

Northwestern University Commencement Address
Monday, June 12th, 2023

Thank you to President Schill for your kind introduction. To the Class of 2023: congratulations on your graduation from one of the finest universities in the world.

Look, I know there were more than a few of you who may have groaned when you heard that the Governor was going to be your commencement speaker. Believe me, I too would rather be listening to Beyoncé give a speech today.

But rest assured, as a Northwestern Law School alum, I studied up before crafting my remarks, mostly by watching a whole bunch of YouTube videos of other people's commencement addresses. And I've come to the conclusion that the best graduation speeches are a lot like your favorite sitcoms. They are short. They make you laugh. And they feature an oddball but lovable character.

Well, I'm your oddball character, folks.

Today, graduates, I want to invoke a seminal piece of twenty-first century culture to help send you forward on the right path in life.

I am, of course, talking about the Emmy award-winning sitcom known as "The Office" – which in its two-hundred episode run gave us all the wisdom you need to make your way in this world.

Now look, the younger members of my staff made it clear to me that your generation might consider "The Office" to be sort of "cheugy" – which I learned is a pejorative term meaning "uncool" or "you're trying too hard."

That's fine. I don't care. I'm a dad. By definition, dads are cheugy. We try too hard every day. Mostly to get our kids to turn off the lights when they leave a room. We don't care if you don't think we're cool – we are determined to plunge ahead anyway.

So, give me and "The Office" a chance to show you that non-trendy things still have a lot of wisdom to offer. You don't have to be a fan of the show to follow along because quotes from "The Office" stand on their own in their uncommon wisdom and depth.

I'll offer you the first one now:

"PowerPoints are the peacocks of the business world; all show, no meat." – Dwight Schrute

Before I was the Governor of Illinois, I ran a technology focused venture capital firm.

In the early years of the Internet, I used to take at least 3 meetings a day with young entrepreneurs who would present their ideas for online retail businesses. Every young retail entrepreneur in the world wanted to copy Amazon's success, but they had to

answer the magic question: how are you going to attract millions of customers without spending all your money on advertising?

One guy came to me with what he thought was the perfect answer.

He started the Hey Company. “Hey” spelled H-E-Y. The guy told me he had registered hundreds of domain names that all started with the word “Hey.” Like HeyBooks.com. And HeyTshirts.com. And HeyWaterBottles.com. Hundreds of them. His idea was that people who were browsing online would think to themselves, “Hey, I need some shorts,” and that naturally would lead them to type in their browser “HeyShorts.com.” And BAM, they’d find what they needed on his websites!

It was brilliant, except for the fact that no one shops by first saying saying “HeyShorts” or “HeyUnderwear.” But he had a fancy PowerPoint and one of his slides had financial projections that showed his company was going to be bigger than Amazon.

It was not.

Here’s the thing that I remember most: the Hey Guy handed out his business plan in an expensive mahogany box and gave a great presentation. I give him credit that after a few months in business he realized he wasn’t going to make it and he closed up shop. He was at least honest with himself and his investors.

But sometimes, when I see a news story on a company like Theranos or WeWork, where a charismatic CEO has a clever pitch that fools a lot of intelligent people into investing their money, or when politicians give flashy pitches with catchy slogans, I think about Dwight Schrute’s lesson for life.

Ask questions. Demand answers. Do your own research. Trust people with a lot of life experience. Be skeptical.

“Having a baby is exhausting. Having two babies? That’s just mean.” – Jim Halpert

I mentioned already that I’m a dad, and I have two wonderful college age kids. And like most of the parents here, having children turned me from a fun, cool, spontaneous person who could stay out past midnight, to a functional madman who answers the phone, “YELLO,” and won’t let anyone in my house touch the thermostat.

We dads didn’t start out cheugy – you made us that way.

Look, we parents – we love our kids. We want you to grow up strong and kind, brave and smart. And we will do just about anything to make sure that happens. But along the way, you all have led a campaign of collective inception to make us question the very fabric of reality at times. If you really want to understand the Multiverse of Madness, have children.

When my son Donny was in kindergarten, my wife, MK, and I went to school for a parent-teacher conference. The teacher told us Donny was doing well in school – great at reading, great at math – but when she asked Donny if he was struggling with anything, he said he couldn't tell time very well.

Like all parents whose love of their child has led them to overthink every single decision they've made, MK and I were flabbergasted. Did we do something wrong? Had we missed some critical step in our son's early childhood development? Had our embrace of the digital age led to a child who had some sort of clockface blindness?

We sprang into action. We bought all kinds of clocks and put them everywhere in our house. We made a big show of telling time at meals and reading clocks everywhere we went. We got Donny an analog clock that lit up and spoke the time out loud when asked. For an entire year, I walked around like the Mad Hatter, constantly proclaiming the time. "Donny, it's 7:10. See? It's 7:10."

After twelve months of this insanity, just when MK and I were starting to congratulate ourselves for doing such a good job focusing on the time telling problem – Donny decided to let us know he had never had an issue telling time. It was just that when his teacher asked him to identify something he needed help with, he couldn't think of anything to say, so he made up a story about not being able to tell time and then didn't want to admit that he had lied.

If you think your parents are crazy, it's important that you understand that YOU made us that way. We are experts in worrying about you. And this affliction just gets worse with time and distance.

We want you to go out and have amazing adventures in this world. We want you to love with abandon and to take calculated risks and experience the rich fullness that comes with an imperfect life. We know that we cannot hold your hand through every difficult thing that will happen to you.

But there will come a moment, sometime in the future, when something you very much wanted to have work out, will not. Maybe it will be a job, or a relationship, or some other passion you have sunk your whole heart into. And you will find yourself teetering on the edge of despair – because every person has teetered on the edge of despair at least once in their lives.

That's when I want you to call the person in your life who would have spent a year trying to help you learn how to tell time. Hopefully that's your parents. I'm here to tell you on their behalf that we will always take your phone call. We will always be willing to help remind you of the strength we know you have inside yourself, because we gave you some of ours.

"Whenever I'm about to do something, I think 'Would an idiot do that?' and if they would, I do not do that thing." – Dwight Schrute

The entire efficacy of this incredibly useful piece of advice hinges upon your ability to pick the right idiot.

I wish there was a fool proof way to spot idiots. But counterintuitively, some idiots are very smart. They can dazzle you with words and misdirection. They can get promoted above you at work.

They can even be elected President.

If you want to be successful in this world, you have to develop your own idiot detection system.

As part of the responsibilities of being your commencement speaker, I am going to share mine.

Sure, I'm naturally suspicious of people who never saw the original Star Wars movies – and even more cautious of people who loved the prequels and sequels – but I admit this is not a reliable idiot indicator.

No. The best way to spot an idiot? Look for the person who is cruel.

Let me explain.

When we see someone who doesn't look like us, or sound like us, or act like us, or love like us, or live like us – the first thought that crosses almost everyone's brain is rooted in either fear or judgment or both. That's evolution. We survived as a species by being suspicious of things we aren't familiar with.

In order to be kind, we have to shut down that animal instinct and force our brain to travel a different pathway. Empathy and compassion are evolved states of being. They require the mental capacity to step past our most primal urges.

This may be a surprising assessment because somewhere along the way in the last few years, our society has come to believe that weaponized cruelty is part of some well-thought-out master plan.

Cruelty is seen by some as an adroit cudgel to gain power. Empathy and kindness are considered weak. Many important people look at the vulnerable only as rungs in a ladder to the top.

I'm here to tell you that when someone's path through this world is marked with acts of cruelty, they have failed the first test of an advanced society. They never forced their animal brain to evolve past its first instinct. They never forged new mental pathways to overcome their own instinctual fears. And so, their thinking and problem solving will lack the imagination and creativity that the kindest people have in spades.

Over my many years in politics and business, I have found one thing to be universally true – the kindest person in the room is often the smartest.

“I knew exactly what to do. But in a much more real sense, I had no idea what to do.” – Michael Scott

When I finished college, only a few short years ago, I assumed there would be a moment very soon after graduation when the maturity of adulthood would start to lend sense to the deep mysteries of life.

Thirty-five years later, I’m still waiting for that to happen.

I hate to break it to you, but the real wisdom that comes with age is that you gain a greater appreciation for just how much you don’t know.

In February of 2020, I had just finished up a successful first year in office. We had passed almost every major initiative I’d campaigned on, and I was beginning to feel I could overcome almost any obstacle that might lay ahead.

But then came a deadly global pandemic, a crisis that most of us would have said was inconceivable just weeks before it began.

I’ve been asked many times what it was like to be Governor during those early days of the pandemic, and all I can tell you is that it felt like waking up every day on a raft in the middle of the ocean, frantically searching the horizons for some land to anchor your feet on.

I knew that my job was to minimize the damage this deadly disease was doing. But no one could guide me toward the absolute best way to do that. As Michael Scott said, I knew exactly what to do. But in a much more real sense I had no idea what to do.

I’ve had a few major crises visited upon me in my life, and the way forward each time has always been the same for me. When the world seems to be spinning — and out of your control — inertia can set in. So, the absolute best thing you can do is start to make decisions. Even small ones. Just get yourself moving. Pick something you can tackle and do it.

Let your small decisions beget medium decisions which will beget big decisions. Some of your decisions will be brilliant in retrospect. Others will be less so.

If you make a mistake, apologize, and move on. Talk to people you trust, and more importantly listen to them. Be willing to change your mind when someone makes a good argument. But avoid that paralyzing inertia at all costs. Because NOT making a decision – IS making a decision. And you won’t like how that turns out.

Most importantly – when facing a crisis, pick one value you are going to hold yourself accountable to and then, every time you face a new choice about what direction you

should take, ask yourself which of the options in front of you is most consistent with that core, guiding value.

For me, as Governor during the pandemic, I decided I was going to do everything I could to save as many lives as possible. That was the most important thing. Everything else had to come second. And that gave me clarity amid an absolute maelstrom.

I know that for this class especially, COVID loomed very large. You were robbed of a chunk of a college experience you very much deserved. I'm sure then and now, it feels very unfair.

We don't get a say in what part of history our lives drop in on. The Great Depression. World War II. The Cold War. The Vietnam War. The COVID Pandemic. Every generation grows up scared or scarred by something. You are not unique in that regard.

Here's the upside. Although you will face a great many challenges in life, most of them will pale in comparison to the challenge of facing a deadly global pandemic. COVID has made you stronger and gave you a unique set of armor. Use it well.

“I wish there was a way to know you're in the good old days before you've actually left them.” – Andy Bernard

Most of us old guys dispensing advice as commencement speakers mistakenly will lead you to believe that everything good that happens — every day you will ever long for — happens in college, or your 20's or your early career. Don't get me wrong — these are great days.

But I think a lot of the parents and grandparents here who are traveling the back half of a century of life would tell you that there are plenty of things about being young that we don't miss at all.

The path of your life will have peaks and valleys. And the good times are defined less by how old you are and more by the people you have around you.

During the very worst days of the pandemic, there was a group of about twenty people who were part of our Governor's office quarantine bubble. While most people stayed at home, my staff came into the State of Illinois building in person every day to help keep the levers of government moving. We worked together for 14-hours a day, tracking down masks and gloves and testing supplies, debating mitigations, tracking data, preparing for daily press conferences. Sometimes we stared into the abyss together.

Anyone who has been part of a group like that — good people working closely together in a crisis — will tell you that the bonds that you develop with the people in the foxhole with you, are some of the strongest you will ever form in your life.

One day in April of 2020, after weeks of punishing work, I decided to gather the small, quarantined team together at the end of a long day for a much-needed morale boost.

The Governor's office at the State of Illinois building was on the 16th floor overlooking an interior atrium. If you dropped something from the top floor, where the Governor's office was, it would land 16 floors down.

We ordered some food and gathered everyone. We were the only people in the building. Someone put on some music and for a little bit of time, we shared some gallows humor. At some point, a staffer suggested we all make paper airplanes out of copier paper and see who could successfully launch their plane off the 16th floor balcony and into the atrium and land it in the middle of the first-floor lobby below. I remember how hard I laughed watching all these serious people – press secretaries and deputy governors and policy advisors – try and construct the perfect paper airplane and get frustrated at their many failed launches.

A lot of the worst days of COVID are still a blur for me – the stress and the worry that seemed to consume my life have just blended together. But I can remember, with unusual clarity and warmth, that hour or so on the balcony of the 16th floor, flying paper airplanes with my battle-worn compatriots.

So, I assure you that your nostalgia for certain times in your life won't be defined by when the thing happened, but by who you were in it with. If there are people around you who love you, who can make you smile when times are hard, and make you laugh when the world seems lost – then you are in the good old days.

Ultimately, “The Office” was a show about a bunch of imperfect people trying to find their way together. And if that's not a metaphor for life then I don't know what is.

You will figure out your way, Class of 2023. I beseech you to remember the lessons of “The Office.” Be more substance than show. Set aside cruelty for kindness. Put one foot in front of the other even when you don't know your way. And always try and appreciate the good old days when you are actually in them.

And remember what Dwight Schrute said, “You only live once? False! You live every day! You only die once.”

Thank you.