



PINGRY

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
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This is a much more flattering response than I received from my family. My eldest daughter's immediate response was: "You? Why you? You're not curing malaria in Africa or anything." Too true, too true.

Why me? As is my wont, I responded to her with a story, from Pingry, actually. It was my junior prom and I was dancing with my date, Vanessa Procopio. I looked at her and said, "Vanessa, you're leading!" Vanessa said, "Someone has to."

Well, this someone feels a great honor to be given this award, no matter how much it may shock my family. It gives me a goal to aspire to, a responsibility going ahead in my life that I sincerely feel.

I must admit, I am blown away by the new Pingry. Likely you all are used to it. But I look at things like the dance studio and two theaters and think that my daughters would kill to go to school here. What I was most impressed by was the fact that, in many of the classrooms I saw, the students' desks face one other, not the teacher up front. It's such a simple but important idea, that students both challenge and collaborate with one another.

It seems you, the graduates, are equally impressive. Nat sent me a summary of all that you accomplished, which is a lot.

I hadn't been aware that there had been so much grade inflation on the SATs and AP exams since I took them in the '70s! I'm going to stipulate that Pingry, and your parents, and, most of all, your own efforts, have prepared you exceedingly well.

So, I'm going to lobby for the other side of the equation today: having fun. Believe it or not, at work, I learned a

lot about having fun. I learned it from two people I had the pleasure of working with, Steven Spielberg and Bill Gates.

Now, I do realize there is a keen irony at play here: the faster I am, the less I talk about fun, the faster you get to graduate, and go have fun. So I will try to be quick.

I'll start with Steven Spielberg. As you likely know, Steven has directed and produced movies including Jaws, Close Encounters, ET, Jurassic Park, Indiana Jones one time too many, Schindler's List, Saving Private Ryan, and more. Creatively and economically, there is no one like Steven. He has an Oscar and more than \$3 billion in ticket sales.

I know Steven since he loves computer games. I was running the Microsoft group that created computer games; Steven wanted to focus a fair amount one year on building some, so I was dispatched to Hollywood by Microsoft to run a joint venture that would build games for Steven.

Steven supplies an incredible work environment. He has built his own posh "world" on the Universal lot. It has buildings with hand-hewn logs, fountains, a great private movie theater, free food at lunch, and fresh-made snacks each afternoon.

For other reasons, I had just spent a fair amount of time at Skywalker Ranch, which is the facility of George Lucas of Star Wars fame. It covers about 4,700 acres just north of San Francisco and George has built his own village there, which houses his studio.

So I asked Steven one day, "What is up with you guys and these types of offices? Not exactly Microsoft cubicles. I know that you and George and Francis Ford Coppola

hung out together early on, and, now, you all have these amazing places.”

And he said, “It’s simple. When we were all broke and trying to get into the industry, we vowed that, if we succeeded, we would create workplaces where it was more fun to be at work than to be at home. We wanted people to want to come to work every day and hang out.”

Fun is more than architecture and warm cookies in the afternoon with Steven. He has always worked simply with a handshake. In essence, there are no Steven Spielberg contracts. He won’t work with people that he thinks lack integrity. He works with you because he wants to work with you and believes in a project. If that stops, he stops. Seems to have worked.

I will switch to high-tech and Bill Gates. Bill and Steven are yin and yang. My boss used to call Steven the “anti-Bill.”

Bill drives himself hard. I was on a press tour in the early ’90s when a reporter asked Bill why he didn’t retire, “when he had it made,” meaning financially. Bill responded scornfully that his goal was to transform how humans lived and when he had accomplished that he would retire.

This made me feel great about my next performance review: sales up, profits up, transforming humankind, hmmm, B-. But Bill wasn’t kidding, of course—he talked about how Microsoft had changed how people worked, and next computers and networks would change how people lived at home—which has become what we now call the Internet, cell phones, iPods, Second Life, and so on. And retirement for Bill, of course, means taking on AIDS in Africa and fixing the U.S. educational system for good measure.

Bill isn’t really the home of casual interests. When I once asked how his vacation to Brazil had been, he talked about a biochemistry textbook he had particularly enjoyed. At a dinner at his house with Jane Goodall, Bill could cite the population growth rate of any African country you cared to ask him about.

OK, there are a ton more Bill stories, but where does fun factor in here?

Bill went to the same high school, Lakeside, that two of my daughters seem to attend. He gave a speech

there about a year ago that I happened to read.

He talked about how much fun he had at Lakeside because they allowed him to program their computers, like the class scheduling system. He set it up so all the pretty girls were in his classes. Maybe he needed a little help.

Although I know many of you out there don’t like them, Bill simply loves computers, and he got to spend 30 years of his life focusing on them. In some ways, he configured Microsoft or, maybe, the entire computer industry to be one large intellectual challenge, and large intellectual challenges, like ending AIDS in Africa or playing online bridge with Warren Buffett, is what Bill likes to do.

Now, I’m certainly not Bill or Steven, but I have tried to learn from them. And much to my surprise, about 20 years after leaving Pingry I realized I had learned a lot at Pingry. Far, far more than I realized at the time. Both Bill and Steven, and Pingry, really influence what I do now, and Pingry deserves a fair amount of credit for any success that Kinetic Books might have some day.

As mentioned, my latest adventure is “doing” digital curriculum. It started because I was tutoring at a local high school, and I thought nothing could be worse than listening to me lecture.

A point you may be starting to agree with.

Also, the school had no physics lab equipment. An informal survey we later did showed that only about 20 percent of U.S. public high schools have more than two physics labs. They have a ball and plane, lenses and mirrors, and maybe a calorimeter. That’s it. Physics labs are expensive. It probably costs over \$100,000 to do a nice job equipping a physics lab.

Conversely, pretty much every high school in this country has a computer lab, and they can run our software for less than \$5 a student. I sometimes have these incredibly frustrating conversations with people who talk about us increasing the gap between the rich and the poor. I just want to shake them and say: by far the cheapest way to deliver science curriculum is over the Internet. It’s like third world countries skipping running phone lines and just using cell phones. And we supply experiences that even Pingry can’t. Even Pingry has yet to purchase spacecraft to experiment with orbits, or equipment that allows students to explore length and time at 90 percent of the speed of light.

The company remains a work in progress.

One day, my daughter, whose politics are slightly to the left of Che Guevara, came home with a horrified look, and said, “Dad, you don’t work for a for-profit company, do you?” I could assure her that, no, I definitely work for a non-profit.

A Pingry classmate who is an investor is equally horrified at our non-profit status, alas. However, as the introductory remarks noted, we are having some success, and it seems this year we will grow again, I think between 75 percent to 125 percent over last year’s sales. So maybe I will be able to truly horrify my leftist daughter some day.

The theme of this talk is fun, and someone reading a draft of my speech asked how “fun” influenced me at Kinetic Books.

Good question. It doesn’t. I’m completely humorless. I mean, I do triathlons for fun. It’s a classic case: those who can’t do, teach or preach.

Slightly more seriously, or funnily, the part of Kinetic Books that is the most fun is seeing students use our texts.

For many, if not most, students, science and algebra have essentially been like eating Brussel sprouts. They taste awful and leave a bad aftertaste to boot. With our products, kids have fun, and a frequent comment on feedback forms is, “please do my other textbooks this way, quick!”

This all ties back to Pingry. When I was having breakfast with Nat, I said I liked Miller Bugliari, and Nat got ready to hear once again about Pingry soccer. Well, I stunk at soccer. I said I liked Miller as a biology teacher, which almost made Nat choke on his breakfast.

Miller let us fool around a lot in biology. We did a lot of labs with quite interesting results—I’m not sure they would pass political correctness tests today. Miller also sang incessantly about urea—he would sing about it to the tune of “Maria” in West Side Story. It’s too bad the entire AP test wasn’t about nitrogen-based compounds; we would have aced it. With Miller, biology was fun.

Tony duBourg had the same attitude in physics. He did wild things, like a demonstration where he shot a

.22 rifle. Again, I’m not exactly sure what science we learned by the firing of a .22, but it sure was a great way to grab the attention of a bunch of 16-year-old boys. Another Pingry teacher, Tom Johnson, had the same idea in 8th grade science, where we just did experiment after experiment after experiment.

I never would have done Kinetic Books without Pingry. Our textbooks are rigorous and comprehensive. They have over 1,000,000 words. It’s something that drives me nuts: since they run on computers, people think somehow they are less rigorous or just supplements. They aren’t, OK?

Our texts are approved by the college board. Schools like Purdue, Dalton, and Taft use them. In fact, a purchase order even just came in from a certain school in Martinsville. You can learn as much physics as, or I’d like to think more than, any 1,000-page print physics tome. For instance, one instructor told us his students’ grades went up on average one point on the AP test after using our products.

Rigor notwithstanding, the textbooks are fun and focus on experiments. Those are the parts of Pingry science I retained.

They have over 15,000 frames of animation and about 30,000 lines of Java code. To test your knowledge of projectile motion, you fire cannons, trying to obliterate your classmate’s castle before they obliterate yours.

To learn about harmonic oscillations, you create a 5-piece ensemble on 5 PCs of different stringed instruments using MIDI synthesizer technology, and play a tune we wrote, called the Physics Blues. In algebra, you create soccer plays using equations, or control the motion of a pair of beavers, who like to sing country and western tunes when you succeed at a task. I think it’s fun, and, more importantly, so do most of the kids.

So, let the fun of the rest of your lives begin. Realize that if you’re having fun, maybe you’re learning something. If you’re having fun, stick with it—it seems to have worked for Steven Spielberg and Bill Gates.

I’m sure you all will achieve a lot—I’m just rooting for you to have as much fun as possible as you do it.

Thank you.