

## **Rick Steves' 2012 Commencement Talk for The Evergreen State College: Get Out**

President Purce, faculty, others here who help make The Evergreen State College so cool, parents, family, friends, and graduates, thank you for this opportunity to help celebrate your commencement.

I've spent a third of my adult life living out of a 9" by 22" by 14" suitcase. And, looking back, it's clear to me: This has been time and money very well spent.

Today I want to share with you some ideas that come not from a classroom, but from spending 30 years on the road. You've already done the classroom thing. Now: GET OUT!

Embrace the world. Live your life honestly and with meaning.

Baby Boomers like me, who came of age back in the Sixties, have an affinity for the movie *The Graduate*. In one famous scene, a successful businessman corners the promising young grad played by Dustin Hoffman. He tells him that to find success, he needs to know just one word: "Plastics."

As a generation, it seems to me that we took this "plastics" advice one step further...and many of us just became plastic. We wound up with plastic success...synthetic conformity...a society of too many mindless producer/consumers.

But in my travels, I've encountered so many people who are the farthest thing from plastic. Guiding a tour group through eastern Turkey, I once dropped in on a craftsman who was famous for his wood carving. Every village in his region wanted a prayer niche carved by him. We gathered around to watch him work. He was proudly showing off for his visitors from so far away. Then, suddenly, he stopped, held his chisel high into the sky, and declared, "A man and his chisel — the greatest factory on earth!"

When I asked if I could buy a piece of his art, he said, "For a man my age to know that my work will go back to the United States and be appreciated, that's payment enough. Please take this home with you, and remember me."

It was clear: He didn't need me to tell him what "success" meant.

As a travel writer, my advice to you: define your own success...and then...GET OUT!

Believe it or not, this is a great time to be graduating!

Sure, our nation — and your generation — are faced with unprecedented challenges. But you can choose to see this as an abundance of challenges — a blessing in disguise. You've got the tools. There's clearly a need. Grappling with, and conquering, those challenges can bring meaning to your life.

Now you can follow the rallying cry of the Impressionist painters like Monet: "Out of the studio and into the light!"

Assembled here are countless success stories just waiting to happen — potential heroes in a needy world. And starting tomorrow: it's on!

But, in the interest of being realistic, let's talk about some of the challenges that await.

As idealistic recent graduates, you'll be eager to improve things wherever you wind up. But be prepared: Institutions discourage disobedience, and they resent people who challenge the status quo — even though, very often, that's exactly what they need most.

Back in the 13th century, the monks who first followed St. Francis of Assisi were nicknamed "Jugglers of God." They worked within, but at the same time against, the Roman Catholic Church. These early Franciscans antagonized the pope. But the Church — so in need of reform — was actually made stronger by those fun-loving, truth-embracing, crazy Franciscans.

Traveling in Central America, I met the modern-day equivalents of those early monks — fighting courageously for peace and justice. While many of these priests and nuns were actually excommunicated for their political activism, they continued their work without missing a beat, believing, as one priest told me, "Part of our vow of obedience to the Church is disobedience to the Church."

Like those first Franciscans in Italy, and those 21st-century Jesuits in Central America, it's your challenge, and your calling, to annoy regressive powers within our society for the good of that same society.

Have you noticed how much fear there is in our society these days? Fear of terrorism. Fear of big government. Fear of paying more at the gas pump. I believe fear is being used against us, and that fear can trump a person's innate desire to be compassionate.

The way I see it, fear is for people who don't get out much. I've found that the flip side of fear is understanding. And you can gain understanding through travel.

Here's my challenge to you: Live your life as a traveler — even if just metaphorically. Get out of your comfort zone. Reach out. Be bold. Be curious. Don't be afraid.

A few years ago, I went to Iran to produce a public television special. Before going there, I was afraid. But I went — and I've never encountered such a warm welcome in my travels as I found on the streets of Tehran.

People asked me, "Why'd you go to Iran?" I went there because I believe it's good character to know people before you bomb them. I wanted to humanize the people of Iran. And the wonderful people-to-people experiences I had there did just that. The Iranians I met welcomed and respected me as an individual, even if their government had taught them to hate my country.

I wanted to understand who could vote for leaders like theirs. I ended up learning that the political base of Iran's regressive and xenophobic government is made up of small-town, less-educated, deeply religious people — good people who, just like their counterparts here, are motivated by fear and love. It was a huge lesson for me, made possible only because I overcame my fear and went there.

I remember back when people would send someone off on a trip with a cheery, "Bon voyage!" These days, it's an ominous "Travel safe." But actually, when it comes to nurturing a free spirit, the real danger lies in staying home.

There are powerful forces in our society that simply don't like smart people like you. For them, the less informed and more complacent you are, the better — and the more money they'll make. Refuse to be dumbed down.

I was in Berlin back in 1999, just as their once-bombed-out and now-renovated parliament building re-opened to the public. It was one of those rare and exciting moments as a traveler when you actually get to be an eyewitness to history as it unfolds. After a tumultuous century of war and division, Germany had moved its capital back to Berlin and capped its historic old Reichstag with a glorious new glass dome. What powerful architectural symbolism! It's free, open long hours, and designed for German citizens to walk the spiral ramp all the way to the top and literally look down, over the shoulders of their legislators, and keep an eye on those in power.

I'll never forget being on the top of that dome on that exciting day, surrounded by teary-eyed Germans. Now, any time you're surrounded by teary-eyed Germans... something exceptional is going on. For those people, the opening of this grand new capitol building was the symbolic closing of a difficult chapter in their history: No more division. No more fascism. No more communism. They were entering a new century with a new capitol, united and filled with hope and optimism.

It was a thrill to be there. I was caught up in it. But then, looking around, I realized many of the other American tourists up there didn't have a clue about the excitement and the importance of this moment. They were preoccupied with trivialities — forgotten camera batteries, needing a Coke, the lack of air-conditioning. And it saddened me. I thought, "I don't want to be part of a dumbed-down society." I want to be part of an engaged society. I made a promise to myself then and there that, in my own little world as a travel writer, I'd expect my readers, my viewers, and my travelers to be engaged. Each of us in our own worlds needs to challenge our countrymen not to be dumbed down... but to be smartened up. Considering the unprecedented challenges facing our nation today, a smart electorate and an engaged public is more important than ever.

I don't have to tell you that you're graduating in the middle of an economic crisis. I'm beginning to think that, like our "war on terror," this could be a perpetual crisis. And it can hit deeper than just bank accounts. With this crisis, your very ideals will come under attack. But because of the crisis, it's more important than ever that you hang on to those ideals.

We're hearing a lot about "austerity" these days. Beware. Austerity can be used as a tool to maintain and widen the gap between the rich and the rest. Sometimes I think that the real crisis isn't the recession... but that ever-widening gap.

Many people in our country are struggling financially right now. But keep things in perspective: 90 percent of humanity would love to have America's economic problems. (Just ask my friends in Greece and Mexico.) And so many Americans would love to be sitting where you are right now.

One result of this crisis is that, increasingly, we Americans are living with a mindset of scarcity. We ignore our blessings and fixate on what we don't have.

I want to challenge each of you to live, instead, with a mindset of abundance. In my travels, I've noticed an irony: While we Americans — the richest people around — live with a mindset of scarcity, the poorest people — like Guatemalans, Sri Lankans, Moroccans — live with a mindset of abundance. These are the people who give me the warmest and most generous welcome. In El Salvador, to throw a great party, all you need is a chicken and a Coke. While they seem to have the least, they celebrate life, and live it with a mindset of abundance.

You're stepping into a brutal economic world. It's an environment where quarterly profit statement thinking trumps long-term sustainability, concerns for peace, and compassion. It's a world where profit maximization in the short term is virtually a legal requirement. These days, so many bright young people — cowed by that mindset of scarcity — pursue careers based solely on where the money is. It's causing a serious brain drain in our society away from noble callings that may be less lucrative.

The mantra these days is: "There's not enough money." But there's plenty of money and plenty of talent in America — just different priorities. We should all be in this together. Working outside our own self-interest to bring up people in need unites us — it toughens the fabric of our society.

On this important day, I hope you feel empowered — not demoralized, not dumbed down, and not made afraid. To better understand the economic crisis and put it in perspective, once again: GET OUT!

As Americans, we're blessed with opportunity. But that same prosperity, power, and pride that defines us can have an unfortunate side-effect: ethnocentrism. Americans are disinclined to look beyond our borders. But if you want to change the world, you need to understand the world. You need to get out.

Of all the lessons I've learned from my travels, perhaps the most important was picked up on my first trip with my parents. I was just a 14-year-old kid — with a pretty egocentric and America-centric view of the world. I was in a park in Oslo, behind the palace. My parents were showering me with love. Their world revolved around me. They'd do anything to make me happy and help me enjoy a fulfilling life. Then, I looked out over the park. It was speckled — like a Monet painting — with countless other parents...all lavishing love on their children. And it hit me: "Wow, those parents love their kids just as much as my parents love me. This planet must be home to billions of equally lovable, equally deserving, equally precious children of God."

America is a wonderful country. I'm proud to be an American and I'd live nowhere else. But if we want to do a better, smarter job of fitting into this ever-shrinking world, we need to be honest about the exceptionalism of the United States. Powerful people in our society are pushing the idea that God loves us more than any other nation on earth. But sometimes I wonder if the only thing "exceptional" about the USA is our ability to think God loves us more.

America is just four percent of this planet. There's no doubt that we're a beautiful four percent of the world's population, with plenty to be proud of. But that doesn't mean that the other 96 percent is second-rate! And ironically, to think we're exceptional is, in itself, a dangerous notion.

As young adults, and future leaders, you have a choice of how to see the USA: With a feel-good ethnocentrism, or with an honest worldview.

Travel has inspired me to help make our world a better place — and it's given me ideas of how to do it. For example, through my travels, I've realized that there are two starkly different models for social activism: Mother Teresa and Oscar Romero.

There are plenty of worthy causes and generous people supporting them — inspired by Mother Teresa. It's easy to love Mother Teresa. She's a saint: heroic, loving, and inspirational. But in all of her efforts to help the needy, she never asked why. Why were the people she helped so wretchedly poor and downtrodden?

Then there are others, who see injustice — and then ask why. Oscar Romero was the archbishop of San Salvador in the 1970s, at a time when his country was torn apart by a civil war — rich landowners against landless peasants. Romero didn't just feed the poor, he stood with them. He spoke out boldly and confronted the very foundations of structural poverty. He asked why. Romero predicted he'd be shot and that his spirit would live on in his people. And in 1980, he was gunned down in front of his congregation. And his memory does live on, to this day, as Salvadorans continue to push for dignity and social justice.

As you move into the future, consider the Oscar Romero model: Ask why. Society may call others "heroes," but you can be the conscience of this great nation.

I believe that to be a true patriot, it's our duty to challenge America to do better. Some people may call it "America-bashing," but I'd say having high standards for our country is "America-loving."

Your passion for truth and justice can strengthen the fabric of our democracy.

The power your education provides can contribute to our homeland security.

And your uniquely Evergreen celebration of freedom can be an inspiring example of good citizenship.

Today you're graduating. But don't ever graduate away from what makes this school, and your education, such a treasure.

One more travel tale: In the middle of Copenhagen, you'll find an unlikely hippie commune called Christiania. Surrounded by all that Danish perfection and orderliness, it's a funky enclave of squatters and rebels who operate their own little idealistic society. Somehow, despite the best efforts of developers and the city government, Christiania has survived for more than 35 years. On my last visit, as I entered Christiania, I saw a huge mural that reads, "Only dead fish follow the current."

You've invested many years of hard work and lots of money in your Evergreen education in order to be successful. Maybe now's a good time to pause... and to think about what "success" really means. Let me help you get started.

First of all, here are a few things success is not:

It's not doing a job you don't believe in.

It's not letting ignorance be bliss.

And it's certainly not letting someone else put barbed wire on your hierarchy of needs — convincing you to worry more about consuming than contributing.

Real success, on the other hand, can be lots of things. Part of it is a practical matter: Working hard to earn a good paycheck and providing for your family. And that in itself can be wonderfully fulfilling. But I challenge you to do even more. As graduates of Evergreen — as promising young leaders — leave this planet with more than scrapbooks filled with smiley faces and memories of good family barbecues. You can change the world.

Fundamentally, only you can define your success. Remember the woodcarver with the chisel I met in Turkey? There's a person who's defined his own success. He doesn't need someone like me to say to him, "Plastics." And neither do you.

As you leave this beautiful arena of your formal education, the choice is yours:

You can be plastic or authentic, agitate institutions to make them better, and choose not to be afraid.

You can use your education to be engaged, embrace life with a mindset of abundance, and make choices that benefit society as a whole rather than just you as an individual.

You can hold our country to the highest standards, confront injustice by doing more than just helping — you can ask why, and then do something to change it.

And you can get out — into our world — to better understand it.

In an American society where so many are selling their souls to conform, you can be a dead fish, or you can swim freely — even against the current.

Evergreen Class of 2012, this day's all about you — and for good reason. But remember: you didn't get here on your own. Thank those who helped make your education possible.

Now begins the real thing: Embrace the truth, make our world a better place, live fulfilling lives, with abandon...and have fun while you're at it.

God bless each of you...And congratulations! Now, it's time to find your success...and GET OUT.

Bon voyage.