

Commencement Address

by

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10:30 a.m.

To the esteemed board of trustees, to President White, to Chancellor Herman, to the faculty, but mainly truthfully to all of the graduates here today and your parents. I know, graduates, you are so happy, but I got news for you. Your parents are even happier because they don't have to pay for you any more.

Here's what I want you all to understand – today you do finish, you finish one sector of your life and you begin another. Now, many people, many people will tell you, there could not be a worse time to be graduating, there could not be a worse time to try to go out and get yourself a job than now. But did you just hear my accolades? Do you understand that maybe those people know or they don't know, but I'm here to tell you I do know. And what I know is this - there is not a better time than today to graduate and go out and get a job. Today, there are possibilities.

When I, back in '73, should have graduated, I didn't, because after four years of going to the University of Illinois, in my wisdom, I thought of course they would get rid of the foreign language requirement so I never took foreign language. See, I'm not so smart after all. And, so, after four years of going here, I didn't graduate. I left, but I too left at almost the exact same time as you are leaving right now. Serious, serious stock market crash, no jobs; nobody knew what was going to happen. So if you think that this is a bad time, that you don't know what to do, I'm here to tell you again you are just so wrong. You are just wrong.

If you had graduated four years ago chances are you might have lost your job. But now, you're out there to create that which needs to be created. People are going to look to you for answers. They're going to look to you for possibilities, and you may be thinking to yourself, "But, I don't even know what I really want to do. I've seen all these accomplishments up here. I can't live up to that. I don't know where to go or what to do. In fact, I might even have to move in with Mom and Dad."

Alright, I just want you to know something about myself. I want you to hear a little bit of my story that maybe you don't know. So that you understand that you can't plan what's about to happen to you in your life. You don't know where you're meant to end up. All you need to know is you keep needing to step every single day in a direction that takes you somewhere.

In 1973 I already told you that I left this great University without a degree, and I got in my Ford Econoline van that my brother Bobby and maybe he is here today, lent me \$1500 to buy, and I headed out west to California, and I lived in that van for three months because I didn't have the money to rent an apartment. After three months of living in that van, I got my dream job — a waitress at the Buttercup Bakery. And I was a waitress at the Buttercup Bakery from 1973 to 1974. From 1974 to '75, to '76, to '77, to '78, to '79, to approximately 1980 when I was almost thirty years of age. Are you all trying to figure out how old that makes me right now? Yes, I'm about to be fifty-eight. I look good, don't I?

But, think about this – I'm almost thirty years of age, making \$400 a month for seven years. The people that I went to school with, my friends – oh they were doctors, they were lawyers, they were mathematicians, they were teachers, they were all these glorious things, making all of this money, and I still didn't know what I wanted to be. I didn't have a clue. Until one day I realized, "I know, maybe I can open up my own restaurant." So I called up my Mom and I said, "Mom", who's by the way, I just have to say this, my Mom is watching today via the internet. My Mother is ninety-four. She never had the pleasure of seeing me in a robe or at a graduation ceremony. It has been thirty-six years since I've walked this campus. Mom, to you, dreams do come true, Mama.

But I said, "Mom, can I just have \$20,000, to open up my own restaurant?" And she said, "Suze, honey." This is 1980. "Where are going to get money like that? That's more money than we have to our name. I can't help you Suze." And, with that, I felt so bad because, really, you guys – you maybe ask your parents for money and if they say "No" it's really not because they don't want to, although I'm sure for some of you they don't. But, it's normally because they can't. And so, I went to work the next day and I felt kind of horrific because I'd hurt my Mom's feelings, because there's nothing a mother wants to do more than help her daughter in particular.

So, a man by the name of Fred Hasbrook came in and he said, "What's wrong sunshine? You don't look happy." And, I'd been waiting on Fred for seven years. To make a long story short, Fred learned about my wanting to have my own

restaurant. He talked to all the other people that I had been waiting on. And, he came back to me and he handed me all these pieces of paper, checks, all kinds of things, commitments, totaling \$50,000 for me to open up my own restaurant. I looked at Fred and I said, "Fred, I have to ask you a question. Are these checks going to bounce like all mine do?" And, with that, he said, "No Suze. Take these checks, put it in a brokerage firm, in a money market account until we can help you open up your own restaurant. I said, "Fred, I have two more questions for you. What's a brokerage firm, and what's a money market account?" I didn't have a clue. My major at this University was social work. In fact, today, when we were in the robing room, the dean of Media came up to me and he said, "Oh look how great you've done. What was your major here?" I went, "social work." He said, "What does social work have to do with communication, with what you're doing?"

It has everything to do with everything, people. When you understand who you are, you understand the strength within you. Then you can go out there and regardless of what your degree happens to be in, you make your life. Your degree does not make you, you make your life. Do you understand me? And what you have learned in this institution, in these great walls, in these places – that you now have instructions of how to get to the library from - you have learned more about yourself than you have any idea. And, it will come back as years go on and you will understand that you are the key to your future. You have what it takes to make anything and everything possible.

So, there I was, and I'm now going and putting the money in a money market account at this brokerage firm. And, the financial advisor says to me, "Suze, how would you might like to make a quick \$100 a week?" and I said,

"Yeah, that's more than I make as a waitress." Again, to make a very long story short, within three months all \$50,000 was lost.

Oh now, listen to you, do you understand that because I lost that money, I am who I am today? You are never to forget that when one door closes, another one opens. You are never to forget that everything happens for the best. You are never to think that when something happens to you that it ruins you. You are to look at every single thing that comes your way as a present. A present that you are going to unwrap and see what good can you find from it. Do not let anything or anybody keep you down my friends. Do you understand that?

So when that happened to me. I thought to myself, "Oh my God. I'm never going to be able to pay these people back. What am I going to do?" and I thought, I

know, I can be a broker. They just make you broker. And, I went in dressed in my red and white striped Sassoon pants tucked into my white cowboy boots and a blue silk shirt. I was a size six back then. I looked hot. And I walked in and there were no women stock brokers in 1980 working for Merrill Lynch at that time in California. And I walked in to get a job, and they looked at me and they were horrified, because I thought pinstripes meant my pants tucked into boots, not a pin stripe suit. And they didn't really know what to do with me. And, finally the manager of the office says, "Suze." And this, I tell you this story because I want you to understand possibilities. He looked at me and he said, "You know Suze, women belong barefoot and pregnant. But, I will hire you, but you will be out of here in six months." I looked at him. His name was Peter Sansevero. Oh yes, I looked at him and I said, "Sir, how much are you going to pay me to make me pregnant?" He said, "\$1500 a month." I said, "I'll take it."

Within a few months, I was studying to be a stock broker and I had learned as I was studying to be a stock broker that what my financial advisor had done that day, loosing all my money, the way he had invested it, was illegal. Because you can't invest money in an improper way for the risk tolerance of somebody. So, I went back in to that manager's office and I said, "Sir, you have a crook working here for you." He said, "That crook makes us a lot of money, Suze. You're a college graduate. Go and sit down in your little cubicle and don't say something. Don't say anything about this. Do you hear me Ms. Orman?" And I said, "Yes sir."

I went and I sat down in my cubicle and I thought to myself, 'You know, I'm still relatively young. I was in my thirties. I had time to make that money back. I could figure it out'. But, what if it wasn't me? What if it wasn't you? What if it was your parents, or your grandparents, or your Aunt and your Uncle and they didn't have time to make that money back? I could sit there and I could say nothing. That would be easy. But, it wouldn't be right. Therefore, I did the only thing that I knew what I could do, and that was I sued Merrill Lynch while I was working for them.

Here's the good news ladies and gentleman, here's the good news – because I sued them, they couldn't fire me. The moral to that is this – very shortly after that I went on to be one of their top performing brokers. They did get rid of that financial advisor. They did give me all the money back plus 18% interest because that is what interest rates were at that time in 1980. I was able to pay back everybody that lent me the money and the rest is history. What a move. You can applaud that. You should.

Graduates, what do I want you to take away from that story? I don't tell you that story to impress you. I tell you that story to inspire you. I tell you that story so that you never ever forget to do what is right versus doing what is easy. So that you never ever forget when somebody says "no" to you that a "yes" is right around the corner. I tell you that story so that you understand that you are now living in the world of probabilities and possibilities, not impossibilities. You are to keep good company. You are to be respectful of yourselves. You are to go for anything and everything that you want. You are to give 100% to everything you do.

The hardest thing in life, the hardest thing in life is to jump a chasm into leaps. You are about to jump out of this University. You are about to jump into something over here, something over there. It doesn't matter what you jump into. All I ask of you is to jump into it with 100% of every single thing that you have. You have the ability within you to create anything that you want. Take it slow. Take the right path. Do what's honest. And never ever forget you are a graduate of this great University – the University of Illinois. I thank you so very much and congratulations to all of you.