

English School Graduation Speech

Constantinos Michael

Hi everyone, hello English School Class of 2016!

It's an honour and a privilege to be here with you on this happy evening. I'm thankful of Ms. Nicholson and the School board, for inviting me to share with you this momentous occasion. We're gathered here to celebrate your success, which wouldn't be possible without the academic, emotional and material support of your parents, so, before I say anything else, let's take a moment to thank your parents for getting us all here tonight!

It would be remiss of me to not extend the same courtesy to your teachers – some of whom also happen to have been my own teachers.

I see Doctor Mavrommatis is here. I made the mistake of calling the good doctor Mister Mavrommatis, in first form, and judging by his gaze, he still hasn't forgiven me for that.

Our teachers patience and dedication to their noble profession has empowered and will continue to empower you, me, and countless other English School students. Thank you from all of us.

Sixteen years ago I was sitting in these chairs ready to embark on a journey much like yours.

I was thinking of what words of wisdom to impart with you today, and I tried very hard to remember all the advice I got right before leaving for university. I realized though, that the only thing that I actually remembered was the exact moment a group of Cypriots were told that there was no Nescafe to make Frappe with in America. This prompted an audible gasp and immediate panic from most of us, but it turned out to be a very small inconvenience indeed.

Personally, I think you'll find far more devastating the complete lack of Sheftalies or mild winters. These things are much harder to stuff in your luggage than instant coffee.

I decided to tell you about a few stops along my journey, to highlight some of the experiences you might yourself face over the coming years. What I hope to convince you in the process is that though times are hard, opportunity will knock on your door if you embrace your surroundings, if

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you challenge your assumptions about others, and if you challenge the assumptions of others about yourself.

I studied Computer Science in Baltimore. I happened to arrive there a few days earlier than most of my future classmates would arrive. I landed at night after a grueling 18 hour trip, walked around this beautiful, but completely desolate campus, and settled into the dormitory room I would call home for the next year. This was a typical 1920s era dorm – or student hall, if you prefer – where none of the rooms had a bathroom or a shower -- you had to walk down the corridor to the communal bathrooms, with either a towel or a roll of toilet paper in hand. There was no hiding from anyone what you were about to do in the bathroom.

My room was slightly larger than a closet. The minute you closed your door, you felt suffocated.

The spartan surroundings themselves weren't that much of a shock -- you'd think it was a 5* hotel after those infamous National Guard accommodations – sorry guys. What made it hard, was this sudden onset of emptiness, this feeling of disconnection, this realization that your friends and family were scattered far away from you. Even if you felt prepared for the academic work, you'd still, in that moment, be an outsider.

Unbeknownst to me, this void would end up being an opportunity, and it's an opportunity I don't want you to miss out on. In the next few days, the campus became electrified as students started coming in from all 50 states, and 120 countries. Some, just like me and you, would pack their entire life into a single suitcase and get on a plane; others would drive just ten minutes and bring along armchairs, refrigerators and 50" televisions. Others yet, would try and sneak in the occasional, forbidden, pet.

As you'd settled into your tiny room, something magical would happen: the entire floor would keep their doors fully open every evening, and strangers would spill out of their rooms into hallways abuzz with conversation. The hallway would become the living room, and strangers would become classmates as new friendships would forge and flourish.

Out of no real choice of your own, you'd find yourself socializing with people of different ethnicities from all over the world. This group of friends would introduce you to novel ways of thinking. These classmates would introduce you to new food, music and literature from all over the world. They would also teach you, if you're like me, how to do well in class – and I have a confession at this point about my time at the English School: I was not a very good student. My only A in my A-Levels was in Modern Greek. While I was here, the only homework I did, was whatever I could complete in the 5 minutes before class started. One time, in math class, in trying to refute Mr. Hadjigeorgiou's accusation that I was talking in class, I kindly suggested that perhaps he should get himself an ear exam. He told me to lift my desk and sit outside.

All of that would change. In your group study for your first year classes, you'd end up emulating, unknowingly in the beginning, habits that would end up shaping your life, and your career. When you find yourself building technology meant to be used by the whole world, you look back and cherish each perspective, each opinion, each race and creed, each walk of life.

I would not have enjoyed the same success if I chose to surround myself only by the familiar, if I choose to dismiss anyone based on prejudice.

In turn of course, you'd teach everyone how to make Frappe with a water bottle, a skill you'd undeniably master in the army. If you happen to study in the United States, you'd also teach a geographically challenged American or two just what and where Cyprus is.

I am delighted to have returned to a school that is more diverse than the school I left sixteen years ago, so perhaps this advice will be easier for your class to follow than my own: As you start your own experience abroad, I urge you to reach out and make friends with those you meet, and – especially the ones with cars so they can drive you around. Don't just stick to the familiar. Make the most of your opportunity to learn from the whole world. You'll come back with invaluable knowledge, with an indispensable perspective that can make our own problems here seem surmountable. You'll always take Cyprus with you wherever you go, but to be an effective ambassador for this island, you'll have to become citizens of the world as well.

This isn't to say that you should neglect your past, but you should recognize that we celebrate our heritage effortlessly. As graduates, your studies here may indeed be over, but your relationship with the English School is just beginning. Whether in a library in London, or at a beach in the Cyprus summer, you'll find yourself with old friends, celebrating the special bond you formed here.

I recently met a Cypriot investment banker in New York, and per usual when you discover you're meeting a Cypriot abroad, the conversation turned to finding what else we had in common. We quickly found out we were both English School graduates, a couple of years apart. This man had a picture of himself from his English School days. Unbelievably, I happened to be in the background in this picture. Needless to say, we became instant friends.

Your experience will undoubtedly be the same. No matter where in the world you end up, the school will be with you, in classmates close by, or in spirit.

I wish I could tell you however, that your education at the English School was all you needed to guarantee success. Our economy is still in shock in Cyprus, and elsewhere, and most of you will have tough challenges to overcome. The world can at times seem bleak, riddled with the incendiary rhetoric of divisive demagogues. The fate of the European Union is uncertain, and with

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it, the fate of the global economy. Jobs, here or abroad, might not be as bountiful or rewarding as they once were.

Take solace in the fact that uncertainty, and a lackluster economy, are nothing new. They are temporary hiccups, sometimes even opportunities in disguise.

When I began studying computer science in 2002, it was about 18 months after the so called dot-com bubble had burst, after a spectacular half a decade of rapid growth. The digital economy seemed doomed at the time; Computer Scientists and Engineers were losing their jobs in droves, companies were shutting down every day, and investor money had completely dried up. The number of students studying Computer Science in schools had dropped to record lows. My entire Computer Science class at university by the time I graduated was 12 people or so.

I was determined, however, to study Computer Science. I was fascinated by the idea that you could change the world by connecting it. I enjoyed the rigor of writing code, the excitement of creating something out of nothing, order out of chaos. The sad state of the industry did not matter.

When I graduated, I was given the opportunity to join two very different companies: The first, this still relatively small search engine called Google, sounded like my dream childhood job – they gave you free food, you could work on anything you want, and you never had to wear a suit. The second, a major investment bank, lured me with promises of a good salary to join as a banker at their mortgage-backed securities desk.

It's typical for those who study Computer Science or other science and engineering fields, like physics or maths, to receive offers to work for banks in the US -- at some point, about half the graduating class at MIT would go on to work in finance.

When looking at it from a monetary perspective, there was no contest -- the bank paid better, they were growing at a rapid pace, and this was the largest single group within the bank. But I was not passionate about the work; I couldn't imagine waking up in the morning and spending endless hours on something that didn't personally appeal to me. So I followed my heart. I was lucky. The circumstances vindicated my decision, as internet companies flourished and the investment banks floundered with the financial crisis.

I urge you to do the same. Find what you're passionate in, and steer your education towards it. Stay true to your passion; if you're not yet sure what you're passionate about, explore. Take classes that challenge you, and take classes that challenge your assumptions about yourself. If you don't see yourself taking a poetry class, then take a poetry class. If you don't see yourself taking a physics class, take a physics class. Take law, languages, and literature; take math, engineering, and computer science.

And take math, engineering and computer science especially when no one else expects you to.

I happen to work in an industry that is overwhelmingly male. It breaks my heart that a discipline that was pioneered by women like Ada Lovelace and Grace Hopper has managed to completely alienate its founders. Google has one of the highest number of female engineers, but it's only a mere 17%. When I joined, my first manager and the first teammate I mentored were women. They are two of the smartest and most effective engineers I've had the fortune of working with. Looking back at that experience, I can't help but think how many have missed out on opportunities to work in this amazing field. Technology has democratized communication and information, has given us the iPhone and driverless cars, and has done so in every setting -- in big corporations in Silicon Valley, or brilliant startups, including here in Cyprus.

What a shame it would be to miss out on these opportunities for the wrong reasons, because consciously or unconsciously, you might have concluded, or worse, you might have been outright told, this lie: that this is not a field fit for you.

If you find yourself in these shoes, please don't hesitate to take that first leap. Embrace your surroundings and learn from others, and take in whatever opportunity that speaks to you and challenges you. You'll stand out in a crowd for doing so.

You are now graduates of the English School. You are the brightest women and men of your generation.

This school has given you a solid foundation. It has given you wings, and now, it's up to you to spread them and take off.

I wish you all the very best; I, truly, can't wait to see all the wonderful things you'll do next!