Good morning. Big day. BIG DAY! I see a lot of smiling faces today no, not you…I was talking about your parents.

I feel a kinship with you today… more so than with graduates at KU, MU, UMKC… you name it. You see, I went to a small school — the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology — enrollment of 2,400…Not much more than your main campus enrollment.

My most memorable day in college was almost 40 years ago. No, not my graduation. This was back to my freshman year.

I ran sprints for the track team and as I was always a pretty quick starter — I led off the 4-by-100 relay team. I remember that day because three of my teammates and I set the all-time school record that day. The very next week at Districts, I slightly pulled my hamstring in the 100 finals and had to sit out the relay. Our team was so small they actually had to pull a guy from the pole vault to fill my spot. You guessed it — they broke my school record. It was alright, though. Seeing my name on the record board in the school gymnasium just that one time really made me feel I did something that mattered.

That same lesson hit me again three years later just before graduation and has stuck with me ever since. My favorite teacher at school was easily my calculus and differential equations professor Dr. Ronald Weger. Doc Weger was nearly blind, was prone to losing his place on the chalkboard and had easily one of the worst looking wigs you have ever seen. If you saw him near the end of each teaching day, he would always, not sometimes, but always, have chalk on the end of his nose from reading the board at close range. And yet, he was brilliant. He taught calculus like it was life and he cared more about his students than anything else.

I wanted to see Doc Weger before my wife Deanna and I moved to Kansas City. When I walked into his office he said, “Well, hi Greg.” And I couldn’t help but ask him how he knew it was me (it certainly wasn’t from seeing me). He told me he could recognize most of us from our shuffle coming down the hallway.
After about 10 minutes, I said my goodbye, but he stopped me as I left. “Hey Greg, the only thing that matters in life, is to matter in life.”

Doc Weger was right.

Before I get into any more heavy stuff, let’s all take a quick minute to do something important.

Graduates, find your parents or significant others in the crowd (I know you know where they are). Now, tell them thank you. Parents, find your son or your daughter again. Tell them how proud you are. Go ahead…be loud…we’ll wait.

See, you already matter.

Parents, I know how proud you are today. I was there to watch my daughter Jessica cross the stage at Pepperdine; my daughter Kristin at Kansas; and my son Greg Jr. just six months ago. Yes, you did hear that right. I went to school in South Dakota; Jessica went to school in Malibu, California…go figure. The feeling of watching your child having this great accomplishment is just not describable, is it? You’re proud, of course, but it’s so much more than that.

I was a typical engineering graduate. I grew up the son of a science and math teacher, and knew I wanted to be an engineer at 12. I would have never guessed that 35 years later, I’d be running a $3 billion engineering and construction company working in all 50 states and 25 countries.

Based on that experience, I’m told by many that I should now be offering some sage advice. Here’s only one:

Live your motto. Now, school mottos are like belly buttons — everyone has one — but no one much pays attention to them. But your school motto is one of the best I’ve seen — it matters.

How many of you even know what it is? Let’s see a show of hands. Someone shout it out.

That’s right *Fides et Labor* — Latin for “faith and work.”

Faith: faith in our fellow man, faith in our ability to rise above our birth circumstances, faith that there is more good than evil in this world, faith that God has given me the ability to do something important — not successful — important.

Combine faith with work and you have someone who will matter.

Whatever your degree — nursing, economics, history — your planet, your country needs you to matter. And you will, if you live your motto.

English majors — help the less literate become valued members of society…that’s you. Business administration majors — help Kansas City, big KC, as it seeks to become America’s most entrepreneurial city…that’s you. Chemistry and biology majors — become the researcher who cures cancer, Alzheimer’s, juvenile diabetes…that’s you.

You arrived just in time. We need you.
I graduated in college 1980. You weren’t born yet. Some of your parents weren’t born yet. But, some pretty important events took place:

- January — First HP personal computer
- February — Trouble in the Middle East
- March — Voyager I reaches Saturn
- April — Americans taken hostage in Iran
- May — CNN launches 24 hour news network
- July — Saddam Hussein becomes president of Iraq
- September — Engineers open largest-ever transportation tunnel in Switzerland
- December — Fitch and Cronin win Nobel Prize for physics discovery proving matter and anti-matter both do exist.

But also in December, Saddam Hussein begins executions using latest nerve gas technology.

You see, for every achievement we make, there is someone who is willing to pervert it. Our abilities are growing exponentially, but can our humanity keep up? And so I remind you at this young age, it is just as important that you take a leadership role in WHO we are, not just what we are capable of.

I believe in my heart, not to mention my gut, that one of the greatest lessons of a university education is not just coursework, but how important duty — duty to humanity — is to all of us.

Your university doesn’t just produce accountants, teachers, social workers. It produces great thinkers, great leaders, great women and great men. It makes a difference to this city and the people who live here. On the field, you might be Pirates; in this town of mine, we’re looking for Saints.

One more thought and I’ll wrap up. A few years ago, I took a career success course from a Jesuit priest at another small university here in town. Sounds funny. I mean, after all what sort of business expertise are you going to learn from a Jesuit priest? I was wrong. I still remember one of his most important lessons.

He said there were three levels of happiness. The first is physical. You can achieve it pretty easy with a bag of potato chips and a beer.

The second level is likely for each of you, and it comes with personal success. It can be achieved through wealth or notoriety, or even through political power.

The final level — I turned around to see if Doc Weger was in the room — and is achieved by only a few — it is to matter.

Now there is only one way for certain to matter in this life. That’s to be someone else’s mom. Then, well it’s guaranteed.

But as college graduates of this great university, the one thing you all have in common is a learned ability to matter.

If Doc Weger were still alive today, he’d be proud. Not just for the success of his shy and skinny calculus student, but because that student has always hoped to matter in a world where we need you to accept nothing less.