

# University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## Commencement Address

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President White, Chancellor Herman, members of the faculty, and most importantly graduates.

Most of you probably have a love-hate relationship with YouTube. Because on one hand, it has allowed you to spend endless nights watching tons of hilarious videos. On the other hand, that means you have wasted endless nights watching tons of hilarious videos.

Let me take this opportunity to apologize for destroying your GPA. If it makes you feel better, I have probably wasted more time and watched more videos than anyone on YouTube.

You might wonder, having watched so many videos, which one is my favorite? My favorite video happens to be one of the first videos that was ever uploaded to YouTube. It's of a guy called Matt Harding. Matt is about 30 years old, he never graduated from college, and his job is to travel around the world, and dance. It's a little hard to describe, so let's take a look.

What's so special about this video? Well, I like it because it illustrates what YouTube is all about: Namely that anyone who has a good idea, can take that idea, and just make it happen. Matt for example just made the first video for fun. His video was then discovered by a bubble gum company. Now, they are paying Matt to dance around the world, promoting their bubble gum.

You might have noticed that I'm a little younger than your average commencement speaker. That's both good and bad. The bad part is that I can't give you any great insights on the meaning of life... because I'm still trying to figure that out myself.

The good part however, is that you and I are of the same generation. And that means, that the opportunities that I had and the lessons that I learned, still apply. And they apply as much to you now, as they did to me just three years ago.

What I'd like to do today is tell you a personal story that you can hopefully relate to.

Larry Ellison, the founder of Oracle Corporation, once said: "I don't know of any place or any time where there aren't great possibilities."

Now we can all agree that these possibilities exist in hindsight. But how do you find them ahead of time? Well, you have to look for them. You can do that by staying informed about your field.

That's how I found my first great possibility. And that possibility was coming to the University of Illinois.

It was back in Minnesota during High School, that I found out that the world's first popular web browser, had been developed at the University of Illinois. I looked up Illinois on the map and found that it was fairly close to Minnesota. I figured, why would I go anywhere else, if the people who invented the first popular web browser, are in my own back yard?

It was a no-brainer. At that moment I knew. I knew I would go to the University of Illinois. I wanted to join the innovators.

I mailed in my application and confidently waited for an acceptance letter to arrive. I did get a reply, but it wasn't quite what I expected. I was told that I had been rejected from the computer science department. Apparently the program was full, and so I had been assigned to ceramics engineering.

I'm not saying there isn't a future in pottery, but it's not what I signed up for.

So what could I do? I sent back a letter asking if decision could be reconsidered.

I wrote:

“I only request that you make sure that none of the facts of my application have been overlooked. In return I can promise you that I will be a highly motivated, dedicated and ambitious student at your fine school.”

It worked. The admissions people changed their mind, and let me begin fall semester in computer science. Being persistent I learned, often pays off. And that was my first lesson.

Fast-forward to the beginning of my junior year.

I received an offer to work at a startup company called “PayPal”, founded by an impressive team of Illinois engineers. It was at the height of the Internet bubble, and PayPal was taking off big-time. It seemed like a great opportunity, but I didn't know if I should abort my studies to join a risky startup.

I deliberated for two weeks, and the more I thought about it, the more I realized: I have nothing to lose. I decided to drop my classes mid-semester and move to California. Looking back, what I learned is the following: Take risks while you can.

At PayPal I felt once again that I was following in the footsteps of the Illinois innovators. It was a great opportunity to see up-close, how a group of talented people could overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges.

The experience taught me the importance of being true to yourself, and to know exactly why you are doing things.

But how do you know, what it is that you should be doing?

As I've said earlier, the best way to do this is to stay informed, and to pay attention to what's going on around you.

Most ideas don't come to you in a flash, but they stew in your brain for a while. And that's how it was with YouTube. Back in December of 2004, the Indian Ocean Tsunami hit the west coast of Indonesia. It was the first natural disaster ever captured on cell phone video cameras, and the video clips quickly flooded the Internet.

But there was no good way to find these video clips. They were scattered all over the web. There was also no good way, to share them. The clips were too big to email. And to play a clip, you first had to install the right video player. Try explaining to your parents, how to install a video player. The time was right for a better solution.

By February of 2005, two colleagues from PayPal and I began talking about building a video sharing website. We started working on the site on February 14<sup>th</sup>, Valentine's Day. That's one of those things about being a computer science major: Valentine's Day, is just another day, so why not start a new website? Just two months later, on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, YouTube.com went live for the first time. It was hosted on a single web server, rented for a hundred dollars a month.

What I learned over the next two years can all be summarized in two words: Stay flexible.

Most people assume that YouTube was an immediate success. But that's not the whole story. In the beginning, we found that very few people came to our website. The product was so primitive, that you couldn't even choose which videos you wanted to watch. Instead, the website picked the videos for you – randomly. And because there were so few videos, they were the same ones over and over again.

We didn't even know how to describe our new product. To generate interest we just said it was a new kind of dating site. Because let's face it – the one thing the Internet needs more of, is another dating site. We even had a slogan for it: "Tune in – Hook up". But there was one catch – we didn't have any videos. Realizing that videos of anything would be better than no videos, I populated our new dating site with videos of 747 airplanes taking off and landing. Dating? Airplanes? Who wants to date airplanes? The whole thing just didn't make sense.

We were so desperate for some actual dating videos, whatever that means, that we turned to the website that any desperate person would turn to: Craigslist. We spammed Craigslist in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, encouraging women to upload videos of themselves. In exchange, we offered to send them twenty dollars, for every video uploaded. It was a brilliant marketing scheme. Except for the fact that we didn't get a single reply.

It turns out, it didn't even matter.

Our users were already one step ahead of us. They began using YouTube to share videos of all kinds. Videos of their dogs, vacations, anything. We found this very interesting. We said, why don't we just let the users define what YouTube is all about? By June we had completely

revamped the website, making it more open, and more general. It worked. Our little website was finally taking off.

What I learned next may sound counter-intuitive: Don't listen to so-called experts.

When the time came to raise funding, initial reactions from investors were mixed. Some of them called the website cute, but they questioned its long-term value. They told us: "get advice from 'experts' on what to do with your website."

That's when we realized that there were no experts. Because after all, if those experts really existed, how come they hadn't built this product? We realized that we were now the experts, and it was up to us, to figure out how to proceed.

Within 18 months, YouTube had a greater impact than anyone, including us, could have predicted.

People often ask me, what do I take away from this phenomenon? To me, it just shows that there are talented people everywhere.

I think Time Magazine put it best when they chose "You" as the 2006 Person of the Year. As you leave this hall, remember that the world is waiting on you to create the next big opportunities. Given where you are today, you have already shown that you are well on your way.

But before you leave, remember dancing Matt? From the video I showed you? He just returned from Africa, and he has a message for you.

And once again: Congratulations!