

Penn State Harrisburg Fall 2007 Commencement Speech Douglas Neidich

Thanks, Dr. Hanes. It's a particular pleasure to be here with you today. You are a delight, and you and your staff have done a remarkable job at Penn State Harrisburg. With the programs and initiatives that you've put into place over the last several years, you've significantly enhanced the quality of life in the Central Pennsylvania region, and I'm honored that you've asked me to join you today to share a few thoughts. It's great to be here.

Class of 2007, Moms, Dads, family, friends, faculty and staff of Penn State, it's great to be here with you, too, this morning on the Saturday before Christmas, with absolutely nothing else to do but relax and enjoy this commencement ceremony. It's great, isn't it, that the shopping's all done, the decorating's all done, the house is clean, the cards are mailed, the gifts are wrapped, the cookies are baked, and we're all able to focus completely on the meaning of the season and the meaning of this commencement.....Wonderful...

Returning to reality, it's a busy time of the year, and it is an honor to be able to spend a bit of time with all of you in the midst of the busyness to reflect on these young men and women and the remarkable job they've done, and the fantastic job that you've done as parents, family, friends, faculty, and staff in helping to bring them to this place and time in their careers and in their lives. My sincere congratulations to all of you.

Class of 2007, if you'll indulge me, I've got one last class that I'd like you to take this morning. I checked your Penn State Harrisburg course catalog, and there are lots of courses listed in there, but the one course that I didn't see in the catalog is the course about happiness. I saw all kinds of other courses in your catalog: An introduction to financial accounting, a course on the history of western civilization, an African Studies course on the African-American woman, and an engineering course on applied computational fluid dynamics, which, having taken that one myself, is about as far from happiness as you can get. The one that didn't show up, though, was Happiness 101, and in my mind that course is an absolutely essential course to take to get you ready for the rest of your life. Happiness is one of the most overused and underappreciated words in the English language, in my mind, but in the middle of this Christmas season, and at the beginning of your careers and the beginning of the rest of your lives, the question of what real happiness is, how you find it, and what you do to carry it with you for the rest of your life is an important one that I think we need to explore.

Before we start to talk about how you find happiness, though, I think the first question that we have to answer is: What IS real happiness? There's a lot of confusion about that question out there right now, it seems to me. Real happiness is NOT television happiness, it's not pop-culture happiness, it's not lottery happiness, and it's not having-it-all happiness. Maybe a good way to decide what real happiness IS, is to decide what real happiness ISN'T.

Money in itself won't make you happy. Some of the happiest people that I know have very little money, and some of the most miserable people that I know have all the money that they could ever spend, and it still drives them crazy. What you DO with your money, though, if you do the right things with it for the world around you, can make you really happy. We'll talk more about that later.

Status won't do it, either. There's no one more miserable than the person who has power over the people around them, but doesn't have the heart or the presence of mind to do the right things with that power. All that power and status really do, actually, is to amplify the faults or the strengths that someone has in the first place. Before you can really begin to call yourself a leader you have to grow to understand that there is no such thing as power or status. There's only responsibility, and if you accept that responsibility for those around you and feel it deeply, you'll have taken major steps toward happiness.

Leisure time is great, and you absolutely need it as part of a balanced life, but the goal of life is NOT to win the lottery so that you can spend the rest of your life watching television.

Fame's not the answer. I don't even have to spend that much time on this one. All you have to do is read the tabloid headlines to know that lots of famous people are really, really confused and miserable.

There are lots of vices out there that a lot of people look at as things that'll make them happy. Drinking to excess, or using any other substance to excess, can seem like it'll make you happy in the short term, but

if you do enough of any of them over a long enough period of time, they'll gradually take over your life and suck the happiness right out of it.

All of the things that we just talked about don't lead to real happiness, I think, because they're all too shallow. None of them go deep enough to let us feel any real peace or real connectedness to everything around us. Actually, all of the things that we've listed so far; money, status, fame, and vices; are traps that can keep us from finding real happiness.

In that last statement, then, is to me what real peace and happiness are all about. You find real happiness when you find peace with yourself, and get comfortable in your own skin, and you begin to be able to connect, and connect deeply, with the world around you and the people around you. Real happiness allows you to really enjoy the world around you while you work to improve its flaws. Real happiness allows you to accept the faults of the people around you and enjoy them in spite of their faults, and to accept your own faults while you try to improve on them. Real happiness and real peace make you a quiet soul, and the world around you starts to fall into place.

So what's the secret to finding the kind of happiness that brings you peace; that lets you find joy in the world around you? That sticks with you, regardless of the circumstances, and doesn't let you down when you need it the most?

The very first thing that I think you need to do in the search for this happiness is to clear your head, quit worrying about stuff, and relax. It's tough to do, I admit, especially at this time of the year, but it's possible, and it's essential to real peace. Everyone in this world has problems, everyone has issues, but the first difference between the people who rise above those problems and the ones who drown in them is that the ones who rise above them are able to quiet their minds so that they can see their problems for what they are and quietly and appropriately deal with them. Most of the really unhappy people that I've met have their heads FULL of distractions. They're thinking about the hundred things they need to get done that they haven't gotten done yet, the twenty things that could maybe go wrong next, all the stuff that other people have done to offend them, and their big long list of if-only-I-had-this-then-I'd-finally-be-happy things. There's all of this stuff going on in their heads, and when you've got all of that going on up there there's no room for real happiness.

But how do you quiet your mind? Most people's minds, if you could put a microphone in their ear and listen in, would sound like you were standing in the middle of Grand Central Station. Actually, if you could put a microphone into most people's ears and listen in, it would scare you to death, but that's not the subject of the talk this morning. If you put a microphone into most people's ears, it really would sound like Grand Central Station. There's more going on in there than they can possibly listen to at once, and it never stops. With all of that going on in there, there's no way to concentrate on the things that are important.

You can spend a lifetime trying to really, completely, quiet your mind, but a good way to start is to get into the habit of deep breathing as often as you can. You can try this right now in your seat if you want to. Breathe in as deeply as you can, hold it for a second or two, and breathe out as slowly as you can about 10 times or so. If you can, don't think about anything but your breathing while you're doing it. If you can just do this about five or ten times a day, it'll start you on the path to quieting your mind and finding real relaxation. This seems really trivial, I know, but in my personal experience it's huge.

After you've quieted your mind down some, the next thing that's important, I think, is to sit down and make a list of the things that really are important to you in your life. This is not a trivial exercise. If you're a guy, and you make up your first list, and the first things on it are beer, women, and Nascar, you've got to go back and look at the list some more.

When you make your list, take time with it. Think really, really hard about what it is that's really important to you. When you're making your list, pay close attention to the things that might have seemed like they were important to you but really weren't once you'd thought about it more. A career's certainly important, but is it really more important than your family? Success is important, but is it more important than honesty and integrity? Having other people like you might be important, but what is it exactly that you want them to like you for? If you really spend the right amount of time on your list, and you read back over it, and then over it again, you'll find that it defines you as a person in the deepest and the fullest sense possible. Look back over your list and question it frequently, especially when life throws you challenging curveballs. If you've made the list of what's really, honestly, important to you, and you stay true to that list no matter what, you'll find that it'll have a huge impact on your happiness.

I don't personally do this, but I listened to a speaker a couple of years ago who suggested that you make up your list, and then go over it with yourself every morning before you start the day, to help you keep your focus on the things that ARE the most important. Not a bad thought.

The next thing that I think is important for happiness is balance. One of the real secrets to life is to find your balance between family and career, between work and leisure, between spending time with your friends and staying home to organize your life. There's never enough time in life to do everything that you want to do. That's what makes your list of what's important so valuable. It's also what makes balance so important, to take the things that really are important on your list and find the time for each of them in their turn. Balance is essential to happiness.

Deciding for yourself that you're always going to try to do the right thing is a huge key to happiness. You've got to make sure that your personal integrity is rock-solid to be really happy. Constantly trying to get away with things, manipulate situations to your advantage, and wheel-and-deal your way through life and through your career is going to gradually eat away at something deep inside of you, and it's going to make it really tough to find peace with yourself. If you decide right up front that you're going to try to do what's right, and do it every time, it takes all of those messy 'can I get away with it or not?' decisions out of your way, and takes the weight of all of that off of your shoulders at the same time. There's a big piece of long-term happiness in that.

Another secret to happiness, I think, is to live an examined life. It was Socrates, back in about 500 BC, who said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Examine yours. Figure out what it is that you do that makes you unhappy, and find ways to change those things. Too many people wander through life doing the same things that make them unhappy time and time again, and they never find the energy to focus on those things and find ways to change them. Examining your life is a huge piece of the puzzle on the way to happiness.

It was Albert Einstein who said that there are two types of people in the world: one who thinks that nothing is a miracle, and the other who understands that everything is a miracle. One of the key secrets to happiness, Class of 2007, is to get yourself into that second group. Everything in this life is a miracle, guys, from the sun coming up, to the rain on a roof, to a new child or a new friend, to a bright star in the evening sky, and the sooner that you realize the extent of this miracle the sooner that you'll realize how lucky we are, and how unimportant most of the problems in life are. The more you focus on what a miracle everything is around you, the more you realize that in the middle of that miracle you don't have time to be unhappy.

The most important things that you will do in your life, and the things that will make you the happiest in your life, are the things that you are not required to do. Let's go over that one one more time, because it's not obvious, but I think it's unbelievably important..... The most important things that you will do in your life, and the things that will make you the happiest in your life, are the things that you are not required to do. It's not showing up at your job every day or keeping your grass cut that will matter. The things that WILL matter are the time that you spend volunteering at a local shelter, the gifts that you buy for the family in your church that can't afford them, and the call that you make to your dad to try to put things back together after the big argument. These are the things that not only matter, but that will define you as a person and bring you that deep, peaceful happiness that we're talking about. Spending a fair-sized portion of your time, and if possible your money to help make the world around you a better place is a foolproof way to happiness. The money part of this is optional, though. Your time is, and always will be, way more valuable than money, and if you use it correctly your time can change the world around you in profound ways. Do things for people that are unexpected, and do them, if you can, so that no one will find out that it was you who did it. Doing these kinds of things, and doing them regularly, will take you an incredibly long way toward happiness.

Taking care of the planet that we live on is a really significant one of those things that you're not required to do, but that will bring you a great deal of peace with yourself if you do it. Class of 2007, you are incredibly, incredibly fortunate to live at a time in which technology finally can work to the benefit of the planet instead of against it. For the first time in history, technology has the chance to make our lives better without compromising the environment to do it. There are remarkable technologies just beginning to appear that can profoundly change the quality of the environment around us. Hybrid automobiles are available now. Electric cars are just starting to appear. Alternative energies that allow us to heat, cool, and power our homes and businesses are beginning to finally make economic sense to install. Biofuels are available, and will be much more available shortly. Lower-energy lightbulbs and even LED holiday lights are available. These things can help to save the planet, and can make the country more politically and economically stable at the same time. The trick, though, is that we ALL have to use them for them to be effective, and your generation is the generation that really can begin to make an environmental difference. There's a lot of possible happiness in that.

Most of you, Class of 2007, are about to leave Penn State to begin your first real job. One of the secrets to happiness is to find meaningful work, and then give that work all of your energy while you are on the job to be absolutely as good at that job as you possibly can be. Becoming extremely good at your job through

hard work on your part is essential. Don't fall into the trap of looking at your job as something that you've got to put up with to pay your bills and to allow you to do what you want to do when you're not at work. Don't start telling yourself that you don't have to work that hard because they don't pay you enough, or they don't value you enough, or your job doesn't mean that much in the first place. If you find yourself in a job that doesn't inspire you, change it. When you find the right job, give it everything you've got. The confidence that you'll feel knowing that you're really good at what you do will take you a long way down the path to happiness.

Allowing the right people into your life is a really significant key to happiness. The right people in your life can make it delightful, and the wrong ones can make you miserable. Be really careful about the people who you let in there.

When you travel, and you absolutely need to travel, travel to interesting places. Traveling to interesting places, and finding out about those places, will make you a deeper person, and inevitably a happier person. The beach is great every now and then, but you need to spend time in corners of the world that will change your view of the world, and change the way that you think about yourself. Go to China. Go to Russia. Go to some little village in the middle of France. Go to Ghana, and when you go there, go with a missionary group that's going there to build a school, or a well, or better housing for the people there. While you're there, get to know the people. Get to know some of them really well, and then stay in touch with them. They're no worse, or no better, than you are. Just different. Some of them vastly different, and in understanding those differences you'll take major steps toward finding peace and happiness with yourself.

Believing in something bigger than yourself is unbelievably important to happiness. Find your faith in something, and do it after you've thought deeply about it. It's difficult to be really happy in life without believing that there are things in it that are much bigger than you are. Once you've found your faith, make sure that it makes you a more thoughtful, more caring, happier person, and not a more narrow-minded, more difficult one. If it makes you more narrow-minded and difficult, go back and think about it some more.

Don't worry about what other people think about you. At the end of the day, the only things that matter are your relationship with yourself and, I think, your relationship with God. Take good care of these, and your relationships with everyone else will take care of themselves. All of us have our faults, and all of us have our strengths, and the sooner you get to the point in which you get comfortable in your own skin the better. You can, and should, work to try to improve yourself throughout your life, but working to try to improve yourself doesn't mean that you shouldn't accept who you are and feel comfortable with yourself while you're doing it.

Class of 2007, the last thing, and I think the most important thing, that you should understand about happiness is that there is no one in this world who is responsible for your happiness but you. No one. Happiness not a state of circumstances, it's an attitude, and the sooner you learn to only depend on yourself for your happiness, the better. It's not your parents who've made you unhappy, it's not your teachers, it's not your friends, it's not the guy who cut you off in traffic who's made you unhappy. It's you. Other people can do whatever they want to you. It's up to you to let their unhappiness become your unhappiness. Happiness isn't about what happens to you, it's about what you do about it.

So there it is. You've just taken my Happiness 101 course. Thanks for sticking with me while I've rambled through all of that.

There's two things that I'd like you to do when you're leaving here today, Class of 2007. The first thing I'd like you to do, if they're here with you today, is to go out in the lobby and hug your parents with all your heart, and all your strength, and tell them that you love them, and tell them 'thanks'. There will come a time when you won't be able to do that, and this is a great opportunity. Don't miss it.

The second thing that I'd like you to do is to think about some of the things that we've talked about this morning and try to use them. I really hope that there are one or two things from this course that might stick with you as you start your careers and the rest of your lives. Try to relax and clear your mind. Play with that breathing exercise when you're in a meeting, or on a bus, or sitting and talking with friends. When your mind starts to quiet down a little, take some of that quiet and make your list of what's important to you, and give it as much thought as you can, and once you've decided on the things that are important, act like they're important. Live them, and live them every day. Work hard. Get really good at what you do at work, and get really good at what you do in in your spare time, too. Balance that work with time for your friends, time for your family, and time for yourself. Take a portion of your time, and a portion of your resources if you can, and change a little bit of the world around you with them. Get really

comfortable with yourself, and happy with yourself, and then let that happiness affect and infect everything and everyone around you. Happiness is contagious, and if you get it, and get it really good, it will take you anywhere you'd like to go and make the journey there a complete joy. Class of 2007, as you leave here today I wish for you real, deep, happiness in your careers, in your lives, and in your hearts. May God bless you with every good thing in life on your way.