

Learn to Love Change

by Ursula Burns
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It's hard for me not to reflect a little on my own time here at Columbia back in 1980. It was a dream come true. I grew up in a single-parent household in the public housings projects of lower Manhattan — just a few miles from here yet light years away in so many respects.

My mother's highest income year in her life was \$4,400. Yet she managed to send me and my two siblings to private Catholic schools from kindergarten through high school. I didn't fully appreciate it then, but it was a gift of immeasurable value. That was followed by a scholarship to Brooklyn Polytechnic — now NYU Poly — and on to a Master's degree in mechanical engineering here at Columbia.

Mom saw education as a way up and out of the projects. She made whatever sacrifices were necessary to see to it that we had

an opportunity to get a good education and then she insisted that we take advantage of that opportunity.

All of the students here today have that same opportunity. Don't ever take it for granted. Some of you are graduating. Others will follow along soon enough. All of you will immerse yourselves in a world full of opportunity and challenge.

I've given some thought about what my advice to you would be and I've come up with five simple items. So here goes. First, I would encourage all of you to follow the example of Columbia

CEO PERSPECTIVES

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and embrace change and learning willingly and with a sense of excitement and wonder. The University is celebrating its 258th anniversary. Think about that. It has survived and excelled and re-invented itself for two and a half centuries because it has evolved and changed.

The only thing I can predict with any certainty is that change will be a constant in your lives as well. Back in 1980 when I sat where you are sitting today, there were no cell phones. The Internet, let alone the iPad, was not even the stuff of dreams. The fax machine was considered close to magic. Chinese capitalism and the fall of the Soviet Union were unimaginable. Genetics was in its infancy. The word terrorism was not a part of our vocabulary. Even as recently as a few years ago, the thought of a global economic melt-down was beyond comprehension.

I can't pretend to know how your world will change — but I know it will and at a pace that will continue to increase exponentially. You can't stop it. In many ways, you are the cause of it. Learn to love it. Make it your ally. Stay relevant by devoting yourself to a lifetime of learning. You are being given a wonderful academic foundation — an invitation to begin a journey of learning, exploration and growth. Treasure it.

Second, have fun. Enjoy life. Choose a career that gives you pleasure and fulfillment. Surround yourselves with people who make you laugh. Don't fall into the trap of letting someone else define your success and happiness.

Some of your parents here won't like what I'm about to say. When they left school, their immediate future was pretty well prescribed. The vast majority of college graduates got a job, settled down, bought a house and had a family — all by the age of 30.

That has changed dramatically. Now the decade after college is spent trying a few jobs, getting a graduate degree, traveling, living and then settling down. I, for one, think it's a very good development.

That's because people are more likely to be successful if they have a passion for what they do. Finding it takes time. Make yourself a promise today. If down the road, you find that your career is not fun, revert to my earlier piece of advice — change!

Third, be true to yourself and your values. Your family ... Columbia ... your church or synagogue or mosque or mountaintop ... have given you a set of core values — a moral compass. Hang on to it. A predecessor of mine at Xerox used to say he tried to live his life as though any piece of it might end up in his obituary. Would he be proud of it? That's not a

bad test. I have an even better one. It hangs on the wall of my office. "Don't do anything that wouldn't make your Mom proud!"

Fourth, do good in the world. Our planet is in trouble. We need your help. When your life's journey ends, I promise you that you won't care very much about the money you made or the status you've achieved if you haven't made the world a better place along the way.

Don't want to do good? You might want to think again. People like Bernie Madoff and Ken Lay got to the "top" at all cost and then started to give back to try to redeem themselves. It doesn't work. Doing good is not an "add on" but central to leading a rewarding life. As my Mother used to tell anyone who would listen, we all have an obligation to "put back" more than we "take out." Leave more than you take — not a bad formula for true success.

At the risk of getting preachy, I'd like to ask you to reflect for just a few minutes on how privileged you are compared to most of the world's population. Think about this: one-fifth of the world's people goes to bed hungry every night and wakes up every morning without hope; four billion people lives on less than \$2 a day; more than one billion of the world's population can't read or write.

You don't have to travel around the world to find people in desperate need. Within a mile or so of this beautiful campus, our brothers and sisters are in desperate need of a helping hand. Who will hear them? If not us, who? If not now, when? As scripture tells us: "*To those to whom much is given, much is expected.*"

Live your life so that at the end of your journey, you will know that your time here was well spent, that you left behind more than you took away.

Fifth, do your profession proud. By your choice of studies, you have entered an extraordinary community — a profession that is as old as the pyramids of ancient Egypt and as fresh as the dreams of your generation.

Think for a moment of any of the world's challenges — renewable energy, hunger, disease, urban congestion, decaying infrastructure — and the answers to a large measure are found in engineering and applied science. What a remarkable time to be an engineer or scientist!

We need to shine a light on what we do ... celebrate our heroes ... make what we do exciting to young people. And all of you can help — by volunteering in schools ... becoming active in professional associations ... by mentoring and giving young people positive role models.

(Excerpted from Xerox CEO Ursula Burn's address at Columbia's School of Engineering and Applied Science.)