A commencement address presents a special challenge for me. To be charged, to be different, to be memorable, and yet concise in eight minutes. That’s tough for a guy who talks for a living. Preparing for this speech gave me a rare opportunity to reflect on my own values and the path that I have taken. I hope today to share with you some of my experiences. No one really remembers the words of his or her commencement speaker. But my hope that today I can encourage you to think about your next move, or that rather I can challenge you to follow your passions, to be the best that you can be.

Now, let me tell you just a little bit about myself. Since I was a young boy, I always had a fascination with radio. At night I would sneak a transistor radio under my pillow. The personalities and sounds that came through that box took me from my home in Tarrytown, New York, to places that I had never seen. To Nashville, Tennessee, to the sound of the Grand Old Opry, to Chicago and the crack of the bat at Wrigley Field - what a powerful, transformative experience that was. It was a wonderful journey that would eventually lead me down a career path that I have never regretted.

I graduated from college in the mid ‘70s. The economy was not unlike what it is today. It was very hard to find a job. And I wasn’t able to get a job in broadcasting as I had hoped. And instead I took a job at the Nestle Company that I believed would give the financial and marketing skills that I would need later on in my career. I was doing well at Nestle. A career path in a multinational corporation was very promising. But my heart was in radio. And after two years at Nestle, I decided it was time to follow my drive, and that wasn’t chocolate. I remember sitting down with my Dad, a Wall Street banker, telling him that I was leaving the Nestle Corporation. I had taken a job as a commissioned radio salesperson in Boston Massachusetts. You’ve got to remember this guy’s reaction. Broadcasting definitely was not on his radar screen. Then I talked to my managers at Nestle, and they all looked at me and said, you’ve got to be crazy. It was pretty much what everyone said to me.

When I got to Boston, my wife and I lived in a basement apartment, paying $175 a month in rent. That included utilities, though. Times were tough. My first commission check was $57.47. That was for a month. While barely enough to eat, I can honestly say that I never questioned that decision. This period was the beginning of the most exciting chapter of my life. It would be nice to say that things quickly fell into place. But that doesn’t happen that way. Success will only come through hard work, determination and ambition. Eventually things did fall into place, although I’m always looking for that next phase, that next challenge and that next opportunity.

Now, like when I arrived in Boston, you are entering a very exciting time in your lives. Your challenge is to find where you can make the greatest impact on your community, on your nation and on your world. The winds of change are very robust. They are of spring, economic rebalancing in the United States, advances in technology and the revolutionary changes in the
delivery of our healthcare system. The new titles or initials after your name that you’ll receive today do not entitle you to success. But rather, they give you an important choice, the choice to take risks and go out and make things happen, or to play it safe and be a spectator in the gallery of change. Follow your ambitions. Take risks. But know one thing is certain. You’ll make mistakes. You’ll stumble. And you will fail. But you’ll get back up again.

Look at Steve Jobs, president and CEO of Apple. In 1983, Jobs was fired from Apple, the company he cofounded, because of a clash between he and his honor, his boss. Ten years later, in a desperate move to save a failing company, Jobs is brought back to Apple. After the success of the iPhone, iPod, iPad, Apple not only changed the way people communicate, but it’s now the largest technology company on the planet. Jobs met adversity but his entrepreneurialism and his creativity ultimately led him back to the top.

Dr. Paul Farmer looked across the world and decided that quality healthcare could indeed be delivered to the poorest and most desperate countries. It was a monumental challenge. But he could see through the barriers, and today the organization he founded, Partners in Health, is effectively combating AIDS, tuberculosis and other diseases in Haiti, Rwanda and Peru and elsewhere around the globe.

Do not squander this opportunity you’ve been given. Do not be afraid. Instead of asking the question, why, ask the question, why not? Never, never let anyone tell you that you can’t achieve what you’re most passionate about. You’ve completed business school. It’s time to develop a business plan, for your life, a strategic plan. I recommend that each of you find your own board of directors, the mentors, the role models, the heroes in your life who can provide you with guidance you need as you execute this plan. Taking risks, challenging the status quo and making change require a strong support system and a group of people who aren’t afraid to tell you when they disagree with you. You don’t have to take their advice all the time. In fact, you shouldn’t. But surrounding yourself with smart people who will challenge you every day is one of the surest paths to growth and success. And make sure your plan has balance, because there’s more to life than career. There’s family, friendship, community, and as my dear friend and one of my personal board members, Norman Knight, a well-known philanthropist, always tells me, “Peter, I came into this world with nothing, and I plan to leave it with nothing.”

In the end, your life will be measured by what you did and what you gave, and not by how much you have. Bono of U2 once said, “in general, people put too much faith in the rich, the famous and the politician, and not enough in themselves.” I hope you leave here today with a strong faith in yourself, and you believe that there is nothing that you can’t accomplish.

On behalf of myself, my family, my greater media family, congratulations business school class of 2011. And as we say in radio, thanks for listening.