

## Commencement 2009 (If I Were Giving the Address)

So you're graduating from college, or maybe grad school. Perhaps you were even dumb enough to have gone to law school. And somewhere in the next three or four weeks, they're going to put you in a cheap black robe, stick a flat, pointy hat on your skull and seat you in alphabetical order with a bunch of your peers, to listen to sage advice. Some captain of industry, shoestring Kennedy or fading middle-aged celebrity's going to tell you where you're headed, what you'll see... what you ought to do. He'll throw around words like "dare" and "strive," and tell you to chase your passions. He'll tell you life's a "journey," liken it to a trek up a mountain, a sea voyage or some historic Roman battle. You'll sit there through a blinding hangover, stanching an urge to vomit, tuning out most of the words. You've heard it all before, the customary overtures and slogans, the charges to go out and "make a difference." *Yeah, yeah, yeah. Leave the world better than I found it. Check. Never lose a sense of wonder at the majesty of humanity. Indeed...* And you'll probably ask yourself, *Why all the saccharine bullshit? Why not give me some real fucking advice?*

I'm with you, kid. I thought exactly the same thing. The only interesting comment my university commencement speaker offered was, "Always be prepared to change professions. Try everything. Life's short." I never forgot that instruction; probably never will. Maybe that was a good thing, maybe not. But in the spirit of offering some similarly memorable advice, something that actually addresses the world you're going to encounter, the people you'll have to manipulate for the rest of your career, here's the commencement address I'd give if I had the podium at your school. The one you'll never, ever hear.

### "Don't Be the Punchline"

Good morning. I'd like to start by noting, you're all fucked. The Market's going to 6000 this summer, unemployment is headed to twenty percent and I think there's a good chance we're going to see widespread rioting in the streets before this thing is over. Mutant armies irradiated with dirty bomb fallout, dogs and cats living together... everything but the Rapture. My advice is buy a gun. Something automatic. And get some big dogs. You'll need them to guard the compound. The good news is you won't have to pay back those student loans. The bad news is you'll have to turn tricks for Spam, candy corn and toilet paper, our new forms of currency. I know, I know... How bleak. But you can always look on the bright side. Speaking in the Confucian sense, you're as wealthy as one can be. These are indeed interesting years. Here's to surviving them.

Okay. Now that I have your attention, let's get serious. I'm going to break this down to a series of discrete points, the only conceivable arrangement in which I could hope to impart advice on as general a subject as "How you ought to live your life." Here we go:

#### 1. Ignorance is bliss.

People will tell you to question, to look inside and underneath all the systems in our society and ask why do what we do. I say leave this to others. The inquiries will drive you mad. We're a pack of shaved apes fighting to amass the biggest piles of green paper possible, so we can exchange them for cars with DVD players in the ceilings, Italian-tiled kitchens and the satisfaction of telling our neighbors we have a double-double-wide, a 140 inch television, a condo in Breckenridge or a gourmet turkey fryer. Leary said "Tune in, turn on, drop out" back in 1967. In 2009, it's "Tune out, turn on the TV, pour a Guarana-infused green tea cola down your pie hole and stare at American Idol." The less you think, the better, because the more you look, the more you'll find of this - entropy, narrowness and intractable imbecility. Three hundred dollar olive oil and quintuple knit cashmere infant scarves... Labradoodle day care centers and subprime

rhinoplasty financing... Purebred \$1000 hamsters, mountain bike detailing, platinum plated cell phones and anal bleaching... Creationist nature museums, websites selling online gaming weapons for hundreds and thousands of real actual dollars and a whole industry of Ivy League nimrods pimping credit insurance without reserves and offering nothing but an Alfred E. Neuman grin when their "Second Life" economy was downgraded to "FAIL." Once you pick up that rock, you're never going to forget the bugs you see underneath it. Better to keep yourself clueless. Take a deep breath, pour a glass of Glenlivet, kiss your lovely wife and admire that gorgeous lawn. You need never think any deeper. Introspection never got anyone a top slot at the cracker factory.

## **2. Cynics are the only honest people.**

Which is why you should always avoid them. It's hard enough stopping yourself from asking "Why?" The last thing you need is someone else doing it for you, and worse than any of that, actually providing the answer. Unless you make enough money to look down on the whole of it from your helicopter, the trees are the forest. The office, your career, everything you do for money - it's all make believe, a patchwork of polite systems we've constructed wherein we can compete as we did in the days of the Crusades without having to gore each other with swords and maces. The cynic's like a bad manager. He tells you to hold out for a better title fight that's never going to come. In the end, he's right. It's all a game of diversion, deferment and delusion. But you're stuck in it either way, so you might as well play along, see if you can cruise through the thing in a fancy car, with a big house. Maybe a time-share somewhere sunny.

## **3. Numbers trump words.**

Math is the language the one percent of society amassing eighty percent of the nation's wealth uses to bullshit the other ninety nine percent. Have a talent for writing pop songs? Playing tennis? Painting expensive pictures of nude women in your greenhouse? You can be the best damned artist, tradesman, marketer, religious icon. etc... in the world, but if you don't know numbers, you're going to wind up a debt slave of some kind, caught in a bad deal with a middle-man of some sort who'll take you for your bank. Numbers are the language of power. A 600 math score on your SATs = 800 verbal. The millions of different socioeconomic groups milling about in this country can be boiled down to two simple classes: People who use finance and people who get used by it. Pundits like to say Wall Street types "got lucky" - that they got a break in an industry that minted millionaires by the hundreds. Maybe. Or maybe they put themselves in the position to get lucky. If you want to make millions by thirty five, you have to work in a place where there are millions of dollars floating around you all day, and the only way to do that is to understand numbers. Or at least have enough facility with them to pretend you do.

## **4. People live in narratives.**

First thing you have to realize in the work world is that Americans don't live in reality. We live in what we want reality to be - a mash-up of skewed perceptions we take from our engrained biases, accepted myths and cultural reinforcements.<sup>1</sup> And there's no correcting our vision. A union

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<sup>1</sup> ~~/~~ Red State v. Blue State, Bro v. Metrosexual, Traditionalist v. Progressive... All of it's "branding" bullshit, sold to you by Madison Avenue and K Street. Just like the Marlboro Man and the War in Iraq. It's intended to keep you squabbling, identifying with factions supposedly at each other's throats. Keep you stupid, focused on illusory enemies, purchasing the literature, badges and products sold by the mouthpieces of your tribes, all manufactured by the same three or four companies buying the same amount of advertising time on the allegedly competing networks. You cheer along with Rachel Maddow when she rips into Bill O'Reilly? Get excited when Anne Coulter calls Al Gore a fag? Guess what? They all go to the same resorts on the holidays, the ones you can't afford. You're the "mark," dipshit, buying into their shtick, greasing their merry go

steward and a banker will almost always see the same closing of a factory as two entirely distinct events, with different actors and forces at fault. And their social networks and the places where they get their news buffer their conclusions, which isn't by happenstance. Few of the people you'll meet in the work world will have any interest in seeing things from an angle other than the one they've already acquired, and with which they've become quite comfortable. The want to be told they're right by things like Fox News or MSNBC, be assured by *Newsmax* or *Mother Jones*. If you want to get along with these people and have them eating from your hand, watch them for a while before you talk, and shift your views to fit theirs. They'll buy into anything that reinforces their "reality" because they desperately need to believe it's accurate, and they're usually the sorts who think the number of people believing in something bears a relationship to its veracity. Stay near these knuckleheads. You can make a lot of money selling things to them.

#### **5. What you know only matters in real work like medicine or engineering. Everywhere else it's who you know.**

Hope you got loaded with the right people while you were in school here. Don't shake your head. You heard me. When you're building bridges or doing heart valve replacements, yes, your skill is paramount. But in every profession outside the "real," or "hard" trades, it inevitably comes down to sales, and sales comes down to connections. (You engineers and people in the pre-med programs can go throw up in rest rooms now. This part doesn't concern you.) Being able to shoot sixty nine on a decent PGA rated course or get clients into an exclusive nightclub is worth twice the value of your class rank or merit scholar awards. You can be three IQ points above retarded and still make partner in a consulting or law firm if your uncle owns a business using seven figures worth of services a year. You know that guy in your fraternity house whose family came over on the Mayflower? The one whose house on the Cape had a name instead of a street address? He's got connections, and every door's going to be open to him from day one. If you don't have that, and most of us don't, you'd better find a way to get yourself wired. Smile, shake the right hands and get the cash crowd to like you. And no, it's not an excuse that you're working too hard to take the time. Slamming you with work is how management creates "lifers," the employees who'll never be anything but hands. A book of business is the only leverage you'll ever have, and the only hope you have to get rich. If you don't have the personality to sell, go work for the government. That or move to a cottage in the woods right now, save yourself the frustration.<sup>2</sup>

## **Part II**

Alright, where were we? Right... more ways to make the corn-holing you're about to receive in the real world a little less shocking.

#### **6. Nobody likes a moderate.**

Heard any good talk radio disc jockeys fuming about how both sides of an issue have good points? Pundits on television railing against the unreasonableness of the lunatics at the extremes of a debate, screaming about how we need to compromise? Fuck no, you haven't. And you never will. People don't want to bend; they'd rather fight to the death. And more than any of that, they like to hear their own voices, and a lot of them want to *lead* you - get you behind their movement or ideology, get the high that comes with power. They're suspicious of anything moderate. It

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round with your hard earned dollars. You want to better yourself, better our political system? Turn it all off and lock up your wallet. Starve the beast until it chokes on its swollen tongue.

<sup>2</sup> Don't get bitchy with me. I don't like playing the game any more than anybody else. But this is how things work, and it's never going to change. The notion of a true meritocracy is an academic concept, nothing more.

questions their essential fiber, threatens their revenue streams. You know the people I mean, the ones who talk in terms of "evil" and "sacred," with their "heavens" and "hells," the "infallibility of the market," or the "crisis of wealth disparity." The crusaders who like to brand skeptics "moral relativists."

Now, I'd like to tell you to hold to your rational instincts, always see both sides of an issue and refuse to pick a side out of laziness or opportunism. But that isn't how the world works. Everyone claims to be a live-and-let-live kind of person, but deep down inside, most of us are closet egomaniacs. We're certain we're right about everything, and we want everyone to believe what we do. Most people like to do business with people they think they understand, and if you want to make money, you're going to need these types to think they know your "code." The fastest way to do that is to join something - pick a side and pledge allegiance, at least superficially. All that angry young man crap about never selling out your beliefs? That's fine and dandy if you have a trust fund. If not, always remember - whatever group you join, make sure they have open bars at the meetings. You'd be amazed how well a triple Stoli kills the urge to cough "bullshit" through your hand during the speeches.

#### **7. Break everything into pieces, and only handle one at a time.**

Most of what passes for intelligence in this world isn't intelligence at all. It's compartmentalization, the process of making things small. Perception's reality in the average organization, and a man who's rarely or never in error is always perceived to be smart. If you think in big pictures, it's easy to make mistakes - you're dealing with a lot of moving parts. But if you break down every issue you're debating into little pieces, each of which you can opine on discretely with no risk of being wrong, you'll look like a man with brains. Ever wonder why the people with the fanciest degrees speak simply and deal with small steps in a project rather than tackling it all once or discussing it conceptually? They got those fancy degrees because they were expert students, and expert students learn early - probably from essay exams - that you can be dumb as a brick on the big picture and practical application of knowledge but still get an "A-" if you can analyze a dozen or so finite pieces of an issue individually in a simple, confident fashion. Some would say this is a variation on the old advice, "K.I.S.S." Right acronym, but they're one word off. If you don't have the balls for decisions, and most of us don't, the rule is "Keep It Small, Stupid." Win the little battles on the narrow fields you define and leave the serious thinking for the seriously intelligent people.

#### **8. Don't expect to create much or do anything of any real consequence with your career.**

The business of America isn't business, it's process. Save drugs for fictitious diseases, books about teenage vampire cults and fantastic credit vehicles, we don't really build or create much of anything in this country anymore.<sup>3</sup> On one hand, we find ways to extend what ought to be the simplest of transactions into an endless stream of procedures, allowing armies of middle-minded middlebrow middlemen to eke out mid-level salaries doing middling tasks in a chain of artificially necessitated steps no effective mind could ever hope to justify. On the other, we craft "deals," rollovers, trades, swaps, buyouts, mergers, refinancings and restructurings out of which we wring "fee income," future tax credits and one time profit bumps by larding up companies with debt. I've no issue with any of this, of course. Hell, I generated most of the down payment on

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<sup>3</sup> What do Fibromyalgia, Restless Leg Syndrome and Overactive Bladder have in common? They're as real as Mormonism. They were invented in boardrooms, by creeps at drug companies looking for quick profit centers - predatory marketing gurus with an acute understanding of the loneliness, ignorance, narcissism and gullibility that drives millions of Americans to doctors every day for the slightest, minor maladies.

my house suing and defending people for violating the fine print of provisions, covenants, doctrines, assignments, addendums, indentures, pledges and clauses in this cash-out-of-thin-air system. But if you asked me what I did, what was my career achievement, what on earth would I say? Boxes of time sheets? How would I even describe what I'd done? "Bickered about verbs and nouns in form documents? Glad-handed clients, argued technical garbage in front of bored judges and dutifully collected checks?" The simple reality is, there are seven billion people on the planet, and there's only enough meaningful work for about a hundred million of us. The rest of the population works at Nerf jobs in Whiffle professions, providing McServices nobody will remember next week, let alone twenty, fifty or a hundred years from now. Legacy's the ultimate luxury, a fixation for the very lucky few. The best the remaining 99.999% of us can do is put on our finest Academy Award performances and milk the Matrix for the maximum cash we can suck from it.

**9. Work will inevitably meet capacity. Never set a high ceiling there.**

The typical job most of you are going work at is a like a gold-digger's marriage - a use-and-be-used proposition. And as any high-end husband hunter would advise, you can't go and fuck the target's brains out on the first date. Give him all you've got every time you're in the sack and he'll eventually tire of the goods, have nothing to look forward to. Lead him on, dole out your talents incrementally. Do that thing with your tongue for a month, put your ankles behind your head for another... throw in a little role-laying later. That's how to get the ring - with the promise of greater future returns.<sup>4</sup> Getting a corner office works exactly the same way. When you get out there in the work world, you'll see a load of talented, bright new hires toiling at maximum capacity, never saying no to more work. Stay away from these types at all cost. Most of them burn out by thirty, victims of belief in the myth that hard work alone mints success. Hard work only begets more work, and they'll throw that on a fool until he breaks. Smart work is what makes you money, and smart work is knowing your best bargaining chip is never what management knows - what it can evaluate empirically - but in all the things it doesn't, what it thinks you're capable of and might achieve in the future.\*\* The only way to keep up its interest is by holding back from the start. Tease it a little. Give it a few good hand jobs, maybe a hummer every now and again for a couple years. Just enough to show promise and vault a few rungs up the ladder before you let it start fucking you.

**10. Commerce cancers everything. Get used to it.**

*I don't want to sell anything, buy anything, or process anything as a career. I don't want to sell anything bought or processed, or buy anything sold or processed, or process anything sold, bought, or processed, or repair anything sold, bought, or processed. You know, as a career, I don't want to do that.*

Heard that quote before? It's a famous line from John Cusack's character in *Say Anything*. Everyone thinks it's funny, and the reason for that's pretty simple: The statement's utterly ridiculous. Humans are vulgar animals, and commerce infects everything.<sup>5</sup> Want to be an artist? You're going to need a manager. Want to be doctor? You're going to jockey with alligator-armed health insurers and parasitic medical malpractice attorneys. Want to be a fancy big firm lawyer? You're going to clock time on a card like a factory schlep. Whatever you do, wherever you do it, somebody's going to commoditize and monetize it, ruthlessly, and you're going to wind up spending half the time you wanted to devote to the thing you wanted to do dealing with the

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<sup>4</sup> There's also a value in looking calm and collected, like you've got it all under control. Nobody frazzled looks cool.

<sup>5</sup> "Vulgar" in the classic descriptive sense.

"merchant" side of the endeavor. The Beatles may not have been more famous than Jesus Christ, but as long as there's money to be made on the backs of others' creative ideas, Ayn Rand most certainly will be. Talent only gets a slice. The bundlers, handlers and credit line providers walk off with the rest of the pie. It's nice to want to do exclusively that which you love, but everybody's got to pay the mortgage. Even Thoreau needed to move units.

#### **11. The best way to get something from somebody is by appealing to his inherent laziness.**

If you've come this far in higher education, chances are you're going to wind up in the "administrative economy" that soaks up most white collar workers - passing papers around in circles, ensuring "compliance" with this or that policy, shepherding some client through a bureaucratic gauntlet or tediously navigating an infinite corporate hierarchy. In this monstrous creative vacuum, you're going to run into many roadblocks, and by "roadblocks" I mean people - functionaries you'll have to interface with and satisfy to reach your ultimate goal. Some say kiss their ass, charm these armies of box-checking Oompa Loompas and they'll do your bidding with a smile. Some say play it safe, engage them as little as possible, that their kind can only do you harm. Both are thinking too much. I say appeal to their laziness. Always couch your pitch, whatever you're asking for - whatever approval or clearance you need - to require not a moment of the gatekeeper's thought. Better yet, not even movement. "Basal" should be your aim, as in, "sustaining the metabolism of the drone whose signature you need at a 'basal,' or 'plant life' level." Every inch he has to move, every calorie that must be expended - be it swiveling in his leather chair to reach for a pen or deciphering the papers you've handed him - works against your interests. Do all of his thinking for him in advance, spoon feeding him the concepts at issue in fourth grade level English.

You might get mad sometimes, wondering why we have so many of these people around us, getting paid to do what seems next to nothing. Purge these thoughts from your mind. Put away any fantasies about society seeking real organizational efficiency and remember: We produce about ten times more new humans every day than the economy does productive jobs or careers. If we had anything approaching real efficiency, we'd have 40% unemployment. We also have a 60% consumption-based economy. If the legions of marketed "marks" don't have paychecks to cover the monthly minimums on their credit cards so they can run out and buy more shiny, sparkling shit, we all go up in flames.

### **Part III**

Look, dude, you can scream "Whipping Post!" at me all day long, but this is a commencement spee - - No, I'm not doing "Paint it Black" either. Security?

Okay, where are we? Right. Getting near the end, the "penultimate" part. ...Where the fuck's my glass?

#### **12. Beware of these words: "New Paradigm."**

The minute you hear them, if you work or hold stock in the area of the economy they're being used to describe, start looking for a new line of work, and liquidate your holdings. There's no clearer harbinger of doom than that twenty eight year old wunderkind CEO touting how his industry's "evolved beyond" the grasp of the pitfalls that felled similarly exploding sectors in the past. History doesn't predict the future, but gravity rules all. From its literal application to the planes in the sky to its quasi-metaphorical impact on every business that has ever existed, There Is No Perpetual Climb. What rises peaks and collapses. The trick, of course, is winning the game of musical chairs - riding a thing to the top and parachuting before it all goes to shit. People will

talk up projections, and most that's dressed up guesswork, or intentionally circulated rumors. There's only one sure truth. At the pinnacle of what's about to cave, you'll always hear the following: "This time it's different." And that's when you'll know it's not.

### **13. Sophistry's the new logic.**

You'll meet a lot of folks at work who like to argue, and you might still harbor the notion that through a debate, people can learn from their opponents' views, have their own assumptions and impressions challenged, broadened or perhaps even changed entirely. Disabuse yourself of that delusion. Today, from the infotainment pimps on TV and the Internet to the creep in the break room who likes to argue politics, everybody's an advocate, and advocates don't "debate." Advocates play to win, and language is a limited, simple medium. As the popularity of AM talk radio proves, any idiot with fifth grade English skills has a sufficient stable of rhetorical tropes, vague synonyms and dodgy phrases with which to duck, shift, weave, reverse, modify, revise or reconfigure the structure or substance of an argument enough to always appear the victor. As annoying as these types will be, and as much as you'll want to beat them on the merits, just walk away. Shake your head, smile and thank God you're getting laid enough not to care.

### **14. If the business doesn't make you money while you're sleeping, it's not a business worth joining.**

You want to know why doctors, lawyers, dentists and accountants drink so much? Because they're their only revenue stream. When their hands aren't moving, engaging in variations on the same five or ten tasks they're licensed to perform, they're not making money. And what do they have to sell when they're done? Goodwill? If your business doesn't produce income while you're away from it - if you can't retire from the thing and draw cash out of it based on your equity after you've tired of working in it - it's not a business. It's a profession. And a profession's a way of life. And nobody, unless he's stark raving, card carrying, four star certifiably goddamned insane wants to make the filing of taxes, prosecution of lawsuits or running of efficiency models his fucking way of life. Ownership has its privileges - chiefly, most importantly, avoidance of indentured servitude. In most cases, no hope of equity = no hope at all. If that's your condition, you're probably going have to find a Plan B. Start thinking early.

### **15. First rule of Job Club? Dumb it down.**

We assume the people above us are smarter than we are, or know more than we do. And in the majority of instances, that's true. People higher up in management will know more. But this is also true: A majority starts at 50.1%. You're going to meet a lot of people who aren't as smart as you, and they're going to be above you. And they're not going to want to be impressed. The average upper middle manager doesn't want to feel challenged. He just wants to feel like he's made it - be reminded he's part of that special five percent, the "winners circle" Forbes tells him he's in because \$20,000.00 of his income is taxed at the highest rate. The guy's not a genius. He just had the instinct or sense to discern that getting ahead in a hierarchy's more perception than measurable performance. Show him you're a prodigy and he's as likely to hide you as recommend your promotion. Who wants to compete with talent? If you're smarter than what's above you, you're going to have to dumb yourself down, at least until you're far enough up the ladder to not have to worry about anybody who can hurt you feeling threatened.

I know what some of you are thinking: *Bullshit. If I show talent early, that will vault me ahead.* Listen, and never forget this... Remember it the same way you'd never come in someone you weren't certain was on the pill. The classic "corporate hierarchy" is anything but a cohesive unit, and it's only secondarily concerned with group success. Primarily, it's thousands of independent operators milking the structure for their own personal gains. Look at what the unions did to the auto makers and the bankers did to their shareholders. Look at the legions of lawyers "lateralling"

every year - jumping to any competing firm offering the slightest gain in compensation. There's no "team" in "Inc." You want to exhibit talent early without creating in-house adversaries? Start your own business.

**16. The government is not going to "make everything better." You're on your own.**

You're thinking it's all pretty unfair, right? You did what they told you, got the degree, and then this recession comes along and - BANG - overnight, you're fucked. But the government's on the case. Obama's going to fix it all, even out the inequities and give everyone a chance, right?

Wrong. The government's not going to fix any of that. Between the influence of lobbyists watering down any attempts at redistributive policies to the genius of the markets in finding ways to work around any new regulations or taxes to the simple axiomatic math that in good times and bad, capital creates more capital and those without it stagnate or sink, there's going to be very little "Change." Just a great big reset. We've shifted from a time of "hyper-capitalism" to a time of "hyper-consolidation." With the new regulatory environment and lack of appetite for leverage, the elements that would have crafted deals with up-front cash-outs will shift to a buy and hold posture, gobbling all sorts of assets and businesses with any eye toward huge longer term margins from inevitable, eventual appreciation. Sounds prudent, right? It is. It's also a recipe for a prolonged economic malaise and wicked wealth disparity. When the price of assets, from real estate to securities to businesses themselves, falls so far that the private money waiting in the wings thinks it can't lose and starts buying en masse at vulture discounts the Democrats are going to find themselves presiding over the biggest consolidation of wealth among the top 5% of the population in history. A full on retrenchment of society into a two caste system - lifetime creditors and lifetime debtors. Which brings me to my next point...

**17. Don't be marketed.**

What can you do to escape being one of these lifelong debtors? To avoid the fate of most the people sitting around you? Don't "front load" the American Dream, getting an expensive place and buying piles of rapidly depreciating, non-revenue producing junk. Happiness isn't amassing loads of expensive, slick shit. Money has no intrinsic value. All it's worth, all it'll ever be worth, is the freedom it can buy - the peace of mind that comes from having control over your life, of never being prisoner to a paycheck or a mortgage you can ill afford. Of being able to turn around on that Friday at 3:00, where some asshole partner or boss throws a fake "rush" job on your desk or gets in your grill about some minuscule issue for kicks, and saying what needs to be said:

*Fuck off, Bob. That's right, you heard me. Fuck you. Fuck your monogrammed shirt, that silly fucking diving watch, those pleated fucking pants and your Grecian Formula comb-over. Fuck your serotonin reuptake inhibited, Botox addicted wife, your Penn Law coffee mug and that rat-faced paralegal on 21 who sucks your three inch dick. Fuck your wildebeest daughter at Wellesley, your idiot son in his third post-grad boarding school program and both of your pure-breed Yorkies, 'Scalia' and 'Thomas.' Fuck your wire-rimmed reading glasses, your polka-dotted pocket square and that faux Wyeth print behind your faux antique desk. Fuck your Mont Blanc pens, your custom cuff-links, your permanently put-upon pout and your contrived patrician accent. Fuck your speeches, your war stories and the way you rub your sunken chin when you're nervous about lying. Fuck this firm, this floor and this building, your paychecks, your reviews and your bonuses, your time sheets, your shit advice and those bow-tied twits you suck up to in the hallway. Fuck your dead mother, Bob, with the mail clerk's dick.*

A man with no debts can say that. He's on his own grid. That's the simple, central essence of the "fuck" in "fuck you money" - being free to do what you like, to control your own direction. And



the queer thing of it is, you don't need \$10 million to have that power. You just have to stay out of hock - build a reserve of savings with the cash the other kids are spending on BMW convertibles and luxury loft apartments so no employer can ever hang the loss of a paycheck over your neck like a blade.

That and have a good explanation for why you can't use your last boss as a reference.

#### **Part IV**

Yeah, yeah... I know. I've held you here long enough. Time to leave, get on with the graduation pictures, pack up the car and bolt. But don't be in such a hurry. While I'm rambling here, take some photos of the buildings, the trees. Feels like you can't get away fast enough right now, but trust me - you're going to miss this place in a couple months.

#### **18. There's no virtue in sacrifice.**

That's just something we tell people to make them feel better about not being able to have the things they think they want, another of the endless rationalizing tautologies we use to turn our lack of something into a benefit. There's no morality in the concept of consumption. The only rule is this: If you can afford it, or handle it, and you want to have it, go ahead and buy it, eat it... fuck it. Just be aware, the law of diminishing returns kicks in awful quickly. Quantity's never going to be quality, and on the buying end of the spectrum, the more you get addicted to the kick of smaller repeat acquisitions, the less cash you're going to have to buy the big ticket items actually worth owning. If you always wanted a second home at the beach, putting plasma screen televisions in your bathrooms isn't going to scratch that itch. Twenty day trips to the Jersey Shore don't equal two weeks in Bali. All those substitute impulse purchases do is siphon away the money you might have been able to stockpile to get what you really want. So yes, though there may not be any virtue in sacrifice, that doesn't mean there isn't wisdom in it.

#### **19. Early in your career, a lot of you will be prisoners of a false meritocracy. No use in getting mad about it. All you can do is work through it.**

The kids with degrees from the highest ranked universities are always going to get the best jobs coming right out of school. This is going to anger a lot of you who, due to factors beyond your control, like a lack of money for the astronomical cost of private college tuition, won't be able to compete right out of the chute. Get over it. None of that's going to change, and as much as you feel uniquely slighted, it's nothing personal. Business doesn't have the time to vet every warm body sending in a resume. Like any rational consumer, it defaults to brand reputation, and Brown beats Ball State every day of the week. That and a fancy name will always provide insurance for the people doing the hiring. The Human Resources monkey playing gatekeeper at Big Company, Inc. has a singular goal - keeping her \$85k desk-warming gig to retirement. When a candidate from a highly ranked school turns out to be an idiot, she's got a built-in excuse - "But he went to Amherst!" If you didn't, the best you can do is claw your way up the ladder and, to borrow from Bill Murray's speech in *Rushmore*, "take dead aim" on the kids sliding by on credentials. We're in a merciless new economy. Value's paramount, and the days of pedigree trumping production, and protecting poor earners, are fading. However gag-inducing the exercise might be, open your mouth, self promote. Be a noticeable asset, ready to grab the slot above you as the paper tigers get axed. And they will.

#### **20. Your ego's a liability.**

I think it was Brian Wilson who most famously suggested you should "hang on to your ego."

Seems about right, considering Wilson was certifiably insane for most of his adult life.<sup>6</sup> You know what caused a lot of the mess that's leaving so many of you jobless right now? Ego. On one hand, ugly little miscreants on Wall Street jockeying to see which douchebag could make enough money to stick a Picasso on the wall of his mud room. On the other, millions of John Q. Publics staring out the windows of their aluminum-sided mini-estates, obsessing over how they can top the set of matching Escalades the couple next door gave each other for Christmas. Ego fucked our economy and ego will fuck you. And before you say, "Nonsense, ego drives us to be great," consider the word's meaning. Ambition, not ego, drives us to be great. Ambition's sharp - it gets you a stack of hundred dollar chips at the blackjack table. Ego gets drunk, hits on 16 and pisses it all away. Ego's malignant pride, ambition's mildly retarded cousin, and all pride's known for is coming before a fall. When you get up every morning, look in the mirror and say this to yourself: "There will always be millions of people richer, smarter, more handsome and swinging much bigger dicks than me." Worst case scenario, you'll wind up more self-actualized than 95% of society. Best case scenario, you'll be saying it one morning and realize it isn't true anymore. Well, at least not all of it. You'll still be hung like a toddler.

## **21. Beware of people selling afterlives.**

No discussion of ego would be complete without touching on our greatest egomania - the perception we're all somehow "special," sacred, on a mission predestined by God... A God who's all knowing and omni-present, so involved and invested in us he's obsessed with who we fuck, whether we eat pork or if we're daydreaming about screwing the neighbor's wife. And yet he's never been seen or engaged by anyone - never stopped in at the corner deli for coffee or appeared in the bathroom to scold us for masturbating. And he can only be understood or engaged via "faith," a device through which rejection of the overwhelming lack of evidence of something somehow provides a stronger "intangible" proof of the thing. I don't know if God does or doesn't exist, but I do know a gimmick when I see it, and the "faith" sold by religion is a pure, Grade A gimmickry. If I told you a band of magical trolls live in your basement, but that you'll never be able to see or engage them - never observe any evidence of their existence but an ancient book of contradictory, fantastic fables professing to describe the history of their rich civilization under your stairs - would you believe me? Build a shrine or home for them next to the washing machine, something along the lines of the Keebler Elves' tree house or the Hobbits' Shire?<sup>7</sup> You'd thrown me out of your house is what you'd do.

But that's basically "faith" - collective, tribally-reinforced suspension of disbelief... And the oddest thing is, it's utterly unnecessary. Devout or non-believer, the golden rule's still the same: Don't be an asshole. If you need the balsa wood artifice of organized religion to remind you to treat people as you'd want to be treated, you don't need prayer. You need a fucking psychiatrist. Make nice with the pious as much as you need to for business purposes, but never get too close. As pleasant as they might be, as comforting as the pitch sounds, anyone fixated on the "afterlife" is nuts. There's more than enough astonishing, amazing shit around us right here to keep a sensible, inquisitive mind busy.

...

And faith's about as good a segue as I'm going to find to wind this thing down. Because if I can leave you with one thought tying this all together, it's to never buy into in any movement or creed whole hog... No awareness campaign, revolution, organization or corporation. Take the best

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<sup>6</sup> At one point, the man kept his piano in a giant sandbox in his living room.

<sup>7</sup> I'm fully aware of the disregard for distinctive species on exhibit here. And the fact that the Keeblers aren't real elves.

pieces of every ideology you see and cobble together your own. Trust your instincts, your logic, what you discern from experience. Never trust another's formula.

Why? Because most of the systems you're going to see out there in the work world are fiction, fantasy, doublespeak. Endless collections of white lies devoted to nothing more than keeping their own gears rolling. Some small and some enormous, some harmless, others egregious, all of them honed to optimal effectiveness by hundreds of generations before us recognizing the central dueling truths of humanity:

1. Vonnegut was right: "We are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you different."
2. If people started admitting that, no one would cut the grass, the bridges would be left to collapse, and all the roads to crack. Nobody'd get fresh eggs.

So we allow ourselves to believe, at least superficially, overtly, that everything everybody does is somehow intrinsically important. That the mountains of paperwork we produce every day, the emails we exchange and conference calls we daydream through are more than an endless series of one act plays the hierarchies and bureaucracies require us to put on in exchange for currency. Something to keep us busy, because, well, there's a lot of us, and we need something to do with our time... a framework in which we can pretend to compete for resources politely.

And this is where I'm supposed to tell you to follow your passions, to find *significant* work. But knowing what I know I can't. Because here's the thing... Only a few of you - five, maybe ten percent - are going to get jobs doing something you love. The rest work solely for money. But that doesn't mean you're screwed, that you'll live an utterly pointless life. It's all in how you approach the reality of your situation.

You're going to run into endless varieties of people in the work world, but generally, broadly speaking, they break down into two simple groups - the people who live in the system they're handed, and the people who *use* it.

The corporation you'll work in will be an elegant, amazing machine, at least on the surface. A crowd of otherwise unrelated minds working in concert on dozens of fronts, hundreds of discrete projects, all directed toward a single goal. The sheer organization of the thing will seem mind-boggling, let alone that it manages to churn profit, pay all of its moving parts and repeat that process every single day simply to remain alive. It'll also be a massive joke, a hideous wreck of neuroses and incompetence no rational human would ever be involved with if he didn't need the cash. A mosh pit of political infighting, backbiting and jockeying by the terminally ambitious... An endless battle for the CEO slot - for someone to feel like he's "made it" until he screws up and the hordes pinning for his job kiss him off as the Senate did Caesar.

And that's why I'm telling you here, Don't be the punch-line in that joke. Never make the work your life. See it for what it is - a game, a play... a stage where you're just an actor. A small piece of your much broader existence, where you collect the money you use in your actual life.

When you view the job with that clarity, two things happen. First, you're confident. A man who sees the forest doesn't get hung up on making decisions about one tree or another, and being able

to make decisions quickly is fifty percent of getting ahead.<sup>8</sup> Second, and far more importantly, when you treat the office like a game, you keep perspective on what really matters. You save your actual personality and real energy - the You that counts (as opposed to the "work clone" that'll inevitably start showing up at your desk after a few years) - for your family and your friends. In the end they're all you have. Fuck up that part of your life and you're Dead. A thousand successes in your career will never make up the difference.

People will tell you having a split personality is bad. Bullshit. In a corporate world, it's the only healthy existence. A man who lives for the office lives and dies a fiction. And he'll never get as far as he deserves to because no one in charge will respect him. "Bob's a hard worker, but he doesn't 'get it,'" they'll half snicker, never expounding as to what. There's power in seeing beyond, in caring less than most. You'll find yourself in on the joke, rather than one of the punch-lines.

~~Pass~~ this around. People who read this tend to buy "Happy Hour is for Amateurs." I don't want to work. Rather try to live off royalties or a TV deal or something.  
Thanks for reading  
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<sup>8</sup> Ever listen to that harried co-worker complaining about how hard she's working and how little some other worker is doing? The complainer's always ineffective, paranoid and stuck on some detail. She's actually mad at herself. She wishes she could be as calm as the person she's complaining about, but that's never going to happen. Why? Because she takes the job way too seriously. Paperwork isn't cardiac surgery. If you think you've got to get everything done immediately and perfectly, you're never going to get ahead. Half of climbing the ladder is learning to do the projects that matter and ignoring the assignments management will never ask you about. Try to do it all and you'll burn out, and the burnt get fired twice as frequently as the lazy.