

“25 Random Things About You”

Commencement address

Long Island University

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President Steinberg, Chancellor Mullarkey, Provost Forestell, honored guests; deans and faculty; family and supporters; and above all members of the Long Island University class of 2009 ... congratulations.

And Happy Mother's Day.

I start by saying that I am at a loss for words at this honor. The phrase “humbly grateful” seems puny in describing what I'm feeling.

Even though you have met all the requirements to become graduates of this splendid institution, I have two last assignments for you. The first is to ask the members of the Class of 2009 to stand up ... please... turn and wave your thanks ... and love ... to your parents and other supporters who have been on this road with you.

The second assignment is to write a text message now ... I know you've all got your cell phones still turned on ... and send a note of thanks to your favorite staff member at the University with extra credit to those who give a specific reason why that faculty member is special to you.

While those text messages may be fleeting, my biggest challenge today is to give you a message that will endure on your hard drive ... even if it crashes during your celebrations later today. I thought I would start with reasons you have to hope, especially those of you who might not have completely figured out what the next step in your life will be.

You can take heart from my own story. When I got my degree here in 1977, there is no way I could have envisioned a path that 32 years later would have had me running a research organization that looks at how people use the internet and cell phones.

The year I got my degree, the Crazy Eddie's at Roosevelt Field did not stock items called personal computers. They were still being hand-assembled by geeks in California.

Neither did Crazy Eddie's carry any of the new mobile telephones that were just coming into the commercial market in Japan.

Then there is the real tomorrow-land that I could not have imagined. In 1977, small computer networks run over phone wires were about 7 years into the future....

A lovely string of computer code called the World Wide Web was still 12 years over the horizon.

... instant messaging was 19 years off

... iPods, 25 years

... MySpace, 26 years

..... and ... for the 1977 me ... YouTube was 29 years into the unknown.

I point all this out in order to highlight the truth I learned from the great rhythm and blues philosopher, Sam Cooke... "Change is Gonna Come."

You will see a lot of it, but can't anticipate much of it. So ... what are you gonna do about that?

I thought I would use as the structure for this talk ... an idea that developed online this past winter. It became popular in the notes section of Facebook for users to post "25 Random Things About Me" and share the notes in their newsfeeds, inviting Facebook friends to create their own factoids.

So, I want to rip off that idea and tell you "25 Random Things About You" ... and think about how they might help you march into your future.

Here we go ...

Random Thing About YOU Number 1) Your generation is bigger¹ and **number 2** more racially and ethnically diverse² than any generation in American history ... including Baby Boomers. When you add in the likely immigration that is yet to come, your generation could eventually approach 100 million people, compared with the 75 million or so who are Boomers.

There are those who worry that a more diverse population poses cultural problems for the country. But thanks to the fact ... **Random Thing number 3** ... that you are the most aggressive and eager social networkers in history,³ this diversity could work out really well for you.

There is abundant medical and sociological research showing that people with big, diverse social networks are healthier, happier, and better off economically than those with small and homogeneous networks.

So, you just have to follow your own instincts to reap the advantages of networking ... because you ... college-educated Millennials ... are the most racially and socially tolerant cohort in history.⁴ Those are **Random Things 4 and 5.**

So, keep cultivating new friends even as you stay in touch with the buddies you made here. You get EXTRA CREDIT if they have different color skin, speak a different language, were born in a different generation, or come from a different socio-economic class.

And I'll make that extra-credit angle **Random Thing No. 6** about you. Your generation is more achievement-oriented, grade-conscious, and rule-observing than your parents' or grandparents' generation.⁵ You

¹ See http://www.newpolitics.net/node/360?full_report=1

² See <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2007/NewGenerationGap.aspx>

³ See <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Adults-and-Social-Network-Websites.aspx> and <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Teens-and-Social-Media.aspx>

⁴ See <http://people-press.org/report/300/a-portrait-of-generation-next> and Andrew Kohut's convocation remarks, February 22, 2009.

⁵ Howe, Neil, William Strauss, and R.J. Matson, *Millennials Rising: The Next Generation*, Vintage Press, 2000

already get extra credit for having gotten into less trouble with the law than your predecessors and having experienced fewer social and emotional problems ... (Those are Random Things 7, 8, and 9).⁶ Moreover, there are a lot more of you entering and graduating from college than was the case when your elders were your age⁷ ... Thing 10.

Now, let's circle back to the social networks stuff for a minute. You seem to have struck a really nice balance in your social networks between what sociologists call "strong ties" (your family and friends who would do anything for you) and your "weak ties" (the people you have a looser connection to).

Random Thing 11 is that you are more likely than your elders to say your parents, a teacher or a mentor is your role model.⁸ Clearly, you honor your "strong ties" in a lovely, traditional way.

At the same time, you serve your "weak ties" by performing volunteer activities at staggering rates,⁹ which is Random Thing 12 ... Perhaps that's because you were the first generation to have "community service" requirements imposed on you by most of your school districts.... Thing 13.

Whatever the reason, you have taken the call to civic engagement seriously and last year translated it into record-shattering voting numbers in the election¹⁰ ... that's 14.

Most surprising to us Baby Boomers is that you showed us what a REAL generation gap looks like. Your disproportionate support for Barack Obama created the largest disparity in voting between young voters and others in the history of modern polling.¹¹ That's Random Thing 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3955/is_200404/ai_n9383887/

⁸ See <http://people-press.org/report/300/a-portrait-of-generation-next>

⁹ Zukin, Cliff, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolia, Krista Jenkins and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*, Oxford University Press. 2006

¹⁰ See http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_youth_Voting_2008.pdf

¹¹ See <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1031/young-voters-in-the-2008-election>

Numbers 16-23 all relate to technology. You and your peers are much more likely than your elders to:

- 16) own gaming consoles and play video games
- 17) text message
- 18) have an MP3 player like an iPod and download music
- 19) use instant messaging
- 20) create an avatar and interact with others in virtual worlds
- 21) upload pictures and videos to the internet
- 22) blog
- 23) and participate in online social networks¹²

And that leads me to **Random Thing 24**: You are record-breaking multi-taskers as you toggle back and forth between all the screens in your life.¹³

I have a friend named Linda Stone who worries about this: She thinks you live your lives in a state of “continuous partial attention” and she believes this adds to your stress levels because you are always “on alert” and interrupt-able.

I confess to being worried about another symptom of frenzied multi-tasking: Is all of this connectivity making it harder for you to enjoy simply being **by** yourself ... and thinking quietly **for** yourself?

The “vaccine” for continuous partial attention and too-much-connectedness is developing an appreciation for solitude and how it can center you and help you enjoy the company of yourself.

Unplug and try it every once in awhile, you might like it.

Still, even as I hope that you cultivate a taste for quiet and contemplation, there is no denying the magic many of you make when you share your digital stories and creations.

¹² See <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Generations-Online-in-2009.aspx>

¹³ See <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia030905nr.cfm>

The 25th Random Thing about you is that you are giving birth to a new kind of culture that is more vibrant because it has led to

- an explosion of new voices
- fresh forms of music
- novel kinds of language
- varied pathways to community-building
- different kinds of ethics and etiquette
- and ... far-out – sometimes pretty twisted – forms of humor.

I hope as you are uploading your creations and leaving behind some large digital footprints, you are conscious that this material all becomes part of the gospel of you ... visible and inviting judgment from others. A gospel need not be religious. It used to mean a “good tale.”

So, by all means, use these technologies to create good tales and grand gospels of you.

And please take time to upload a couple of reminders about THIS day at THIS place.

Your gospel ... and this university's ... are now linked. I hope you cherish the connection as much as we all cherish you.

Thank you and congratulations.