

University of Iowa Honors Program 2020 Virtual Commendation Address

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Transcribed by Gabrielle Meis

**David L. Gould, Visiting Associate Professor, Public Policy Center:**

Only humans tell stories. They recall the things that happen to us, and how we feel when they do. They allow us to inhabit the lives of others and then bring that understanding back to ourselves. And they offer us the space to build a narrative that affords our life meaning. When we share our stories with one another, we are no longer alone. Storytelling is at the core of my teaching, and over the years, authors, chefs, magicians, activists, athletes, and CEOs alike have passed through packed lecture halls to urge undergraduates to look for the things that make them come alive and then, trust them to shape their future.

One of my most memorable teaching experiences was when actor Ashton Kutcher stopped by for a visit. I kept it as a surprise to the class, and when he walked into the room, there was a buzz of excitement that I have been trying to duplicate ever since. Ashton spoke about his small town upbringing and the divorce of his parents. He shared the stories of the high school arrests that confined him to Johnson County and the big break that took him to New York.

But there was one moment, in particular, that I have carried with me ever since--when Ashton asked my students to raise their hands to a series of questions. *How many of you think you can be a firefighter? How many of you can picture yourself as a scientist? An artist? An engineer? A teacher?* With each inquiry, only a scattering of hands would go up. When Ashton asked, *how many of you believe you can be the president of the United States?* there was but one outstretched arm. *Why? Why?* implored Ashton, *especially when you are at a point in your lives when everything is still possible?*

I wish you could have been there, but alas, that story was for a different group and another time. You will need to collect your own moments, but with your permission, I would like to give you a running start. I introduce you to my friend, Ashton.

**Ashton Kutcher, Actor and Entrepreneur:**

You're on the clock. What's your plan?

I had a plan. My plan was probably a lot like yours. Actually, I had a plan of sitting exactly where you are today. Well, not exactly, I mean technically I had an actual graduation ceremony and stuff. I was hoping to get a biochemical engineering degree. I was going to become a geneticist, go work at a company, make a decent six-figure salary, move up over time, buy a house, get married (once), have some kids, settle down, and probably retire a little bit early. It was a really

solid, solid plan. The only thing that provided me with an opportunity to be where I am today was a willingness to throw out the master plan.

Now, I didn't throw out the hard work. I didn't throw out the morals. I didn't throw out my goals. I didn't throw out my ambition, my drive, my experience. I just threw out the master plan. I'm not saying you're going to have to do that, but I'm saying having a willingness to do that, goes a long way.

You don't *ever* have to know what you want to be when you grow up. The truth is, even if you think you know who you are right now, you're probably wrong. You're not who everyone else thinks that you are. In fact, you're probably not who you think you are. And your life will definitely not go as planned. I ended up going into modeling, then I was an actor. Then, I was a producer, then I acted some more. Then I started reality tv shows, then I became a venture capitalist and a philanthropist. I was married twice, had kids later. The whole thing was backward to what the master plan was. Life will throw you some crazy, crazy curveballs. It will send you opportunities and directions you couldn't even imagine, and if you got the *plan* locked in, you might just miss the opportunities.

Here's the good news: there are very few choices you're going to make in your life that are permanent. So, try things. Try all kinds of things, and always be in pursuit of the better you. Now, there are some plans that are worth making. Plan on surrounding yourself with people that disagree with you, without trying to convince them that they're wrong so that you can be right. The people I disagreed with when I was younger got a lot smarter when I got older. I'm not saying they got right, but I'm saying in many cases--some cases, they get right-- but in many cases, in most cases, the justification behind their reasoning became a lot more intelligent.

Plan on meeting as many people as you can because they come in all shapes, sizes, ideas, backgrounds, and we become the average of the ten people we spend the most amount of time with in our life. But as you meet people, take your time in finding generous, thoughtful, caring people to share your life and work with, and then, once you find them, give them all you got. Give them everything because the only things that are worth anything in this life are the things that you can share.

Start to develop your plan around your moral foundation and your purpose, but never stop developing it. Figure out what you will do. What you won't do, and most importantly, what you're doing it for. Review and revise it as life washes over you and augments your framework and assumptions for how the world works. Because it will change, I promise you.

Plan on working hard. There's just no replacement for hard work. You'll read in the news and hear about people who had these overnight success stories. Trust me, everything you read in the news is an anomaly, that's why it's news. If it happened every day, it wouldn't be news.

Most of the people I know who are successful in this world got there the old-fashioned way. Chances are, you will too.

Plan on weird shit happening. I don't know how many people say 'shit' in commencement things--I just said it--but just plan on having weird shit happen. Right now, I'm in quarantine in California, you don't have a graduation. The world's going to throw curveballs, it's just going to happen that way. So plan on it happening, and as a part of that plan, come up with big, giant, ambitious ideas because the world needs them. But, a word of caution: ideas are cheap, execution is expensive, so hold your ideas until you're ready to defend them. And be ready for people to try to tear you down. Sometimes they will, and it hurts. That's why knowing what you're doing it for matters. It goes back to that purpose piece; it's really, really important.

Plan on time becoming your most valuable asset because I can promise you that it will. No matter what endeavor you pursue, you're going to discover that your partners and your bosses are going to be seeking leverage. The greatest leverage of all is time. As you get older, you're going to realize the true supply-demand curve of time, and you'll know it's only becoming a more limited supply and the demand is only becoming greater.

The clock starts now. What's your plan?

**Congratulations Class of 2020!**