

COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

Thank you President Schutt, the Board of Trustees, Faculty & Staff, Students, Family and Friends. This is such an honor and I'm so glad that your first choice for a commencement speaker, Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, was apparently unavailable to attend.

Truly, I am thankful and humbled to be here.

So I have a cool job and I graduated from Lake Forest College.

I am pretty sure that is the prerequisite to have the honor to give a commencement speech.

Hire Tina Fey and convince Ben Goluboff that you truly appreciate Nathaniel Hawthorne's dark romanticism and you get to stand up here and pontificate for 15 minutes.

And while that is likely the broad reason I'm standing here today, I do think that President Schutt may have extended this offer because he recognized that my life was transformed by my experiences as a student at Lake Forest College.

Since graduating college in 1988, I have been in the highly enviable position of being able to directly apply not only what I learned at Lake Forest College but also how I learned at Lake Forest College - to a career in theatre and comedy.

25 years ago, I was sitting where you are sitting now.

I may or may not have had a mullet.

I may or may not have had an ear cuff;

I likely had UB40's "Red, Red Wine" on my walkman and I was absolutely certain that Michael Dukakis would become the next president of The United States.

I was wrong about so much.

But one thing I was right about was my absolute belief - instilled by my professors and, luckily, by my family as well - that I could pursue a career that didn't need to make a distinction between happiness and security;

that I should aim for the stars with the full understanding that a lot of the time I'd be living in the shadows;

and that the things I learned were important and to be used.

And with those noble thoughts coursing through my veins I got a job as a dishwasher at The Second City.

Although history would prove that this particular gig was, in fact a gift, it didn't feel like a gift then.

Working in a cramped kitchen with a variety of alcoholics and sociopaths, my hands left raw by the cleaning of hundreds of beer glasses, there was a distinct lack of glamor in The Second City kitchen.

Additionally, you could smoke inside the theatre in those days, so I would come home reeking of cigarettes and stale beer with the creeping sensation that I had made a horrible, horrible mistake.

But glimpses of light would shine through.

A young unknown actor from Toronto joined the cast and I would get to step out of the kitchen throughout the night to see an amazing array of characters that he was developing on stage.

We would hang out at the bar after the show and talk about hockey. I always felt a little bad that the other actors tended to pick on him because he was clearly a huge talent.

In those days, no one knew who Mike Meyers was. But they would know that name soon enough.

And soon I was moved out of the kitchen to seat the room, so I was able to see more of the productions on stage.

Chris Farley had just joined the touring company of The Second City and he was constantly getting in trouble for breaking things. Bob Odenkirk, Jane Lynch and Tim Meadows were all performing on stage and I was being exposed to a degree of talent and invention that was spell binding.

I made almost no money, I was working in the trenches, but I was happy.

My understanding with these commencement speeches is that I'm supposed to provide you with some pearls of wisdom. So here's one:

Be happy.

I know this sounds trite and simple, but I assure you it's not. If adulthood teaches you anything it's that a lot of people make unhappy choices for themselves. You don't have to do that.

You have so many sacrifices that you will have to make in your life - never, ever let one of those sacrifices be your own happiness.

Those few years after graduation were chaotic and wonderful, hard and inspiring. I was attempting to fashion my own place in the world while the world itself was constantly changing.

I honestly don't know that I would have had any success in my field if it weren't for the preparation I received at Lake Forest College.

In my first week at school, I had the amazing luck to be singled out by one of my professor's - the late, great Ron Miller.

It was a religion class and as we went around the room sharing our own religion, I loudly and obnoxiously bellowed, "I'm an Atheist."

Ron knowingly winked at some of the upperclassmen in the room and, sure enough, in a few weeks time I was hanging out in the interfaith center arguing about Martin Buber's "Tale of the Hasidim" with other students that Ron had cultivated.

I should note that prior to my time at Lake Forest College, I read but I wasn't a reader; I went to school, but I would have never identified myself as a student.

Over the next three years, I wasn't just taught the great books, I was shown that my ideas had their own value and I was given real tools to apply the knowledge I was gaining to, hopefully, make a difference.

I was encouraged to say yes to new ideas, to take risks and to not only support the community I was within, but to seek out new communities.

Each of those elements, I later discovered, were key tenets in the work we teach and practice at The Second City: Improvisation.

At its essence, improvisation is making something out of nothing. Of course, that's a thing we do every day - simply by waking up.

But many of you will go into careers where you are making something out of nothing - whether it's designing new products or coming up with the ad slogans to sell those products; creating legislation, building hospitals, writing proposals - everyone has to improvise.

Today, I want to share with you three tenets of improvisation that have been core to every success I've witnessed on stage or off.

Second City alums such as Stephen Colbert, Amy Poehler and Keegan Michael Key, have noted that their improvisational training was vital in developing their careers.

Even the CEO of Twitter, Dick Costolo - who, in a former life, was a Chicago improviser - talks about using his improv training as a way to lead a better business.

The first rule of improvisation is that in order to make things happen you must say Yes, And. No action on stage can move forward if you say no.

Of course, we live in a No, But world. People love to say no. No makes things easy. No is the default setting for people acting in fear.

No is the enemy of change.

Saying Yes, conversely, creates opportunity. But you can't stop at Yes. The "And" part of that equation, requires that you add something to the conversation.

It's not enough to affirm, you must affirm and contribute.

We bring our teaching into a lot of businesses that are looking to improve teamwork and to make their employees more creative.

The first thing we ask them to do is to eliminate the word "no" from their vocabulary for just one day.

It's not easy, especially for those in charge.

But the smart ones start to realize that when you are forced to respond to another person in agreement - when your first move is to engage in the positive rather than the negative - you have created a space for dialogue.

Our world would be a whole lot better if it contained more dialogues and less monologues.

Saying Yes, And is the start.

The second tenet of improvisation is about embracing failure.

No matter what you do for a living, you're going to fail at some point.

Student's fail, politician's fail, salespeople fail, sports teams fail.

The reality is, if you are good at what you do, you're going to fail, because it means you are out there taking risks. Failing isn't a bad thing. It's the Fear of Failing that screws everything up.

We live in a culture that has equated failure with shame. And our fear of failure makes us timid, tentative and static.

Failure is hard-wired into improvisation.

There is a great saying in our theatre, "Make Mistakes Work For You." What that means is that if something goes wrong on stage, you don't need to let it stop the action or throw everyone off - see it as an opportunity - and use it to find something new.

It's really amazing that in a world where we understand the need for research and development, where we realize that products have to be prototyped and that novels need to be revised and rewritten - that we don't apply the same consideration to our daily working lives.

Be okay with failure.

The third tenet of improvisation is about ceding control.

We create our content at The Second City in groups - and that's true of many, many businesses. What we've realized over six decades is that true collaboration only happens when individuals surrender the need to be right.

Americans in particular love the myth of the solo act - whether it's the lone cowboy or the industry pioneer - when, in actuality, almost every great innovation was the product of many people working together in a variety of teams.

There is great power to be had in groups of people coming together to work on a single objective. But that power is drained by individuals who only listen to themselves.

Ceding control is hard - especially for smart, creative people - but the opportunity to make something truly great can only happen when individuals learn to let go, listen and allow the group to find "The" idea rather than "Your" idea.

Saying Yes, And.

Embracing Failure.

Ceding Control.

Three elements of improvisation that form the bedrock to create something new, something original, to create something out of nothing.

After graduation, my goal was to become a playwright.

The experience of watching the plays I wrote being performed at the college - go Garrick Players - and having written a senior thesis - I thought I was destined to be a writer. So I talked to people in the industry.

One of the great things about the Chicago theatre community is how accessible it is. I met with Roche Schulfer of The Goodman Theatre and Bernie Sahlins, founder of The Second City. Both said the same thing:

“If you want to be in theatre, be in a theatre - it doesn’t matter if you’re tearing tickets or cleaning up after the show.”

It was Bernie Sahlins who got me the job washing dishes at Second City and he later hired me as a production assistant for a new theatre he was building called The Willow Street Carnival.

Hailed in Time Magazine as the “next Second City,” The Willow Street Carnival was a total disaster. Just a matter of months after opening, the theatre closed.

With no job or prospects, I went back to Second City and my friend Anne, the box office manager, asked me if I wanted to join the box office staff.

I had said, Yes - And I asked her if I could have a day shift, every day so I could make more money and better learn the business. Although I was coming from a failed theatre, I didn’t let that failure stop me from pursuing my goals.

Three years later, I was offered the job of producer at The Second City. It wasn’t the job I had intended to get - I wasn’t becoming a playwright - but I had learned to cede control over what I thought I should be doing and, instead, I said Yes, And to that job.

I would not be standing here today if I hadn’t listened and acted upon all I learned - at Lake Forest College and at The Second City.

The job I didn’t know I wanted has turned out to be a dream job.

I ended up marrying Anne, my friend who got me the job in the box office and we have two tremendous kids, Nick and Nora.

And although I didn’t become a playwright, my first book on improvisation and creativity is being published in February of 2015 by Harper Collins.

When I hire people at The Second City, the first thing I tell them is “now, it’s your fault.”

The point I'm making is that although they are joining a legendary institution, they need to recognize that the institution they are joining is only as good and strong and meaningful as the people who are working inside it.

To grow, we must change, and the success of that change is tied to the values of the individuals working together. Do they say yes, and to new ideas? Do they eradicate fear by letting failure be part of the process? Do they surrender their own egos to allow everyone to benefit.

So, graduating class of 2014, now it's your fault.

The world you are joining desperately needs your help. Our government is broken - divided by partisanship; our cities are war zones, our farms and family businesses are disappearing; some make a devil out of science while others make a devil out of religion.

More people can quote a Kardashian than they can Kierkegaard.

And yet, with so much wrong in the world, there is hope. And that hope is you.

While some of you may seek to tackle the big problems that our society faces, it is just as important that all of you realize that small actions make big differences.

When your choices are based on thoughtfulness, kindness and integrity, you are building a better world.

Take what this wonderful college has taught you and bring it to the world. The world needs it. The world needs you.

Thank you.