

1981

Commencement Address, Cathy Gulsewite, April 25, 1981

Eastern Michigan University

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By Cathy Gulsewite

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Mr. President, Honored Guests, Faculty, Families and Friends, and Members of the Graduating Class...

My mother always told me that life would be good to me if I would just keep my hair pulled back away from my face.

My mother has always had an annoying knack for summing up the answers to life's most difficult questions in one short sentence.

When I was a senior in college, and frantic about a career choice, my mother said, "Cathy, if you want a career, you'll have to go get a job."

When I was desperate for success, my mother said, "Cathy, if you want to succeed, you'll have to work harder."

When I pleaded for improvement and change, my mother said, "Cathy, if you want something to change, you'll have to do something different."

When I agonized over right and wrong, my mother said, "Cathy, listen to your mother."

Like many mature young adults, I made a deep, personal commitment to do whatever it took to prove my mother was wrong...that the answers were not that simple.

In my search for a career, I leafed through back issues of Rolling Stone Magazine, reorganized my sock drawer, and made little maps out of M&M's, and then ate them, one state at a time.

In my search for the secret to success, I sat at my desk bending paperclips into little farm animals, and tried to see how many boxes of Milk Duds I could consume without passing out.

In my search for the secret to improvement and change, I practiced writing how my name would look if I became the Queen of England, and I watered my plants.

In my search for what was right and wrong, I watched Mary Tyler Moore reruns and stuffed myself with Fig Newtons.

A month before I graduated from college, I had gained 45 pounds, murdered all my plants, destroyed 200 boxes of paperclips, and still was no closer to the answers of life.

Today, nine years later, I humbly offer what I have learned...in four, short motherlike little sentences:

#1: If you want a career, you have to go get a job.

#2: If you want to succeed, you have to work harder.

#3: If you want something to change, you have to do something different.

#4: Occasionally, it pays to listen to your mother.

Now, these answers may seem a touch basic for the complicated life you have just graduated into. I assure you, they are not. In fact, the more complicated life gets, the more important it is that you have some clear answer somewhere, to focus on.

I'm sure I don't have to tell you, you're graduating at a time of great social change. While this is wonderful, it also means you're graduating at what may be the most confusing time in the history of America. To me, the hardest job you have ahead of you is to keep rules for yourself in a society that not only seems to not have any rules anymore, but not want any.

This is an amazing year. Look at us. It's as socially acceptable to wear an alligator shirt and penny loafers as it is to dye your hair pink. It's as socially acceptable to jog five miles in the morning and eat an organically grown, sprouted whole wheat sandwich for lunch, as it is to drink a plastic milk shake.

It's as socially acceptable to protest the draft, as it is to waltz in and register for the service...We have a resurgence of home, romance, and family, at the exact same moment that we have the peak of the sexual revolution. We have the moral majority marching off to their meetings in skin tight jeans and designer underwear.

I don't know what's going on anymore. Desperately trying to glean some insight into the concerns of this generation, I run over to my \$2000 stereo system in my \$45 sneakers and snap on some music. You know what I hear? One minute, we've got

Blondie chanting...

"And out comes the Man from Mars and you try to run but he's got a gun and he shoots you dead and he eats your head. And then you're in the Man from Mars. You go out at night eating cars, you eat Cadillacs, Lincolns, Mercuries too and Subarus ..."

Thirty seconds later, we hear Harry Nilsson singing...

"I can't live if living is without you

I can't give

I can't give anymore..."

And the only thing in between these remarkably different concepts is a commercial for breath mints. Behavior at two completely opposite ends of the spectrum is acceptable, everything in between is acceptable.

In 1981, everything's okay. Okay? It's not okay. There aren't any rules anymore. All there are are options. I can have a career. I can have a career and a husband. I can have a career, a husband, and a baby. I can have a husband and a baby, no career. I can have a career and a baby, no husband.

You are, in short, graduating into a world there are no cliff notes for. I don't have the answers. I'm 30 years old and I spent 45 minutes trying to decide what color of barettes to wear today. But I can show you how the four points I began with can at least help you cope with some of the change and contradictions it brings. Whether you're about to enter the working world, or will be after graduate school, the same points apply.

Point #1: If you want a career, you have to get a job. I'll be the first one to tell you the glamorous life of the career person is not always all it's cracked up to be. The people who envy my life are never there at three o'clock in the morning when I have nine more comic strips to draw and my dog has just thrown up on my lettering guide. In spite of that, the years I've spent working on my own have convinced me that it's crucial for women and men to either have the experience of

supporting yourselves or, at the very least, to earn enough so you know you could.

Working can make a shy person not so shy...an Insecure person not so Insecure. It will give a meek person confidence and self respect...a sheltered person a broader horizon...those of you who already have it all together, will get it more together. Look what it's done for me: I lost 45 pounds because I ran out of time to eat.

But most important, no matter what kind of lifestyle you may have next week or next year, by working now you give yourself a choice you'll have the rest of your life.

The time I've been working has also convinced me it isn't necessary to have the whole rest of your life mapped out before you get your first job.

I distinctly remember promising God at term paper time that if I could just get through this one, I would never enter a profession that involved writing of any kind. A month after graduation, I was working as a writer at an advertising agency, and four years after that, I signed a contract to write a comic strip every single day for the rest of my life. Careers just aren't determined by the first place you work, or even by what you think you want to do. Careers evolve by continually keeping your mind open to the next logical opportunity. You can't possibly be sure what you want to do, or even what you can do until you're doing something. Don't agonize over a career, just get a job.

I say this also because, chances are, there will be no jobs in the field you just spent the last 21 years of your life preparing yourself for.

In fact, the notion that today's world is packed with great opportunities for eager young men and women is surpassed only by the lack of jobs for men and women with no actual work experience. The very fact that there are supposed to be more opportunities today will only make you feel much worse if you don't find one.

Look around. Everyone else knows exactly what he wants to do and has found a

great job doing it. What's the matter with you???

This can be devastating to the rich sense of personal perfection that we just spent the whole "me" decade trying to create. After 10 years of convincing yourself you're perfect, you're likely to start asking...what's wrong with me?

In spite of the positive self-image theories, it seems to be a natural human tendency to look at how we're unique mainly in terms of how we fail...for instance:

I am the only person who sold my Econ. 101 textbooks in the middle of the semester to raise money for a new outfit to impress a guy I never even met...I am the only person who spent the entire 16th Century of Art History trying to figure out how to sit so my legs wouldn't look fat...I am the only person who balances my checkbook by switching banks and starting all over every six months...I am the only person who's ever trudged home from a day in my career and stood in the kitchen squirting Redi-Whip topping directly into my mouth.

We tend to look at how we're unique lots of times in terms of how we fail.

Disgusted that life isn't handing you the opportunities it promised, and more disgusted that your unique qualities are only making you feel worse about yourself, you will eventually be forced to turn to point #2: If you want to succeed, you have to work harder.

You cannot graduate from college, send out 200 xeroxed resumes, and then declare that there are no jobs, or that you're being discriminated against, if what you get back are 200 xeroxed rejection slips. That isn't looking for a job. That's a conversation between xerox machines.

You have to do something special to let someone know you're there. Find out about companies...write personal letters that show you know what you're talking about...if you don't have samples of what you can do, make samples...if you don't know what you're talking about, volunteer to work free for a week to show them how fast you can learn.

Show some enthusiasm. Send your resume with a bouquet of roses if you have

to...but do something different so your resume doesn't get stacked up with the thousands of xeroxes on somebody's desk.

"What, are you crazy?" you say..."200 personalized resumes?? That takes too much time. That's too much work!"

Well, this is the bad news. If you want to succeed, there seems to be no choice but to work harder. Believe me when I tell you I have tried every alternative. You have to work harder at getting a job. And if you want to keep on succeeding, you have to work harder when you're on the job.

As soon as you do only what's expected of you, you can never expect anything more to happen.

Which brings us to point #3: If you want something to change, you have to do something different.

In many ways, this does not seem to be your most optimistic year to be graduating from college. Maybe no year is, but this one, up so close, certainly seems to have its share of depressing moments.

There was no gas until the price got over \$1.20 a gallon, and we don't know why. The more money we make, the more in debt we get, and we don't know why. We give half of what we make to a government run by a man with a bullet wound who refuses to change his mind on gun control, and we don't know why. For every dollar a man makes, a woman still only makes 59¢...it costs \$3 to buy a box of bags to throw your garbage out in. And across America, there is that creepingly hideous feeling that if we don't nuke ourselves in the next few years, we're going to do ourselves in with feminine hygiene products that cause cancer.

You have to wonder, what's the use in trying to better our lives if in spite of ourselves, our lives just keep getting worse?

Well, consider this, the people who are controlling the gas, raising the taxes, deciding how much money a woman should make, creating garbage bags, building nuclear power plants on top of earthquake faults, and naming products "Rely" without

checking first...those people were all sitting in a college commencement ceremony one time, just like you are today.

It's hard to believe that that particular group of people is any brighter than this group here today. And equally hard to believe that the only answers there are, are the ones they've managed to come up with so far.

If you want something to change, you have to do something different. You can blame your relationship on your boyfriend, your crummy job on your greedy boss, your standard of life on the Reagan administration. But until you do something different about it, it will never change.

Many people know this secret, but their relationships, salaries, and standard of life still don't change. This is because everybody either waits for someone else to do something different, or else everyone's convinced that his miniscule efforts would not help.

Surprisingly enough, this is just the place to make use of point #4: occasionally, it pays to listen to your mother.

I think it's safe to say that all mothers and fathers expect a great deal of us. For some reason, no matter what we do, they have a special way of making us feel it's never quite enough.

When I tell my mother I'm going out on a date, she'll say, "But Cathy, what about your wonderful career? You should be working!"

When I tell my mother I'm working, she'll say, "Cathy, you should have a social life. You should be going out."

When I tell my mother I'm working and I'm going out, she'll say, "When's the last time you had a nice piece of fresh fruit?"

When I tell my mother I'm working, I'm going out, my refrigerator is full of fresh fruit, she'll ask if I've been budgeting my money.

When I tell my mother I'm working, I'm going out, my refrigerator is full of fresh fruit, and I have just written out a budget plan for the next 12 months, she'll

ask if I've been remembering to do my exercises.

And on those rare days when I really think I have every aspect of my life in perfect control, and beyond any conceivable reproach, she'll smile and casually mention the thank you notes I still haven't written from last Christmas.

As I see it, there is only one reason why parents insist on thinking their children should be able to do 500 things at once. This is rooted in a belief they have steadfastly clung onto from the moment each of us was born...which is...my son or daughter can do anything.

No matter what else the rest of the world might make you think, or how annoying it is to hear it, this naive, unobjective, ludicrous parental notion is the single most true thing that will ever be said about you in your life: you can do anything.

If you believe strongly enough that something should be different, you will figure out a way to change it.

You are no different from the graduate sitting next to you who may solve the world's energy problems. You're no different from the graduate behind you who may bring about the most important changes yet in human rights.

You're no different from the graduate in front of you who may decide to devote his or her life to raising intelligent, sensitive children. And you certainly are no different from me.

If I can do this, you can do anything.

The events of my life have made me as sure of only one other thing: if you do nothing, and just sit around waiting for life to happen to you, nothing will happen.

You have to make rules for yourself in a society that's doing away with rules. You have to set standards for yourself in a society that says everything is okay. You have to figure out what's important to you, when no one seems to agree on anything.

You have to separate yourself from the confusion and concentrate on something, one day at a time...May I suggest these four, short sentences:

1. If you want a career, get a job.
2. If you want to succeed, work harder.
3. If you want to change something, do something different.
4. Occasionally...and when you're absolutely sure she doesn't know you're doing it... listen to your mother.