

Chancellor Dynes, Provost Bond, Revelle college faculty, parents and family and especially you Revelle College Graduating Seniors, Congratulations! It's great to see you here today. You know, I graduated from Revelle College myself, more than 30 years ago. I didn't march then, so I appreciate you guys letting me crash your party today. I'm delighted to be a part of your graduation ceremony.

I'm here to see you off. To celebrate your accomplishment. This is a ritual marking a change in status and in life phase. I represent the teachers and mentors you have had while at UCSD. We hope that you learned while you were here. We hope that learning will continue for your entire lifetime.

We are celebrating your accomplishments of the past 4 years, OK for some of you it was much longer than that. I took almost 5 years to graduate, but I was busy with important things – being a founding member of the UCSD surf club and competing on the surf team.

Today we look back and recognize that by completing a degree at Revelle College you have done something special. Something worthy of note. Something you, and your family can be proud of.

We also look forward today, because graduation is both an ending and a new beginning. But looking forward is hard. No one knows what the future will bring.

Knowing why you showed up

The well-known American filmmaker and comedian, Woody Allen, said that 80% of life is just showing up. I think what he means is that when you step into a role in the social world, the organization of the situation, other people's expectations and your mere physical presence combine to make up 80% of your perceived performance. It's an insightful observation about life.

As an example, of Allen's law, consider what you are doing right now. Your role this afternoon is to be "the college graduate." You've got the cap and gown, the field is set with chairs, your mentors are seated on the stage, friends and family are all primed to make this a joyous and proud day for you. So you show up. Your head holds up the cap, and your shoulders hold up the gown, and voila! You are the graduate. That's cool. You would have to be pretty far out of it to mess up today. So today, perhaps for you, Allen's law applies. But when we look ahead to what awaits you in the coming years, the situation changes. Something like Allen's law still holds, but I think Allen got the percentages all wrong. About 20% of life is just showing up. 80% is knowing why you showed up.

I showed up today because I was invited on the recommendation of some of you Revelle students. To be asked to speak at the commencement for one's alma mater is a rare privilege. I am honored by the invitation and hope I can do something for you in return. I also showed up because my old friend Tom Bond invited me. I wanted to do something nice for him on the occasion of his retirement from the university. Congratulations Tom!

I know the expectation is that the provost will round up some old guy and put him out here to give advice on life. Maybe I seem like a good choice because I was once just where you are now – leaving Revelle College. Actually, I was not exactly where you are now. When I graduated in 1971, this field was a vegetable garden operated by a hippie commune that lived in the trees over there. Since I got out of Revelle ahead of you, you could say that I have scouted the road ahead. But I'm so far ahead that the information I can give you based on my own experience is pretty far out of date.

Better information about what you can expect comes from those who graduated recently.

I recently got a letter from a former student who now has a job at Sun Microsystems as an interface designer. He sent me the url for the Amazon.com listing for his new book "Sunfire system design and configuration guide." With a snappy title like that, it is no wonder it has a higher sales rank on Amazon.com than some of my books. As faculty we know this is going to happen. You will take our places. Just this year I heard from two former students who just got faculty positions at major universities, and both recently became mothers as well.

You might not realize this but your professors love hearing from students they have mentored.

If you have interacted much with Provost Bond, you know he is a good-natured fellow. You might be led to think that being Provost is a fun job. And at times it is. But like all jobs, there are times where one works hard for something worthwhile, but that something just never happens. On days like that the job can be discouraging. Tom Bond once confided to me that he keeps a box of letters from former students under his desk. When things get really frustrating in his job, he pulls out the box and reads a few of these letters. That always reminds him why he showed up, and invariably makes him feel a lot better. Make a note now to write to a former professor about what's up with you sometime in the coming five years.

As I began to reflect on my own career and what I have learned, and how I could use my experience to advise you, I became worried that I didn't have much to say. Then I discovered that I do have one solid piece of advice. It is this. Be lucky.

I know that's not much help. Expensive and trendy self-improvement seminars like to teach that luck happens when preparation meets opportunity. You can see that in this form the advice gives you more leverage on the problem than the suggestion to just be lucky. You can't do much about luck directly, but you can be prepared. Stated that way, you recognize the advice as something you already knew from your boy- or girl-scout years. So you can skip the seminar and save your money. Keep doing stuff. Everything you do teaches you something. Everything you learn prepares you for something else. Learning is your best investment in yourself.

You are all such good students. You had to be good to get into UCSD, and you had to be even better to get out! You already have a head start on good fortune. You are already part of a great community.

Here is an observation. Whatever you do, you will not do it alone. If you go into science, or the arts, or business, you will find that it is nearly impossible to excel without having really talented people around you, including good critics. When you were younger, your parents probably told you to be careful about who you hang out with. They were right about that when you were in high school, and that advice only gets more important as you proceed through life. Opportunities often present themselves via social relationships. Build good ones.

I'm unapologetically idealistic. I believe that each of us who has the ability to make a contribution to the betterment of our world, also has the responsibility to make a contribution. At another college, I would not bother to say these things. But this is Revelle College. The first and best college at UCSD. Our college is named for Roger Revelle, a great scientist who addressed many important issues including the link between carbon dioxide emissions and global climate.

Many people have invested a lot in you. Some of those investors are here today: Your parents, your teachers. Don't forget the taxpayers of the state of California. No pressure kids, but we are expecting something of you.

In order to make a contribution, you don't have to be the smartest person on earth. Each of you is already plenty smart. But you do have to know what you are doing. You have to know why you showed up. I

have seen lots of brilliant people blow huge opportunities by just showing up places without a clear idea of why they showed up. Lacking a clear conception what can be accomplished and what you want, you will drift while others steer.

So what's your contribution going to be? Must you choose? Yes, you must. And here is where the advice gets tricky. On the one hand, as you move along in your careers, you will encounter an increasing number of really interesting things to get involved in. I realized some time ago, that no matter how long I live, there will always be many more worthwhile and interesting things to learn than I will have time for in one lifetime. So choice is necessary. You must choose to explore some paths and that means you must choose to ignore others.

Choose carefully, and commit fully. Choose to fit your strengths and your passions. The people I know who really make a difference find what they do so interesting that they can think about it 24-7.

So far so good, but here comes the contradictory part. You must also be flexible. I can illustrate this with my own career. As an undergrad, I had three different majors, physics, literature, and anthropology. Tom Bond likes to show me to freshmen to convince them they don't need to know their life's path when they enter college. You don't need to know today either. All of my degrees are in Anthropology, but since graduating I have been employed as a Personnel Research Psychologist, a Human Factors Specialist, and a Cognitive Scientist.

Last week I got a letter from another former student. What was interesting about this student is that I had helped her make the decision to change majors. When she started taking classes from me, she was not happy in her major and wanted to change to Cognitive Science. She was thinking about why she showed up. Her family had other ideas. But she changed major anyway. She completed her degree, and now has surprised us all by going to medical school. Be flexible.

I believe I got into grad school by luck. I had planned to join the Peace Corps with the intention to do some good in the world directly with my bare hands, but I was flexible. When a slot in grad school unexpectedly opened up, I jumped in.

In graduate school, I struggled for a while until I figured out a way to answer questions that really mattered to me. Do people in other cultures – particularly technologically simple cultures – think the same way we do? Once I had this question, I committed fully to finding a way to answer it., I took my wife (A Muir

College graduate) along to the south pacific and we spent 18 months in a village on a tiny island in the Trobriand Island group of Papua New Guinea. We learned the language and immersed ourselves in the culture and life of the village. I wrote a thesis (later a book) showing that the arguments presented in public litigation in the Trobriand islands contains the same structures of logical inference as are found in our own discourse (legal or not).

Curiosity took us to Papua New Guinea, but our stay there was sustained by two other aspects that make contributions possible, perseverance and a spirit of adventure. It was an experiential adventure (exotic people, swaying palm trees, white sand beaches, sailing canoes on a tropical ocean) and an intellectual adventure (approaching an old question in a new way). It was also an enormous trial (mosquitoes, hunger, disease, culture shock, physical hardship). But we resisted the temptation to give up and by the time we came home, we were both transformed by the experience.

When I finished grad school, I got lucky and got a post-doc. Then my luck seemed to run out. I could not find an academic job.

I was flexible. I ended up working for the US Navy. Now working for the Navy came as a shock to me. After having grown up on this University of California campus during the turmoil of the 1960s, to find myself with a security clearance, working behind a barbed wire fence was a challenge to my personal identity. But I found that I had access to incredible resources and had once again fallen in with some really smart people. I designed and implemented a navigation training system that became the standard on all ships in the fleet and had perhaps the most important scientific insight of my life while working there. I also made observations on ships, wrote reports that I subsequently could not read (security clearance not high enough), and got strapped into an airplane and shot off the deck of an aircraft carrier by steam catapult – now there's an adrenaline rush!

Another stroke of luck (preparation plus opportunity) brought me back to UCSD in 1985. I was hoping to get an appointment as a researcher here, but my file seemed to be caught in a bureaucratic eddy and was making no progress through the system. Then, I was notified that I would be receiving a MacArthur Fellowship, the so called “genius grant”. What great luck! As if by magic, my appointment was processed in a day so that when the Foundation press release appeared the next day, UCSD could claim that three of that year's recipients were “at UCSD”.

If you are like me, the following is the most difficult advice. Believe in yourself. The MacArthur award helped most by giving public validation to my earlier unconventional ideas. When it seemed that everyone was telling me that I was nuts, I pushed ahead because I felt I knew where to go.

In the late 1980s, one of my navy contacts moved to NASA and presented me with a new opportunity. So I began a new research project, this one on how pilots of state-of-the-art computerized commercial airliners understand what the automation is doing. I'm still working on this project now. For fifteen years I have been designing cockpit procedures, flight instruments, and training programs all in the interest of improving aviation safety. Along the way, I've also not only become a pilot, I have learned to fly jet airplanes. This illustrates one of my guiding principles, that there is no set limit on the amount of fun I am willing to have in the name of science.

Let's review.

Call Home – tell us what you are doing.

Hang out with good people.

Commit to what you are doing, but be flexible and open to unusual ways to do it.

Be curious and skeptical.

Believe in yourself.

Have a complete life.

Recognize that you are already lucky.

Most important of all, when you show up somewhere, know why you showed up.

Class of 2003, as you launch from Revelle College I wish you as much fun, adventure, and as much LUCK as I have had.

Congratulations to you all!