

Commencement Speech College of Engineering, University of Florida Gainesville, FL

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Dean Cammy Abernathy, esteemed members of faculty and staff, family and friends congregated to witness today's graduation ceremony and, most importantly, my dear graduating students:

I cannot tell you how honored I feel to be in your midst today. I feel deeply grateful that you have bestowed the honor on me and, through me, on Mindtree, the enterprise I co-founded 15 years ago. As we built what is now an IT services company with 13,000 people, we chose to set up our US Development Center here at Gainesville. This Center is a three-way collaboration between your University, the State of Florida, and Mindtree. We chose to come here largely because of the reputation of the University of Florida.

Given our relationship, when Dean Abernathy asked me to be your Commencement Speaker, I was delighted. But then I asked her: do students really listen to Commencement Speeches, particularly from people two or three times their age? Dean Abernathy replied emphatically: "Yes, young people listen, they pay attention. In particular, they want to be inspired." Then she said something I will never forget. She said, "Our job is to inspire young people. You cannot inspire them enough."

Drowned in the ordinariness of our existence, sometimes dealing with our own struggles and frustrations, and during the occasional, inevitable moments of cynicism, we adults often forget the responsibility to inspire. But we

can never inspire enough. We cannot just say that we did our bit and that no more needs to be done.

To my graduating student friends, I give you the words of your dean: your job and mine will always be to inspire. And we can never inspire enough!

You have already begun.

I asked you to write to me with your questions and with your thoughts on what you wanted to hear from me at Commencement today. As your responses poured in, I marveled at the quality of your intellect and the power of your humanity. You sent in questions that astonished me with their thoughtfulness, kindness, and wisdom. You revealed your ambitions, your fears, your strength, and your fragility. You took my breath away.

One question in particular moved me deeply, touching on matters of change and identity, on how to keep one's sense of self in an ever-changing environment. Your classmate Elise Burke wrote, and I paraphrase only slightly:

As a student about to enter a new world, I have this feeling of loss. I'm sure it is something that we all must be feeling: that, by graduating, we are potentially losing a part of ourselves. How does one deal with that, morph that into a new world, and ease the weird, empty feeling that comes with graduating and entering the unknown? How do we keep ourselves?

You are not alone. Everyone seated here has felt this way at some point. These have been my feelings when I left college, and then when I left my professional life to start a company at 28; I felt that way again when that company folded up and I began working as a manager in a large corporation, and then when I left that contented but cocooned life to co-found Mindtree 15 years ago. Even now as I stand here in front of you, that “weird, empty feeling” is coming back to me as I contemplate the inevitable transition that will happen for me in a few years from now.

That you are potentially losing a part of yourself will be a recurring theme for the rest of your life and you will find yourself asking, “How do I morph into a new world, ease the weird empty feeling that comes from entering the unknown, and keep my sense of self?”

One day, a few years from now, perhaps you will find yourself sitting in your tiny home office, pensive because you had to sell your startup company, which was your baby, because if you hadn't, it would have shut down. And you will be asking yourself these very same questions.

You will ask them when you are sitting in your office in the White House, alone except for the sound of a janitor's vacuum cleaner out in the hallway. You will have just completed your second term in office and tomorrow, after eight years, you will no longer be the president of the country.

The questions will come to you when you leave your comfortable, glamorous job as the CEO of a Fortune 100 firm, because you have decided to take on the responsibility of turning around a struggling international relief organization.

And you know what? The questions will rise again as you move in and out of some very precious relationships in your personal life.

So, Elise, you have put your finger on a vein that pulses below the cheers and celebrations of the day: the idea of change. How will you handle it? How will you make the tradeoffs? How will you deal with the loss? How will you survive this?

You *will*. I'll say that first. You will do all this, and more, and you will do it with courage, humility and grace. But before I say any more, I'd like you to pause and picture yourself right now. What do you see? Graduation robes, a big smile, a funny hat with a tassel on it? Look again, at the images layered below. Go all the way back to your first day at university. There you are: excited, uncertain, happy, sad, mixed-up, with your two suitcases, your six overflowing cardboard boxes of random but precious things, in the unadorned dorm room that will be home now.

From that day, to this day: look at what you have done. You have been the master of change. From our vantage point today, that change might appear to be a smooth curve, but it wasn't. There were bumps. There were high highs and low lows. You took it all in stride, and here you are. The change that you have navigated in these four years is really no different from the change you navigate when you start a family, or leave a plush job for a meaningful one, or when, one day, you drop your own child off on the first day of kindergarten and try not to cry as she vanishes from sight.

You see, you are not graduating with simply an engineering degree. You are graduating with a rope, a pickaxe, hooks, a water bottle and a walkie-talkie to help you navigate all the curves ahead. Yesterday you were good. Tomorrow you will be superb. But today you do not know it yet. This is humility. This is the beginning of wisdom.

Consider the river. At its source, nothing about it suggests greatness or grandeur. The Amazon, when you trace it all the way back to the Apacheta cliff in Arequipa, Peru, begins as a glacial stream. Nearby are just a few lumps of

snow below a solitary wooden cross that seems to say, simply, keep the faith. At her source high up in the Himalayas, the Ganges is just a tiny gush. It is the same story for many great rivers in the world.

At its source, the river has no control over what is ahead; all it can do is flow on to just the one next step. And the next. And then one more. At that time, actually, it isn't even a river. It is just a stream, a rivulet. But as it gurgles along, it finds another one to join her. The rivulet welcomes the tributary. Now they become a river.

As this river now flows with new energy, there appears a huge mountain, blocking its path. The river doesn't fight the mountain, and neither does it flow back to where it came from. The river finds its patient way around the mountain. The journey becomes beautiful once more.

Then suddenly, out of nothing, nowhere, the surface below and the banks by the side vanish. What appears is a monstrous gorge below. What happens now? The river does not weep. The river becomes a roaring waterfall. Every waterfall in the world roars even as it falls! And guess what? The sun illuminates its mist, and a rainbow appears, and the entire world comes to marvel at its majesty.

Through the trickle, the tributary and the torrent, an expansive, deep calm emerges. The river's benevolent flow creates life, civilizations flourish along her banks, and then she becomes one with the ocean. But at the source, she has no idea of what she will become, or where she will go.

If the river were to speak to you today, what would it say?

The river would say: *your identity is evolving; it is okay to have self-doubt.* Uncertainty is inherent in change, and change is the only thing that is certain.

The river would say: *don't just be passionate—do something.* Passion is what passion does. Changing the world happens one tiny step at a time. If you are an idea-person, if you dream big, if you are ambitious and creative, then you probably want to build something big and make a big impact. But you probably also know the feeling of being overwhelmed by the enormity of what you need to do and what you hope to accomplish. But like the Amazon at its source, just take that one next step.

As you flow on, from source to confluence to estuary, sometimes even your very best will not be enough. Sometimes you will falter. Sometimes you will make poor decisions with unpleasant outcomes. The river would say: Every single day, you get the chance to start all over again. The river would say: *don't dwell on failing; instead, prepare to succeed. And when you fall, fall like me! Fall brilliantly.*

Along the path, there will be loss. The river would say: Honor your feelings of loss, but do not wallow in them. Loss is not the boss of you. To flow, we must leave something behind. Each step we take is always a step further.

Change comes sometimes from the outside world and sometimes from within. Sometimes we see it coming, and sometimes it catches us off guard. Sometimes we are able to bend with it and withstand it. Sometimes it knocks us over and leaves us breathless. And sometimes we ride it to glorious new tomorrows.

Today, each one of you leaves behind certain markers of who you are: volleyball player, honors student, champion french fry eater, debater, essay writer, student leader. But you carry with you the seeds of all the things that you are. And you will find new markers that point to those things that you are: entrepreneur, engineer, activist, change maker, parent, business leader. Whatever may be your goal, flow with abandon and intensity; make friends with passers by; welcome every tributary; and, when the gorge opens its jaws, fall and find new force.

Be like the Amazon. Even the mighty ocean will wait with respect for your arrival.

I urge you to embrace a life of not just courage but wisdom, not just capability but credence, not just glory but greatness. Rejoice in your arrival this evening. May your tomorrows be enchanted. As you chart your new life, may you inherit the greatness of your parents, your

teachers and your friends. As your legacy, may humanity be richer, wiser and more inspired because of you. And remember: you can never inspire enough.

Thank you for sharing today's wonderful occasion with me. My wife Susmita and our daughters, Neha and Niti, are here with me this evening, applauding your achievements and wishing you the very best in your continuing journey.

Acknowledgments

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