

Marlboro College Graduate Center

Commencement Address, August 27, 2000



By Dan Harple

Intro-

Thank you Paul LeBlanc, Trustees, Faculty, and Students, Families and Friends.

The opening-

It's a bit surreal to stand here in front of you. That's because I attended Marlboro College as an undergrad in the 1970's, literally a time when I was petrified to stand in a crowded line at the dining hall. So, I've come full circle. I first stood on a stage in front of an audience at age 17 at Marlboro, in this spot, an electric guitar in my hands, attempting to play a Pink Floyd tune. I was so shy I couldn't actually face the audience. I hope to do a bit better today, and I promise I won't turn my back on you !

On top of that, my oldest son, Cody, has decided to also attend Marlboro College. So, this place has special meaning for me.

With that, I feel a certain bond with today's graduates, as you must also feel something unique about this place that caused you to be here.

Since then, as with everyone, I've grown and changed. I've spoken for large groups and small. I've given talks at COMDEX, Internet World, Network/Interop, and others.

But, this is my first Commencement speech, right in the place where I experienced a coming-of-age.

And, what oddly makes it more comfortable is the fact that, of all the talks I've given, this is the first one I get to give in a long flowing robe. So, with my security blanket close in tow...

Summary-

I'd like to talk about five things today-

1 I'd like to discuss why your degree is perhaps one of the most relevant degrees you can have in today's world.

Why your knowledge has the potential to make the increasingly pervasive internet a positive change agent for the world.

How your degree is not simply a means to an end. It is the foundation for a life-long process of creation, design, and differentiation.

2. I'd like to discuss how you can use this knowledge to make a difference, to improve the world we all live in.

3. I'd like to discuss how you figure out how to do this. How do you find your Cause? For if you can find your Cause, your reason for being, all else in your personal and professional life will take care of itself. I'll talk about tools I've used to find my Cause.

4. I'd like to talk about how you can explore the possibilities and actually contribute tangible long-lasting value to our world.

And finally,

5. I'd like to talk about what this really means; how you live it, how you stick with it, and how you ultimately cross the goal line.

I'll talk about some things I've seen along the way, and how working with teams and smart people can be your sustenance.

How "knowledge work" only produces results with teams. How teams you work with feed your Cause.

How working with people you admire and respect makes you better and raises our collective bar to heights we couldn't reach on our own.

OK? Is everybody ready?

And you thought you were going to get a light Commencement speech today!

The First Point-

Let's start with my first point. When you embarked on your Master's Degree at the Graduate Center did you actually consider that it may be one of the most relevant degrees you can have in today's modern world?

I don't mean that because the dot-com landscape got hot and offered our generations' version of the gold rush.

The real gold comes to those who find ways to create things that truly improve and alter lives.

I am sure that the post-IPO glow for the founders of dogfood.com does not provide

inner bliss, and is even worse after the latest "correction" on Wall Street.

Whereas, Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the world wide web, must surely feel an inner joy that transcends any liquidity event.

We all know the internet is changing many things. It's cliché now, but as Neil Weintraut, InSoft's investment banker, then at Hambrecht & Quist said in 1995, "The internet changes everything."

Your decision to pursue an advanced degree in internet technologies places you on the forefront of technology and culture. What you now know can allow you to be a change agent.

These technology advances create giant opportunities-

Advances in bandwidth will make today's net experience seem like yester-years transistor radio. Bandwidth is increasing at least four times as fast as Moore's law and will continue to do so for years.

This opens up a big opportunity for all of us. We can use this power to transform lives. I think we can do it in a cross-cultural way that actually improves the way we live on this planet.

To put all of this in perspective, George Gilder recently said, "The internet is best imagined as a virtual point of light into which will be distilled all the commerce and culture of the race."

No doubt George Gilder is a visionary. But just imagine if only a small percentage of culture- what we think, who we are, how we do things, how we behave- was a virtual point of light, instantaneously available for ALL people.

To me, that is the true ULTIMATE team, all people, and when all people can concurrently access information, process it, and improve it, true global change and improvement can happen.

So, this means that your degree has provided a substrate for you to devise improvements in the internet ecology.

This allows you to become a positive change agent, as you now possess the knowledge to craft ways to Make a Difference.

The Second Point-

I'd like to discuss how we can use what we've learned, exploit the rapid growth of technology to **make a difference** and **change our world**.

So now, once you cross this stage and accept your Masters Degree, you can rejoice that you are all certified internet gurus. You speak in new hip acronyms, no longer understandable to friends and family. So, considering that we are in our beloved Vermont, and that you have spent a considerable amount of time in the Graduate Center Building, known as the Holstein building, we will now introduce yet another acronym-

"MAD COW." "Make a Difference/Change our World."

Repeat after me-

Make a Difference.....MAD
Change our World....COW

Did you realize that your matriculation at the Graduate Center was actually driven by an innate human instinct- the MAD COW reflex ?

You were put here to milk the MAD COW.

How can you use what you've learned at the Graduate Center, and elsewhere, to make a difference ?

The Third Point-

OK ! How do you do it ?

I think the way to start is to find the nucleus.

This nucleus is your "Cause."

There are several ways to find your Cause. One is education, and the thinking that comes from it.

As for education, let's start with the Graduate Center-

Mission of the Graduate Center-

"The mission of the Graduate Center of Marlboro College is to prepare individuals to lead the internet and online strategies of corporate, non-profit and educational institutions."

So, let's ask, "How do we do this ? What should be our Cause ?"

To get started-

All of you, no doubt have the core skill sets onboard to be leaders on the internet.

Everyone has a burgeoning tool belt, with tools literally dropping out onto the floor- Java, C++, CGI, HTML, metadata, remote procedure calls, TCP/IP, http, Perl, UNIX, etc. And don't forget the new one we just learned- the MAD COW.

Your minds are muddled from educational information overload, and today you get your reprieve. But the real work starts now. And, if you've found a Cause, the fun starts. This is important ! You may never have to work again! IF- you have found a Cause.

So perhaps there is a clue here too ?

If your work is not fun, you've probably not found your Cause, and will

probably not milk the MAD COW.

So congratulations, everyone here today is now an official "knowledge worker," the term officially coined by Peter Drucker, a leading business author and organization visionary.

To quote Peter Drucker-

"Knowledge workers do not produce a "thing." They produce ideas, information, concepts....

The knowledge worker, moreover, is usually a specialist.

In fact, he can, as a rule, be effective only if he has learned to do one thing very well; that is, if he has specialized.

By itself, however, a specialty is a fragment and sterile. Its output has to be put together with the output of other specialists before it can produce results."

So, this is a BIG CLUE !

The fact that we have to work with other knowledge worker specialists to actually produce RESULTS.

The take away is "We need to work together in teams."

This may seem incredibly self-evident. But the stark reality is that many ideas and companies never succeed because there is no team bond.

The Next Step-

Another tool I've used to help find my Cause is interdisciplinary thinking. It's something that I first got exposed to here at Marlboro College.

Modern corporate-speak calls it "thinking out of the box."

The reality is you need to connect your left brain to your right brain, because the world is not polar.

It is a pool of infinite interconnects- of ideas, thoughts, and things. If you can connect ideas, thoughts, and things in an interdisciplinary way, you will transcend specialist thinking, and perhaps....get closer to the MAD COW.

It is not coincidence that Tim Berners-Lee says, "Hope in life comes from the interconnections among all the people in the world..."

In a similar mode, I don't think it's a coincidence that the PC revolution was actually launched by a philosophy major, Steve Jobs, from a school

very similar to Marlboro, Reed College.

So, go interdisciplinary. There have surely been many smart people before us to help us find our Cause.

What kind of thinking has occurred in other realms that could be relevant for us? How can we use an interdisciplinary approach to find our Cause?

Perhaps a way to start on this is to look at the mission of Marlboro College-

Mission of Marlboro College-

"to teach students how to think and how to learn, how to analyze and how to synthesize, how to form opinions and how to defend them."

When I was a new undergrad at Marlboro it was even simpler, "to teach you to think, to read and write."

Marlboro with its undergraduate focus on teaching you "to think," created a lifelong interdisciplinary continuum for me.

For me, reading and loving Ram Dass in the 70's, now seems the perfect prelude for loving Peter Drucker in the 90's and the Millennium.

Learning "to think" in an interdisciplinary way makes perceiving related connections seem as natural as the Grateful Dead transitioning from "China Cat Sunflower" to "I Know you Rider." It makes music the perfect mathematical backdrop for designing communications systems on the internet.

It's all a continuum, and I believe the ability to see and read these subtleties is important to success in your life and your career.

If you can do this, you may just be able to derive more meaning from your life. Your Cause can become your higher order purpose.

This kind of thinking allows you to ask questions like-

"Is it possible that Carl Jung's concept of archetypes and our quest for universal identity may actually be coming true with the world wide web?"

Hmm, maybe Carl Jung and Tim Berners-Lee are on the same page.

Tim's statement, "Universality must exist along several dimensions, to share knowledge, the web must be a universal space..." sounds like the fulfillment of Jung's thesis-

This is why interdisciplinary thinking is important. It is why I firmly believe a liberal arts education is the perfect precursor for a technical specialty.

Knowledge workers with liberal education grounding can produce new,

tangential thoughts that birth the MAD COW.

When Guy Kawasaki tells us the "Selling the dream only really works if you've found your Cause," this may be the same thing as the philosopher Nietzsche, writing that "he didn't work for money, but for pleasure and that you justify your life through your creative works."

Maybe all of these great thinkers are saying the same thing-

Find something you believe in and work on that.

Which leads me to my-

Fourth Point-

Exploring the possibilities-

There are infinite possibilities for your Cause. It's your choice and you have an infinite range of topics.

They range from simply improving and actualizing yourself, changing JUST YOURSELF with your new technology tools- to- creating methods and systems that can help others do this. As long as it is your Cause, it is valuable, whether you commercialize it or not.

I believe that if you find a Cause and tenaciously pursue it, something good will ultimately come of it.

Possibilities that I have been involved in have included-

InSoft/Netscape-

Taking the chance that my Cause ideas could be realized by starting a company called InSoft.

The Cause at InSoft was simply, to build tools that would allow people to communicate and collaborate in realtime, over the internet. We never even really considered money. We wanted a new cool way to work with each other.

InSoft lasted four years, produced some of the earliest commercial realtime multimedia collaboration products, and was the acquired by Netscape Communications.

How was the Cause realized ?

Devising a way to communicate in realtime point-to-point/one-to-one on the internet. Using audio, video, graphics, and drawing tools.

This idea became Netscape Conference, which introduced internet telephony to the world

Devising a way to communicate in realtime one-to-many on the internet, using audio,

video, and web pages.

This idea became the Netscape Media Server, which was one of the first commercialized streaming servers.

I feel fortunate for having these experiences and for having worked with these spectacular teams. The feeling is bolstered by having the chance to have contributed a small time slice at the once fastest growing company in the world, Netscape.

This altered my view of what is possible, and how your ideas can affect people.

Our products were ultimately used and accessed by over one hundred million people. We were able to contribute technologies that now are internet standards, such as the Real-time Streaming Protocol (RTSP).

We produced a patent, "An Apparatus for Collaborative Computing," which I'm proud to say is now in AOL's basement. And to think ! We used to make fun of AOL at Netscape !

We had touched the MAD COW.

A take away from this ?

**Follow your Cause, believe in your idea, and something will happen.
We just never know what it will be.**

Context Labs/Context Media-

My new Cause has been manifest in an entity I called Context Labs, which has commercialized itself in an entity called Context Media.

Remember, your Cause can be to just Change Yourself. Or, you can live your Cause in the Context of a Company- a great place to assemble a team of "knowledge workers." As we collectively raise the bar, we all get better !

What things do I personally see as areas for a Cause on the Internet ?

How can we leverage the decentralized nature of the internet ?

Why do we have portals ? To me, a portal is akin to having one McDonald's that everyone goes to, worldwide. This hardly leverages the efficiencies inherent in the innately decentralized internet.

The portal has imposed a mono-culture on the internet, the most diverse knowledge-sharing vehicle ever created. Whole industries have evolved to make the mono-culture work- Content delivery Networks putting content to the edge of the network.

I believe the portal will be rendered the Route 66 of the early-stage commercialized internet. We will look back fondly, smile, and wonder why everyone took that one overused road. What were we thinking ?

The internet is the worlds largest digital media warehouse. Digital assets are the new lingua franca of the Millennium.

How can we make the net learn and deliver what we need ?

How can we make the delivery contextual ? Fit our personal goals ?

How does a company that creates content, get it to all the people that need and want it ?- Securely, in control, and efficiently ?

How does a company process and deliver the exponentially increasing explosion of digital assets ? How do we efficiently author and deliver it for all platforms, in one fell swoop ?

How can we receive all the information we want anywhere on all devices we personally use ? with all new and emerging media types ?

I believe that these questions can be solved and will provide new opportunities to milk the MAD COW.

All of this leads me to my,

Final Point-

What does this all really mean ?

You've found your Cause. You believe in it. How do you realize Results ?

One, you find a team of people that is as self-evangelized as you are. Your first step is to evangelize them. It is easy if you have a real Cause.

This team should be people you admire, respect, and raise the collective performance bar every single day.

You will get to the point with them where words don't matter. You will be so bonded that non-verbal communications decide many of your actions.

You will know when this happens- and it will be a waypoint in the fog.

Two, stick to your guns. If your Cause is True, you are on the Path.

Don't believe what you read in the Red Herring, Industry Standard, or Internet Week. They are reporting trends. Real sustainable Causes are not trends.

They are reporting on the Mainstream (that is where the MAD COW has already been milked- remember you are birthing a new MAD COW- you are a MAD COW midwife). Don't get me wrong- the Mainstream is important, it is just not where you birth MAD COWs.

Ignore what Wall Street has to say. If you have a real Cause, stick to it and never give in, you will produce a MAD COW. Then Wall Street, and others will pay close attention.

Peter Drucker has been right about many things, particularly when he writes, "The purpose of a business is to create and retain customers." If your cause does this you will have created sustaining value.

So, as my old boss at Netscape, CEO Jim Barksdale used to say, "Plan the work, and work the Plan."

Don't give up. You are on a Mission !

A story-

As you go through this process, realize that dot-com mania is over. We are back to the good old fashioned days where you create real value. Dot-com mania financed virtual ideas, the real world rewards sustainable Causes that Make a Difference.

So, if you are a heavyweight fighter, prepare to go the full 15 rounds.

InSoft lasted four years. My uncle, in our initial startup days, when I was questioning the Cause, had sent me a note.

It read, "Don't worry, it doesn't happen overnight. I've found a quote I think you need to hear- "We are all faced with a series of great opportunities, Brilliantly disguised as impossible situations."

I taped this to top drawer on my desk and read it every day until our company moved to Mountain View, California to be part of Netscape.

Once you use an interdisciplinary mindset, everything starts to relate-

My Uncle's advice seemed remarkably similar to one of Jim Barksdale's pearls of wisdom that he helped Netscape live by-

"Three rules: if you see a snake, shoot it; don't play with dead snakes; and everything looks like a snake at first."

See ? If you can live in a multi-contextual interdisciplinary world, everything starts to sound pretty similar !

So, find your Cause, and don't give up.

In summary-

With Context Labs, I had the opportunity to work with a person I consider to be a modern day Leonardo- artist, composer, engineer, architect, philosopher- Todd Rundgren. In one of our email exchanges, focused on our product development, he wrote,

"Differentiation is not just what products do. It's deciding what they will do better than any other product. Or what they will do that it didn't occur to anyone else they should do. It is about putting distance between you and your competition by stealth as much as by brute genius. It is the most fun

part about product design. It's the slant, the easter egg, the look on someones face the first time they experience what you have created."

The take away from this is-

if your Cause is Real,
if you have the Team,
if you can persevere,
the Differentiation will come.

You will have found the easter egg.

Now, I realize that no one ever remembers what their Commencement speaker said.

The speakers all are rather long winded (as I have been).

That's why I came up with this silly **MAD COW**.

My message to you today is-

If you want to Make a Difference, Find your Cause, and you will find Fulfillment.

Or,

So, Get out there and start milking those MAD COWs !

Congratulations and Good Luck !

Endnote:

The next day, graduate Jeremy Osborn sent this URL-
[MADCOW](#)