

What to Do in College

**Presented to the
University of Hawaii Freshman Orientation Camp
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Good afternoon! It is a great pleasure to be here today, to participate in the 1986 Freshman Orientation Camp. I congratulate you all on being here, to think about who you are, what opportunities are available to you at your university, what state issues will affect you, and what global issues should concern you. The next few years will be very important to your personal growth and long-term happiness, so it is good to take some time to think about those years before classes begin.

You Are Rich in Possibilities

All of you are rich. You are rich in possibilities. You are rich in potential. You have time to explore yourself and others and the world around you. You have time to learn who you are, and who others are, and what the world is. In every direction, you have opportunities, and you have the time to try them out. You are in a candy store, and you can buy whatever you want. Possibilities! Opportunities! You are in a wonderful situation.

You will be rich in possibilities and potential all your lives, but you may never be as rich as you are now. At this moment you are setting out on your own, with few commitments, few responsibilities, and a long future ahead of you. You can squander it all, or make good use of it. Today I want to talk about how to make good use of it. I am here to tell you what to do in college.

Some of what I have to say may be obvious and make sense to you immediately. Some of what I have to say may make more sense in four years, or in ten years, or in twenty years—when you are my age. Some of it may *never* make sense. You don't have to agree with what I have to say. That's okay. I'd just like you to think about it. I'm going to give you the best advice I can give. What you do with it is up to you.

There are two curriculums in college. The first has to do with subjects and skills and your future job. The second has to do with values, philosophies,

character, and personality. The first is the official purpose of college; the second is the meaning of your life.

Subjects to Explore

Officially, you are going to college to learn *subjects*. The world is not really divided into subjects, but the course catalogue is, so you'll be studying subjects. I'd like to suggest some subjects which you should address, regardless of your career plans. They are subjects which affect all of us as human beings. They are subjects which form the framework of our thought as we live our daily lives.

These subjects are grouped around some basic questions. First, what is the natural environment like? What are atoms and molecules and elements? What are plants and animals? How does the planet's environment work? How do the birds and bees and grass and trees relate to each other and to humans? Do we really know? Why is there DDT in the tissues of penguins in the Antarctic?

I suggest you read some biology, botany, and ecology asking yourself these questions.

Second, what is a human being? What kind of organism are we? Why do we behave the way we do? How much of our behavior is determined by genetics, and how much by our experience in our environment? Or to use the popular phrase, how much is nature, and how much is nurture? Is each of us just a material body, or do we have a mind— a spirit— which is not material? If we have a spiritual life, what kind of life should it be? What are the spiritual goals of human beings? What do we believe?

I suggest you read some psychology, human biology, sociobiology, philosophy, and religion asking yourself these questions.

Third, what are human societies like? How do humans behave as a group? How do we manage our organizations? How do human beings make political decisions? How do humans organize their economies, distributing goods and services? Do we all behave much the same, or quite differently? What does this say about the limits of human society, and the limits of our future together?

I suggest you read some sociology, cultural anthropology, economics, political science and history asking yourself these questions.

Fourth, what are the aspirations of human beings? What are our hopes and fears, our delights and depressions? How do we express them?

I suggest you read literature, study art, learn music, enjoy dance.

Fifth, what kind of future do we want? How can we shape it? What would utopia look like? Is it possible? What is our future in the universe? Is there life on other planets? What would happen if we discovered alien creatures? What would happen if they visited us?

I suggest you read astronomy, science fiction, and books about the future asking yourself these questions.

These may be things you study in formal courses, or things you discuss with fellow students and friends, or things you read and do on your own. It doesn't matter. What matters is that you hunger for knowledge about these things. What matters is that you develop a sense of wonder about the world, a curiosity about it, a deep abiding interest in it, a fascination for all its exciting dimensions. This will help you to formulate and re-formulate your own philosophy or attitude toward life.

I might add, here, that there are two specific subjects which deserve special consideration on your part. One is foreign languages. If you have not already done so, I highly recommend that you pursue proficiency in a foreign language. First of all, a foreign language can be fun and useful. More important, it is the only way to really understand another culture, its values, and its way of thinking. The appreciation of another culture is an important experience which can add great depth to your understanding of the human condition. You can stand outside and appreciate many things about a culture, but language is the only door that leads inside.

Second, let me mention computers. I am not good with computers myself, but I am working on it. During the coming years, the use of computers will become simpler and simpler, and we will all have to know less and less about them to use them. Even so, computers are having, and will continue to have, such profound impact on our technology and the management of our daily lives that it is important that you understand the fundamentals of their operation.

Choosing a Career

It is hard to study subjects and develop skills without thinking about your career. There is life after college— what are you going to do with it? How can you prepare for it?

You are probably already forming your life plans. You are probably already making some decisions. Let me make a recommendation. Let me recommend that you go where your life will make a difference. This is an idea which crops up from time to time in the speeches of Nobel Prize winners: somebody encouraged them to devote their lives to a problem or question which would really make a difference if it could be solved or answered.

My own notion, which I modestly call the Keith Axiom, is “find a vacuum and fill it.” The corollary is that “even a particle can fill a vacuum.” Find a need that no one else is filling, and go for it. It could be in the home, in business, in government, in religion, in art, in science— wherever. Experience the pleasure and satisfaction of having made a decisive contribution.

If you really want to make a contribution, work on the big problems. What are the big problems? War, starvation, and disease are big problems.

There are 50,000 nuclear warheads in the world, capable of blowing us all up, many times over, and ending all life on this planet forever. I can't think of a bigger challenge than the challenge of peace— the coordinated, negotiated reduction of arms, or the formation of a world government, or both.

What about poverty? There are hundreds of millions of people starving in the world. At the same time, food is rotting in warehouses. Why? How do we get the food to the people? Why aren't they getting it now? What are the short-term obstacles? What are the long-term solutions?

People are dying of many diseases. Most of the ancient diseases have been controlled or defeated, but new ones arise. What about cancer? What about heart disease? What about AIDS? Millions of people are dying because we don't have the answers. What do we need to do to find the answers? Who will do it?

There are plenty of important things to devote one's life to. Why not pick the really big ones?

Let me give you some more advice. If you are interested in a certain job or career, try to get some exposure to that job or career before you go too far down the path in that direction. Often, we are attracted to a job or career because it is prestigious, or it pays well, or it has the kind of image we want. But a job should be more than that—it should be a deep source of meaning and satisfaction, an activity which draws the best out of you and stimulates you toward continued personal growth. There has to be something behind the prestige and the pay and the image, and that something has to be you—who you really are, and what really makes you happy.

Many jobs use the same kinds of skills in terms of working with people and managing resources. But even these jobs have different demands and rewards. Before you commit yourself to a subject and a graduate school or training program, you might get a summer job or part-time job in your area of interest. If you want to be a doctor, try to get some experience in a doctor's office or hospital. If you want to go into business, try to get some experience with a company. If you want to go into government, try to become an intern in a government agency.

Whatever the job or career is, find people who are doing it, and see what it's like for them. Talk to them, watch them, and learn about the daily joys, sorrows, frustrations, and rewards. You may decide that the prestige, pay, and image of a particular job are great, but the job really isn't for you.

Growing Up

So far we have talked about subjects and careers. Subjects and careers are the first curriculum, the official purpose of college. Now it is time to talk about the other curriculum, the unofficial one, the one which is far more important. While you are taking courses and studying subjects, you must also grow up, adopt values and a philosophy, and discover the meaning of life.

The first thing you can do in college is to grow up. I don't mean that in a patronizing way. It's terribly important, and it takes a long time.

Growing up is hard work. Growing up *must* be difficult, because so many people do it *badly*! I'm still working on it myself.

By growing up, I mean achieving a sense of balance and confidence, a sense of perspective and responsibility. This may mean putting yourself first, for a few years. By that I don't mean being selfish or pushy, I mean that you have to learn

about yourself, and how to take care of yourself. If you can't take care of yourself, you'll be a burden all your life on your friends, your family, and society. If you don't have your own inner strength and harmony, you'll be a continual drain on the strength and harmony of others.

The goal is to be a *source* of strength and harmony, not somebody who leans on others as one leans on crutches, not somebody who is a great psychological vacuum cleaner sucking up other people's time and attention. The goal is to become a giving person. You have to have something to give. Most of us want to give ourselves. It takes a little time— and is *worth* a little time— to develop who we are. So we have to pay attention to growing up.

Strength and harmony come from learning what there is, and how you relate to it. What does that mean? It means learning how to influence your environment in the way you wish. It means knowing how your thoughts and abilities relate to those of other people. It means knowing the impact that your words and deeds have on other people. It means knowing how you can maximize your potential by focusing on the things you do best, and how you can maximize your pleasure by focusing on the things you enjoy most. It means trying and failing, and getting hurt, but learning that you are still alive, and can go forward again. It means trying and succeeding, for reasons which surprise you, and learning that you have potential or ability that you hadn't noticed before. It means studying and testing yourself and the world, with your eyes and ears, your heart and mind, in first person.

In this regard, I highly recommend that you participate in what are usually called “extra-curricular activities”— student government, sports, service clubs, debate clubs, and the like. Many educators believe that academic subjects *are* the curriculum, and everything else is “extra,” so these activities are called “extra-curricular.” I don't agree. I believe that extra-curricular activities can be far more important to your future happiness and success than any academic subject.

What you can learn in extra-curricular activities is how to live and work with other people. You can learn human relations skills. You can learn how to cooperate to achieve joint goals. You can learn how to speak and write and organize to get things done. You can learn the skills of a good citizen. And while you are doing it, you can learn self-discipline, responsibility, and accountability.

These are things that you will use every day for the rest of your life. Long after you have forgotten the length of the Amazon River, the role of microbes, and

Plato's *Republic*, you will still remember what you learned from your extra-curricular activities. If you want to grow up, and learn about yourself and others, extra-curricular activities are not "extra"—they are fundamental.

Information and Philosophy

One of the problems with growing up is deciding what or whom to believe. There are always contradictory facts; there are always sincere, respectable people who disagree about the facts. You will learn that facts do *not* always speak for themselves. You will learn that more and more information may *not* help you solve important problems and make important decisions.

As you go forward, you will be flooded with information—textbooks, articles, books, newspapers, TV, radio, movies, and so forth. The floodtide of information will rise higher and higher as each year goes by.

Of course, information is very important, and you should strive to learn all you can. But what is the best decision when the facts conflict with each other? We don't know—we can't prove anything. And yet, we have to live. We have to decide. Waiting for more information is often futile, and the wait itself can be destructive. I have a little verse which I wrote, which is my own guide in facing this problem. My advice is:

Always doubt, and always move.
If you move without doubting,
 you'll destroy someone.
If you doubt without moving,
 you'll destroy yourself.

You have to doubt, and you have to move—you have to consider options and impacts, and you have to take action. If you move without doubting, you may cause harm which you didn't intend, and could have avoided if you had doubted enough to ask questions and seek information. But you can't get caught up in indecisive indecision either. If you sit and doubt and doubt and doubt, without moving, you will hurt yourself. You will be immobilized, and you will be surrounded or crushed by events. Instead of picking your preferred option, you will find your decision being forced upon you.

One advantage of taking action is that you get feedback. With good feedback, you can do better the next time. One business management consultant

writes that excellent companies have a motto: “Ready. Fire. Aim.” At some point, you have to just decide, take action, see what happens, and then adjust the next decision accordingly.

So you have to decide— but how? In making decisions, data are almost meaningless in and of themselves. We have to apply our values to the information, and organize it, in order to use it. So even with tons of information, the decisive factor is our goals or objectives, and those are based on our values. Primary values like love, honor, duty, justice, loyalty, and truth are the real tools we have to work with, in decoding and applying the information.

For most of the residents of our planet, these primary values arise from religious beliefs or secular philosophies. Information does not answer the most fundamental questions: Why are we here? What is real? What is right? What is good?

The answers require values, and for most people, the answers are an act of faith. The answers are beliefs. The great strength of faith, its great contribution and importance, is that it is essentially *outside* the world of facts and information. By definition, answers of faith cannot be proven. It might be possible to prove, however, that people cannot find true happiness in the world of information, poised delicately atop a question mark. I recommend that you seek out a faith or philosophy and make it your own. It is easy to get lost without one.

Another problem with learning facts is that you’ll only remember ten percent of them a few years later, and that ten percent will be outdated a few years after that. You should still study very hard, because you need to learn *how* to learn, and it’s hard to learn how to learn if you don’t learn at all. So go ahead and study.

Love Is the Meaning of Life

But if all you learn is facts, and all you achieve is good grades, you will have missed the most important thing you can do in college. The most important thing you can do in college is to discover the meaning of life.

What is the meaning of life? That’s a huge question, the most important question one can ask. But don’t worry: the answer turns out to be easy. In almost every country, culture, and century, the answer is the same. The answer is love. Happy people are people who give and receive love. That is the highest, deepest, most exhilarating meaning of life.

Of course, there are many kinds of love. Your love for your parents is not quite the same as your love for your friends, nor quite the same as your love for your brothers or sisters, or your love for your boyfriend or your girlfriend, or perhaps someday, your love for your spouse, and your love for your children. Certainly, there are different kinds of love, but they all involve affection, the sharing of feelings, the enjoyment of being together, and a commitment to support each other.

Most of the books and songs and whispers in the hallway are about romantic love. Romantic love can become so deep and satisfying that it is a wonder of the world. In our culture, stimulated by TV and movies and magazines, it is one thing that everybody wants.

It is really none of my business whether you have a romantic relationship with somebody, and if so, what it is like. But there are a few things I'd like you to think about. I will predict that you will go through a number of stages. First, you will *want* the person you think you love; then you will *need* the person you think you love; and finally, if you are lucky, you will want to *give* to the person you really know and love.

Or, to put it another way, you will be in love with love, and be infatuated with yourself; then you will be in love with an image, and be infatuated with your partner; then you will be in love with your partner, and be committed, truly knowing your partner and wanting to make him or her happy. My hope is that you get to this last stage, because that is the kind of romantic love that grows and deepens, filling the heart and liberating the spirit.

Infatuation can be misleading. Becoming infatuated with another person is not so hard. We seem to be built for it. There is a magnetic initial attraction. We "fall head over heels in love," and it is delirious and exciting. That's fine. But love is based on knowledge, not a delirious image. Really loving people is not easy. But if you try, it will become easier than you ever thought possible. After a time, it will be hard *not* to love everybody, in one way or another. Even the mean, nasty, cranky, and irritating people.

If you want to be part of the life of this planet, share its joys and sorrows, and find meaning and fulfillment, you must love people. If you don't feel much love now, I have some advice. Start by loving yourself. If you don't love yourself, it is hard to love others. Loving oneself does not mean being an egomaniac, or

approving of oneself, or being contented with oneself— it means accepting oneself. It means seeing good in oneself that can grow, and seeing bad in oneself that should diminish. It means being at peace, but being in motion; it means being stable, but striving to improve.

If you really face who you are, and see your own faults, you will become humble. Seeing your own faults, you will be more patient with the faults of others. If you really face who you are, you will see your immense potential, and you will become strong. Seeing your own strengths, you will enjoy the strengths of others. Thus, you will find it easier to accept, support, and love other human beings.

I admit that loving people is sometimes heart-breaking, depressing, confusing, and humiliating. It takes time to learn enough about oneself and others to do it right. But when you learn to love yourself and others, and want to give to them, and you begin to feel your love growing to encompass more and more people, even all humankind, then you have found the meaning of life. You have the key to happiness. If you never forget that, you have it made.

I hope that you will each find great meaning and happiness in your lives. I hope that that meaning and happiness will begin in college, and continue forever. Best wishes— and God bless you!