by taking it easy on you and well...that's what our professors did to us. But they did it for a reason and so do we.

Your most valuable asset and the one that will most help you succeed is your ability to think and to solve problems. The other most valuable asset is the ability to work hard to achieve your goals. I don't care what your intended major is...from Chemistry, to Philosophy, to English, to Accounting...you're going to be challenged in ways you never have been before and you're going to hit Chutes.

That paper due in three days and you have severe writers' block and no amount of caffeine or 'energy' drink is bringing inspiration. The three tests in one day...that concept you just can't understand and want to howl in fury because you know that's the one concept your professor will really hit you with.

Or that speech you have to give and you hate giving speeches...

The list is endless.

Do we do it because we're mean, cruel and out to break you? No, we do it because a diploma from this institution means you have mastered the skills necessary to succeed in your chosen profession or to go on to graduate school. Not just memorizing endless facts, but being able to apply those facts and even more, being able to think when new situations come up.

But for every Chute we put in your way...there will be a ladder that you can use to climb back up, hopefully even higher.

Chutes to go down, Ladders to go up.

Look behind me...there they are and I hope they'll forgive me for calling them this...there are the most important Ladders on this campus. The same ones who put the chutes in your path aren't going to leave you hanging. They have a pretty good idea what the answers are and they'll give you clues and resources to get up there where you need to be.

But will you take advantage of them? Will you go to our office hours to talk one on one with us over some problem that is just beyond your reach or that you're totally clueless about how to solve? Will you take advantage of the resources they've given you (the readings and web assignments and homework assignments) to get you up the ladder? Or will you stay at the bottom?

And Faculty aren't the only Chutes and Ladders around but they are the most important one for your success...there are also administrators and staff, and we all want you to succeed. And if you couldn't succeed, you wouldn't be sitting there.

There's also the social side. The friends, the peers, your classmates, the gatherings, the clubs and organizations. They can be both Chutes and Ladders.

Do you study for the exam or do you go out with some friends? Or do you do both? Do you join five clubs and realize you suddenly have no time for studying? Do you join a group of classmates to form a study club? Do you sleep in instead of going to class...here's a news flash.

I'm not going to call you wondering where you are if you miss my classes. It ain't gonna happen...it's your responsibility now. Not your parents', or your roommate's, it's yours.

Case in point. At the end of each semester you'll get a chance to evaluate your professors and here's what one of them had to say about my general chemistry class last semester:

“Teacher was excellent but I wish I had woken up for class more often”

The class met at 11am.

It's your responsibility now. Not your parents', or your roommate's, it's yours.

Speaking of your parents and family...

My greatest Ladder my Freshman year was my father and those midnight to three in the morning phone calls, sometimes two or three times a week. I don't remember what we talked about...but all I know is that we talked and it got me through when I really did wonder what happened to that A-student from high school now that he was in college.

And you know what...he never once minded the calls and though tired always seemed glad to hear from me, and I bet most of your parents won't mind them either. They can't do it for you, but they can help.

Chutes to go down. Ladders to go up.

Not all Chutes are bad and some, not all, of the Chutes you hit will be beyond your control. How far you drop depends a good deal on you, and whether you take advantage of the Ladders that are out there. And how far you climb also depends on you and the Ladders that you find on the way.

Faculty, Friends, Classmates, Parents.

To wind this down I expect, and hope, to see all of you in four or five years getting a diploma and we'll do everything we can to get you there but we ain't gonna make it easy. Because we know that the more we challenge you, the better prepared you are to face the challenges that lie ahead.

And at graduation you can listen to someone else give a speech and I hope you have a better memory than I do for the only thing I remember from my graduation speaker is "Var är Öl", which means...well, ask me in four years and I'll tell you what it means.

Well I've talked long enough so I think I'll shut up now.

See you around!