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The end of commencement...and things

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I've been practicing my commencement address just in case the official speaker, the first alternative and the second and third backups have other engagements.

Graduates: Congratulations. You made it.

The first thing I will tell you about the rest of your life is that you will not remember a single word of what I say to you today.

Commencement addresses are intended more for parents who hope that one or two helpful life principles they have learned through hard knocks may be repeated for your benefit by someone other than themselves.

So take out your smart phone, type notes and send a text to yourself. Here are a few things that you might want to take with you.

Life is a roll of loaded dice. Life is never fair. Get over it.

Those who are smart, rich, good-looking, thin, athletic, tall, friendly, self-confident, talented and ambitious have a 50-yard lead in a 100-yard race. Good dancers have a 55-yard lead.

Work with the things you have and what you can make of yourself. You have no other choice.

People are not equal. We differ in abilities, inherited advantages and disadvantages, personality traits, integrity, appearance and a dozen other ways we use to group ourselves.

While we differ, the government of all of us should treat us the same regardless of where we rank, what we look like, what we think and who we are. It is in our country's interest and yours over the long run to have everyone be treated the same.

Money in politics should not buy preferential treatment, which it always does.

Put most of your effort into the things you do best.

Substitute the things you can do well for things that you can't change. If you're not the smartest kid in the class, be the nicest. If you're not the richest person on the block, be the kindest or the most helpful.

You will go through hard times. You will make dumb choices. Bad luck will befall you. Things won't work out. You'll feel alone, depressed and at wits' end.

Cheer up! It happens to everyone. It's not fun, but you'll get through most of these episodes, somewhat the worse for the wear.

Life is not a crapshoot. It's not totally random, totally immune to your own actions, totally unpredictable and totally absurd. But it acts like a crapshoot from time to time.

You have to accept that things happen to you that you don't deserve, both good and bad.

Not everything can be fixed. Some things -- after you've done what you could do -- you just have to tough out. Some situations cannot be escaped from. Pace yourself through long, dark tunnels.

You can change some things about yourself, but not others. You can, for example, change your shape but not your genes; you can make the most of your ability, but you can't do anything about the ability you had to start with.

Practice improves whatever you're doing. It doesn't change what you started with.

If you want to get better, practice a lot. If you want to be really good, start with native ability that's above average and then practice like it's going out of style.

Practice is always rewarded...up to the point where the limits on your ability kick in. This is an argument to practice, not to give up or goof off.

Some righteous fights are either unwinnable or not worth the effort. Others are worth fighting *because* they're a losing cause on the right side of things.

The decision to fight or not to fight is less a calculation as to whether you'll win or lose, but how you'll feel about yourself when it's over.

A respectable loss can lay a foundation for a better outcome next time. And then again, there are times when you don't gain anything from diving into an empty pool for a just cause.

If you're not in love, don't get married.

Sex is not love.

If you do get married and you're not in love, don't acquire things and have kids.

Most of us climb a learning curve over time. You get better with experience. You make fewer mistakes.

The more experience you have in doing anything, the less likely you are to screw up big time. Avoid big screw ups.

It's OK to take a risk after you've scoped it as much as you can, but never bet the farm. Never.

Do something for the first time, slowly. If you don't know how to swim, don't jump into the deep end. The point is to learn to swim, not to learn to sink.

Everybody makes mistakes. Learn a job from someone who knows how to do it. Make your mistakes on your teacher's nickel, not yours. They will be smaller that way. I guarantee it.

If you think you are making a mistake, you probably are. Things don't work out because you want them to.

Sometimes you have to follow through on a mistake and make the best of it. But if you don't have to make a mistake, don't.

We are biased toward repeating mistakes because we favor paths that we've gone down before.

Appreciate a mistake for what it's taught you.

Don't categorize mistakes as aberrations. Don't think that making a mistake once gives you immunity from making it again.

Try not to repeat the same mistake more than twice more.

You can't change things in your past.

But you can understand them better. You can put them behind you by doing better. You can rise above them.

Spend your time in the present, and more in the future than in the past.

Money is a powerful motivator, but a poor goal. Nothing's wrong with being rich. How it shapes you depends on how you get there.

Money is just a thing, not a statement of your personal merit.

Doing the right thing is often bothersome and painful. But every time you choose the wrong way, it gets easier the next time. After a while, you forget that you have a choice.

Politics in a democratic republic like ours is often bizarre, shameful and a bad joke. It is unfortunate that it's the best way we have yet devised to make decisions for ourselves.

As long as some want to buy politicians and politicians agree to be bought, politics will always be skewed toward those who bought.

Maybe public financing of all political campaigns with a very low cap is the answer. I don't really know.

Always consider advice, because, whether it's good or bad, whether you accept it or reject it, it's almost always given with your best interest in mind.

Good friends don't like to give hard advice, so you have to discount what they say.

Your parents are flawed as are you, but, maybe, differently. Chances are that you are more like them in more ways than you care to accept right now.

Resolve what you can and park the rest in the long-term lot.
Making peace with your parents makes peace with yourself

Life is a lot like high school—tribal, adversarial, cooperative, competitive, mindless, petty, hierarchical, grim, fun, comical, stupid, scary, bewildering, mind-opening, hormonal, humiliating and unforgettable.

The thing is that most of us get through high school, and all of us, including each of you, graduate from life, sooner or later.

And so I say to the graduates of 2015, now that you know a thing or two, which means that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, you will understand that when all things are considered that all good things must come to an end even though one thing leads to another.

I hope that clears things up.