

Commencement Speech, Summer 2009 - -Robert M. Nerem

President Peterson, graduates, families and friends, guests, faculty and staff; it is a distinct pleasure and honor to be speaking with you today. To start with I thank President Bud Peterson and I congratulate all of you who are graduating today. I have been at Georgia Tech 22 years. I am proud to be a Yellow Jacket, proud to be a member of the faculty, proud of the fine staff that we have at Georgia Tech, but most of all I am proud of the students we have and that includes all of you. Thus, I again congratulate each and everyone of you, not only on graduating today but on having survived! Personally, it is a special honor for me to be delivering this commencement speech, but I do promise to keep it short.

As background, let me tell you a story. A while back my wife and I were at a restaurant with friends, and after serving us drinks, the waitress asked “are you Big Bad Bob? I answered that sometimes I am called that, but that I had to wonder how she knew that. As it turns out, on our previous visit to this restaurant the waitress then had asked what I did. I

answered that I was a professor at Georgia Tech, that I worked with students, and that when the students liked me they called me “Uncle Bob” and when they were not so happy with me, I was “Big Bad Bob.” So when someone asks you who spoke at your commencement, I hope that you will say “Uncle Bob.”

Like some of you I am the first generation in my family to be born in this country. My father graduated as a civil engineer in Norway in the mid 1920s, and my parents then immigrated to the United States. I was born in Chicago in 1937, growing up in Evanston, Illinois, outside of Chicago, with the exception of the two years after World War II when we lived in Norway and I went to Norwegian schools.

As an undergraduate, I was a migrant student, i.e., I migrated from one engineering field to another, changing majors every semester, starting in petroleum engineering, and ending up in aeronautical engineering. In fact, all of my degrees, including my Ph.D., are in aerospace engineering.

My first position after my Ph.D. was at Ohio State University as an assistant professor, and a few years later, I became a consultant on a research project at Ohio State on the effect of vibrations during launch on astronaut physiology. This opened the window on a whole new world, that of biology and medicine, provided me an entry into the interdisciplinary world, launched me into a new phase of my career.

Initially I wanted to use my engineering knowledge to study blood flow, especially its role in disease processes. This then led me to investigate the interaction of blood flow with the blood vessel wall, first at the level of cell biology and then at the molecular level. Ultimately this led me to tissue engineering and stem-cell technology, including both embryonic stem cells and adult stem cells. As my career has evolved, I have continually moved into new areas that in general I did not have the background to pursue. As a result, I have been a student all my life, and as I tell my own students, “I am still trying to figure out what I want to do when I grow up.”

In 1987, I moved to Georgia Tech, and over the last 20 years I have been blessed with wonderful colleagues and excellent students. In fact, it is because of the students that I have pursued an academic career, and my greatest satisfaction professionally has come from the young people with whom I have had the privilege of working.

A few years ago my then students, who refer to themselves as SOBs, i.e., Students of Bob, banded together and said to me, “You know those various rules you keep on ‘spouting off’? Well, write them down.” So this I have done, and I thought that I would share these with you today. These rules for the most part are not original, simply pulled together over the years; however, they do represent my philosophy about life. I share them with you in the hope that at least a few might be of interest, some even of help.

There currently are 15 of what I call “The Rules of Life: The Planet Earth School.” In this school the teachers are the persons you encounter

and/or the events in which you are involved, and the “rules” are as follows.

1. There are no such things as mistakes, only lessons (i.e., a series of learning experiences); growth is through a series of such experiences, a process that involves both successful and unsuccessful experiments.
2. An unsuccessful experiment does not represent failure, just a learning experience, and one often learns more from these than from successes.

As Tiger Woods said not too long ago, “apply the lessons of today so as to make yourself a better person tomorrow.”

3. Always be open in the widest possible way to encountering a new person or a new opportunity, as these represent new teachers, new learning experiences. “Leave the screen door (to the outside world) unlatched,” because you never know who or what will walk in.
4. Let the “rock” in your path be a “stepping stone.” If you encounter a closed door, simply look for another door that might be open. Life is filled with a lot of paths and doors to walk through, so don’t waste time on a door that is closed.

5. Your life is up to you. At birth you were provided a “canvas” onto which you have the opportunity to “paint your life.” Take charge of your life and the “painting of this picture.” If you don’t, someone or something else will.
6. People will remember not what you said, but only how you made them feel, so strive to make a difference in the lives of others.
7. Be willing to let go of the life you had planned so as to have the life that awaits you.
8. Remember that the cup is always half full, never half empty, but also remember that the only cards you can play are the ones you are dealt.

In a recent interview Michael J. Fox, the actor and Parkinson’s activist, was asked “how do you keep your optimism in the face of difficult circumstances?” Do you ever ask “why me?” He answered that “I have no choice about whether or not I have Parkinson’s”, I have nothing but choices about how I react to it. In those choices there’s freedom to do a lot of things.”

Again, you can only play the cards that you are dealt, so be willing to let go of the life you have planned so as to have the life that awaits you.

9. Look for the good in people, and try to imagine the world as it seems to the other person.
10. Never, never worry about something over which you have no control.
11. Whatever happens, place the least dramatic interpretation on the event, the incident, and/or whatever is said.
12. Welcome each and every new day, for “each dawn is a new beginning.” Each day presents new opportunities.
13. Listen to your heart. If you can’t hear what it is saying in this noisy world, make time for yourself, make peace with who you are and where you are at this moment in time.
14. Don’t let your preoccupation with reality stifle your imagination. If someday, why not now, even though the impossible may take a while.

This brings me to the final rule. In the Boniva ad, the actress says that she “has only one body, one life to live.”

15. Life's journey isn't to arrive at the grave safely in a well preserved body, but rather to skid in sideways, worn out, shouting—holy cow, what a ride!

When I look at my life, I do say “what a ride,” both personally and professionally. Although the “ride” is not by any means over, my selection for this summer's commencement speech has provided me a unique opportunity and so again I thank my friends who nominated me, my colleagues, my wife and my family, the FOBs and SOBs, and all those whose lives have “touched” me. They all have been my teachers on this planet Earth, and they have been “The Wind Beneath My Wings.” I thus consider myself to be truly blessed.

I also hope that today you will take time to “smell the roses.” This should be done with family, with friends, with those who stayed with you in those moments when everyone else walked out. This leads me to the following thought.

And as you now take the next step, I hope that my “rules of life” will at least in some small way be of help. In a recent talk in Boston the Dalai Lama said that it is not enough to be intelligent, but you must also be compassionate. In graduating today you have demonstrated your intelligence. As you go forward, use this gift wisely, be loving to those special people in your life, be compassionate and understanding of all others. Furthermore, I can only hope that you will have as much passion for what you will do as I have for what I do.

Finally, I return to Rule No. 6 which states that “people will never remember what you said, but only how you made them feel.” This being the case, I don’t expect you to remember anything that I have said this morning. What I do hope is that you will leave this ceremony knowing that Georgia Tech is proud of you and with the feeling and the confidence that you are ready to take on the world.

Commencement represents a celebration of the next step in your journey through life, a beginning of the next chapter in your life. I

realize that these are at best challenging times because of the economy for those of you going out into the real world. I thus urge you to remember Rule No. 7, i.e. be willing to let go of the life that you have planned so as to have the life that awaits you, because there are opportunities out there, but they may not be what you expected. Because of what you will bring to whatever you decide to pursue, I am confident that the future of this country is in good “hands.” Quite frankly, the world needs you.

And now it is on with this graduation ceremony. “Uncle Bob” congratulates you. I know that the best is yet to come. So go for it!