

As those of you who read emails from the University president know (and I know there are at least a few of you out there), the day after Spring Break I send an email to graduating seniors asking them—asking you—“what would you like me to talk about in my Commencement remarks.”

This year, I was particularly struck by a theme common to many of your responses: “with all of the challenges of starting a career, with all of the demands of our professional lives, how do we find a balance? Many of you asked, along with that question, how do *you* find a balance in your life? What are the components of the “*meaningful personal life*” for which Drake’s mission statement promises us we’ll be prepared?”

Now I said that I was “struck” by the frequency of this question, but I wasn’t the least bit surprised. Your generation, as you look at career opportunities, is insisting on a *balance* between life and work—a balance that certainly wasn’t typical of members of earlier generations, who for the most part have tended to define themselves by their occupations—by *what they did*. You’ve got a much healthier attitude, and you are to be heartily commended for it. It’s not that you don’t have ambition, or that you don’t expect to work hard and to reap rewards from that work, but—to your great credit—you also expect to have a *life*.

In spite of the fact that I suspect that Maddy will find any attempt on my part to explain work/life balance to be ironic, I am going to attempt to provide an answer to your question, and I’m going to answer it in two ways; the second in a manner that I suspect you’ll find unusual. But more of that in a moment.

The first part of the answer is that—from my perspective—a meaningful personal life isn’t about *you*. It’s about *others*—it’s *the nature of the consequences of the fact that you were here*. It is a matter of engaged citizenship, a matter of finding a way to ensure that it *made a difference that*

*you were here*—that someone's else's life, some organization or institution, some community, maybe even the whole world—is better off because you spent some time on earth. *It should matter that you were here.*

But there's also another vitally important component of a meaningful personal life, and that part *is* about you. What are the ways in which you try to make sense of things? To understand the world and what happens in it? What are the ways in which you try to decipher the promise of human capabilities, the ways in which you try to comprehend your own place in the order of things? What are the ways in which you begin to understand who you are, and who you want to be? What are the ways in which you search for inspiration? And, as selfish as it may sound—but equally important—what are the ways in which you seek comfort, solace and refuge from the erosion of your soul that comes with prolonged, excessive immersion in reality? Ensuring that you're grounded in reality is essential, of course, but so is dreaming, so are daily vacations from everything else that consumes you—even from the many good things.

So let me close this part of my answer by telling you what that component of my life is: it's *narratives*, stories. Narratives—whether created thousands of years ago or last week, can help us better understand how we came to be who we are, and who we can be. They help us see the world through the eyes of others, they create worlds that we've never seen before, and they are testimony to the immense creative power of the human imagination. Immersing myself in narratives—in the stories—is the most important way—outside of family—in which I ground my personal life.

For ten years now, at Commencement, it has become expected by my friends on the faculty and staff that at some point in my remarks I will quote a relevant passage from a narrative – a work of fiction – by one of my favorite 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian authors. But, as you well know, words are not the only way to tell a story – there are stories in colors and shapes, in movement, and in sounds.

And that is where the other part of my meaningful personal life lies—not only in my passion for reading fiction, but in my love of music. My father was a highly acclaimed jazz trumpet player. I did not inherit his talent or discipline, but I did inherit his passion for music, the joy of listening to it and the immense pleasure of making joyful sounds. I am, thanks to my gene pool, one of those people who has music playing in his head all the time (and I only wish I could make all that I hear in my head come out of my guitar!) and I am one of those people who literally disappears into music when I’m listening, oblivious to the reality around me (which makes for interesting moments when I run every morning with my iPod shuffling through its 9500 songs...). Music takes me to places that I can’t get to any other way, enables me to see the world in ways that words cannot convey, and immerses me in emotions from sadness to the sublime. Music makes us ageless, at least while we’re listening to it or playing it—an important attribute at my age. As Kurt Vonnegut wonderfully said (and I think he was quoting someone else, but I don’t remember whom), “music is the only true evidence that we have for the existence of god.” Personally, I’d state it a little differently: music is one of the most important ways in which we prove that *we* exist, and that gives purpose to the fact that we’re here.

Given the immense talents of the man whom we’ve honored today with an honorary degree, saxophonist Dick Oatts, it seems only fitting that I conclude my narrative about the ways in which one gives life meaning in different mode, quoting some of my favorite “authors” who crafted their stories with notes, rather than words. If you’ll give us a moment, Dick and I will be right with you to continue the story....

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwSbBLgqq14&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwSbBLgqq14&feature=player_embedded)