

Commencement Address

By

Dr. Timothy Shriver

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

May 16, 2010

Thank you Chancellor Easter and President Ikenberry. Thank you for your gracious words and for the recognition you give not just to me, but to the Special Olympics movement I represent. Thank you also for giving almost the entire text of my graduation speech before me!!

I guess the good news is that I now can be very short.

It is good to be in Illinois, the home state of Special Olympics. I bet you don't realize it, but Illinois has always been at the center of the Special Olympics universe. Down state, in the 1960s', the late William "Bill" Freeberg of Southern Illinois University of Carbondale was one of the world's foremost leaders in physical education for people with intellectual disabilities and was the early pioneer trainer of all the first coaches and teachers for what became Special Olympics. And the first Special Olympics Games ever were held in Chicago in 1968 and last year alone, there were 34,000 Special Olympics Games in 170 countries for 3.4 million athletes. How's that for having an impact!

This state got a big thing going and thank goodness UI Urbana Champaign is keeping it going!! Just this year, the volunteer Illini and Best Buddies on campus right here led a huge awareness day for our Spread the Word to End the Word campaign. Thank you Volunteer Illini!! And if you need an explanation of why that campaign is important, you can simply ask Professor Mark Schrad and his wife Vicki to introduce you to their beautiful daughter Sophia. If you can't find them, check out their billboard with Sophia's gorgeous smile. Take one look at Sophia and her proud parents and then realize that they're the kind of people willing to fight, and want to join our fight for acceptance!, for dignity for Everyone!, and pledge to end the slur 'retard' and replace it with a new era of 'respect.' It's not too late. Go to www.r-word.org and sign the pledge!!

Speaking of pledges, Faculty: you pledged to teach them and now, you got them through! Congratulations!

And Parents – mothers, fathers, grandparents, foster parents, people who parent without blood or title and who just pour out the love: your pride and joy is now a college graduate and a sub-prime loan! Congratulations! How about a national bailout for the parents? I mean if Goldman Sachs can get a bailout, how about the parents of Urbana Champaign? Can anybody get to the President to propose that?

And finally, Graduates – Bravo. Here’s what’s over: having a beer too many and as a result going on dates you regret and then piercing your body in places where foreign objects don’t belong to try to forget the date you shouldn’t have gone on and then shaving parts of your body that aren’t meant to be shaved to distract people from noticing the piercing you wish you hadn’t gotten – that’s over! And now, the Alumni Association is right around the corner and they will be calling. Alumni leaders, if they don’t return your calls, remember that they’re young, and they’re busy, and frankly, they’re just not that into you.

But, here’s one brief piece of advice to the graduates that you can use today: spend the rest of the day being nice to any of the nerds in the class. Within a few weeks you’re going to be working for one of them and I suggest you show them a little respect. Nerds: you know who you are. Your revenge is coming and it will last a long time!! Be forgiving!

Truthfully, I was concerned about my role today, so I asked an old Irish friend of mine for a few ideas. He said, “Tim, don’t worry. The graduation speaker is like the deceased man at an Irish wake. You need him to have a party, but you don’t expect him to say much.” He’s right. There remain 3, and only 3, constants in my life. Death, taxes, and no one listens to the graduation speaker!

So there are very low expectations for me today. But there are probably very high expectations for you. And I want to suggest to you that even if you don't realize that you're under much pressure at some level, you probably feel quite a lot. Because all of these people sitting behind you and all of these people sitting on the floor have given their lives to you. And at some level, I believe that they're all probably hoping and expecting and waiting and thinking that you, the graduates, will fulfill their dreams.

So my first piece of real advice, graduates, is DON'T. Don't try to live up to someone else's expectations, no matter how much you love them or respect them. Don't try to fulfill their dreams. And parents, I ask you to consider the same advice. Don't expect these young people to fulfill your dreams. I know it's hard. I have five children of my own and I'm tempted every day to tell them to do what will make me happy. But it's the wrong thing to do. It's profoundly wrong, I believe.

Perhaps the great spiritual writer Thomas Merton said it best when he said, "the beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, never to twist them into our own image." As long as you are living someone else's goals, you're not living the glorious purpose that is truly yours. And ironically, far from being self-centered, when you live your own sacred purpose, you will fulfill the dreams of others in what you can scarcely imagine.

So it's time, graduates, for you to define your own purpose and to think through what you really want, what you really believe is the answer to your biggest questions. It's not easy, and I can tell you ahead of time it's unlikely to be any of the obvious answers. It's unlikely to be money or toys, beauty or power, or guys or girls. All these things may help, but they won't help you answer the BIG question — “the why question.” Many people will be quick to ask you the what questions – what’s next, what’s your job, what’s your address, what’s your car? Those are all about the “what.” They are interesting questions, but they are not the big questions. The big

question is why? Why are you here? Why are you doing what you're doing? Why bother? What's your why?

Your WHY is going to be a lifelong project. You begin it today and a lot of forces will tell you to skip it altogether. We're in a time of. The economy is in trouble. The Gulf is spewing oil. The country is at war. The planet is heating up. I can hear your inner banker saying to you, "Don't worry about "why," get a job, pay the rent, survive, look out for yourself. That's 'why' enough.

Realistically, while we each feel this way at some level, at another level, to reduce your life's mission to a job description and to building a cocoon is an insult. It's an insult to your intelligence, it's an insult to your education, it's an insult to your country, and it's an insult to your spirit. We live in an age of extraordinary breakdowns. The problems you see are not just rooted in circumstances or money, they're rooted in values. You face a world struggling for prosperity, but also struggling for purpose.

The crisis you face is as much moral and spiritual as it is economic. It's about who we are not just about what we each do. What a waste for you to give your skills to a system that cries out for your spirit, to reduce the why of your precious life to a "to do" list on your refrigerator.

So I encourage you, graduates, to start a new course today, your course of finding your why, that will lead you to something bigger than you. The syllabus is your life. Every sunrise is a quiz. Every person you meet is a new reading; try to look beyond the cover of what lies within. Every moment of sadness and happiness is an invitation to go visit the professor. There is a final except you won't attend it here.

My best teachers in the Big Why course have been the athletes of Special Olympics, not the typical role models of greatness. They are NOT on the covers of magazines. They are often relegated to gulags. They are usually rejected by their peer groups. They are regularly treated as somehow less human than the rest of us. They have few heavy backpacks to carry to school. No big, huge numbers at their birthday parties. No long lists of speed dials on their cell phones. None of them graduating with you today. None.

Over 3 million of them are the athletes of Special Olympics – people whose common definition is that they have an intellectual disability but whose uncommon gift is that they have not let social pressure stop them from showing the most audacious courage and the most generous spirit of openness I have ever seen among any group anywhere. Their stories are of transcending what to you may seem like the most unimaginable limitations to live life with passion, purpose, bravery, and joy. Theirs is an invitation to believe that no limitation is too great to suppress the human spirit. If you are ready to embrace the values necessary to refresh the spirit of a selfish world, listen to them.

Consider first, Troy Daniels. He was born with Downs Syndrome. And he was asked by his high school class to deliver the graduation speech. And he did it in two minutes. So I'm trying to catch up to him. It's one of the best speeches I've ever heard. I'll read you just a few sentences. He said, "Not too long ago, (this was at the age of 17) people with disabilities could not go to school with other kids. They had to go to special schools. They called people like me retard.

That breaks my heart. "Now," he says, "the law says I can come to school. But no law can make me have friends. I started school here with all the other kids. At first it was OK and they realized that I loved school. I told them I wanted to have real friends. We started to learn together and we found that in some ways we were different and in some ways we were the same. They called me friend and they included me in everything in school. I cared about them, they cared about me. The law says I can come to school but no law can make me have friends." He closed his speech by saying this, "I want all the people to know and to see that all the students who called me 'friend' are the real teachers of life. They are showing you how it should be. That, yes, I am a person with a disability. The law says I am included. But it is my friends who say, 'Troy, come sit by me.'" Troy's answer to the question of why – why are we here is simple. I think he would say it is just simply to welcome one another. To be teachers of openness. Some might call it love. Maybe Troy's answer is – we're here to love.

Consider Ramadan. I met him at a Special Olympics event in Arusha, Tanzania. I got off a plane in the middle of the night. He greeted me with beautiful flowers. We drove into town across barren fields. About half way in, he got out to go into his house in the fields. When we got to the final event of the trip, the final event of the games there, it was a 10K run. And Ramadan was not scheduled to run in the 10K. He has an intellectual disability, suffered from malnutrition, is barely verbal, but wears a smile most places. And he came into the stadium, there in Arusha, with a smile on his face. Then he said he wanted to run. And his coach said, "No, Ramadan, this is not your race, you don't even have sneakers." But he insisted. I looked over and saw his father, a short, diminutive man, almost expressionless, looking at his son. So the coach said, "Ok, you can run the 10K." They leave the stadium, and he turned to me and said, "We will pick him up when he tires." The first runners came back into the stadium. Thirty-six minutes was the fastest 10K, a pretty good time. And the subsequent runners came in, one by one, up until the hour time limit was reached. But just before 59 minutes, in came Ramadan. The stadium had been all but emptied, but he came through and turned to the outside of the course, and ran around the track. As he came down the home stretch, his chest was out, his eyes were big and his head was cocked toward the sky, and he strode down and he finished the race. I saw his coach come running over to him, crying tears of joy. And I saw his father standing, still expressionless, at the side of the track, with tears also streaming down his face. His coach said, "Tim, I am so proud of this young boy. I am so proud." Ramadan and his coach and his dad taught me something that day. They were proud of him less for his skill, and more for his trying. Less by his finishing time, his grade, his rank, his title, and more by the spirit he shared. That man, that father, wept with joy for his son, who has nothing. No education, no job, no future, like you all have, no shot at a break, BUT he made his father proud. He made his father proud because he left it all on the court, he tried. If he were to answer the question of why are we here, I think he would say, "We are here to do our best, to be brave, to be the best we can be, to be proud of ourselves."

Finally, listen to the lesson of Alexander Rogoff. I met him last at the Special Olympics World Games in Boise. He's a speed skater and was racing the 500 meter speed skating event in his medal round when he fell, with two laps to go. In a rare, but painful and tragic accident, he fell and one skate came across the back of his leg and sliced his Achilles tendon in two. He fell to the ground, his wound open, and there were two Olympic skaters there who recognized immediately had happened to him, but never saw what they saw next. Which is – Alexander Rogoff got up and he finished his race. He went two more laps with a severed Achilles tendon. I met him the

next day, after six hours of surgery, with a cast on his leg, lying in bed, and I said, through an interpreter, "Alexander, everyone is talking about you, but no one can understand how you did it. Why, why did you get up from the injury and finish the race?" He said, "I did it for my team. I did not want to disappoint my team." If he were here today, I think he would encourage you to say that we're here for one another. We're here for the team. We're here to support each other.

So enjoy the new course, graduates; "the Big Why." As you take it, welcome Ramadan and Troy and Loretta and Alexander – all the heroes of love and bravery and teamwork. You may think your role is to help them, but you will find the opposite: they will help you pause, look inward, shun social pressure, and focus on what really matters. Most importantly, they will focus you on now, on this moment in history that begs your generation to live for something bigger, that begs you to welcome sacrifice when it is needed, to summon courage when called to change, and to charge into the future with a joyful belief in the possibilities of the human spirit. Live like a Special Olympics athlete I say, be loving, be brave, be a team player and you will discover reckless passion for making a difference. You will realize that the strength that lies within you is all the strength necessary to remake the world.

So charge forward you mighty Illini – with love, bravery, teamwork. You can do anything with those three.

Your generation has given you environmental catastrophe. It will be up to you to change it. Build a team to stop the destruction. You can do it.

My generation has given you a fraction of an educational vision. You can start the revolution we need helping millions of children go to school and putting heart and spirit back into schools that desperately need it. Love the kids. You can do it.

My generation hands you greed and selfishness that have helped make billions of human beings suffering the most extreme poverty. Even today, 3,000 children will die of malaria, most under

5. Be brave in fighting injustice. You can do it.

The life you save, as Flannery O'Connor wrote, may be your own.

You may wonder if you can do it. And I suggest you already have. And you may say "When? I haven't done any of those things. When have I inspired people? When have I made a difference?"

I would suggest that you think back twenty-two, maybe twenty-one years ago, you arrived to these people who are at your back. Whether you arrived to biological parents or adoptive parents. Whether you arrived in a hospital or a home. Whether you arrived in this country or somewhere else in the world, you arrived and someone said, "OH MY GOD, look how beautiful you are!" And they took pictures. And parents, I'll bet you have them. I have one in my wallet of my oldest daughter. They're usually about this size. Sometimes they're blown up bigger. And they have big, bald heads and smiles. And people said, "OH MY GOD, look how beautiful you are!"

If you cried, no one cared. If you slept late, everybody was ok with that. When you cooed, just looked in someone's eyes, everyone was happy. You did it just by who you are. Not by all you've learned, not by all your grades, and not by your title. Just being you.

You're still beautiful graduates – body piercings, tattoos, and all. Give your beauty to the world with joy and passion. Live for something bigger. Live with love and bravery, life for your community, your country, your planet. Live the Big Why and love life! And regardless of where you find yourself, be brave in the attempt.