Wycliffe Grousbeck Commencement Address
Sawyer Business School Graduate Ceremonies - May 22, 2010

Thank you, Dean O'Neill. Thank you all. I first want to congratulate all of you for making it to graduation as the great Class of 2010, and I would like to give you all a round of applause. [Applause] I am here as the co-owner and CEO of the Boston Celtics. I am here as the parent of a special needs child, as a former venture capitalist, I suppose. But most of all I'm here as a proud 1992 MBA recipient, and I want to look back on the 18 years since and help you look ahead.

It shouldn’t take me more than 90 or 100 minutes to look back on 18 years, so let's all dig in. This will go by faster than you think. I do want to give you a few words about the twists and turns and learning opportunities I've experienced along the way, principally, maybe, mistakes I might have made along the way. There are three points that came to me as I sat down to write this speech. But as I organized my thoughts and worked on the three points, I experienced a very humbling and very disconcerting realization. I sat in a room just like this 18 years ago. There was a commencement speaker. I have no recollection of who he or she was or a single word that they said. [Laughter] It's very discouraging. [Laughter] So that's where all this is leading, another forgettable speech. Well, I'm not going down that route.

I would really like to make this a very memorable address, one that you might possibly remember 18 years from now if you were asked to ever give such a speech. So I'm going to shake things up and we're going to start right now. I'm going to try to demonstrate ESP, a little bit of mind reading. I'm going to ask the Class of 2010 to visualize one or two or three very important people in your lives, visualize these people, professional people who impacted you, who showed you the way, who made a difference for you already, who moved the needle. Visualize these people in your minds. I don't know them. But I'll see if I can read your minds, and I will tell you something about each and every one of those people. So if you can just do me that favor, think of the people who mean the most to you as you chart your course. I'm going to get the signals. I'm going to tell you something about them.

Whatever they did, at their very, very high inspirational level, they were not doing it for the money. They were doing it out of love; they were doing it out of passion; they were doing it out of caring. They were doing it because it was mandatory for them somehow to follow that path and make that difference and perform at that high level. And certainly many of them did draw a paycheck if you thought of a teacher or a coach or a mentor or a religious figure. You know, there may be paychecks involved. There may be careers involved, but that's not why fundamentally they did what they did. And that's not why they did it so well.

I'll give you one real-world example. One of my inspirational people most definitely was Red Auerbach, the great Red Auerbach. I had the very great privilege of working with him for four years and becoming close friends and colleagues. Yes, he drew a salary from the Celtics, but that had nothing to do with why he was there and
the 16 World Championships that he won. He was about pride and winning and doing the right thing. And it happened to keep him solvent. He could buy groceries, but that was way beyond, way beside the point.

I have another example, much less, not in the Red Auerbach category, but my own family situation. First, here's a snapshot of my life in 1992, 18 years ago, a steady job, a great marriage, dream house, northern California, second child on the way. And our second child was born totally blind. It was a shock. It was a wake-up call. It was a thunderbolt. Corinne and I processed it, thought about it, and decided to devote ourselves to his life and progress and happiness and to the cause of preventing and treating blindness in other children. We had dreams before that day, but somehow they suddenly seemed sort of ordinary and achievable. Suddenly our dreams had become maybe impossible and therefore so compelling. We wanted to eradicate all kinds of blindness. What a gift it really turned out to be somehow to have those dreams, to have a purpose much bigger than ourselves and to be able to reorient our lives in a way that seems to actually offer more possibilities. And what a real dream it has been to Campbell's dad in so many ways I can't even begin to mention them to you.

So my point is, if you truly do what you love doing, what you need to do, what you feel inside, not only will you enjoy your life more, but you actually have a chance of performing at an even higher level. It actually can be a great career move to follow your heart. If you're beating yourself down just chasing a paycheck, it stands to reason that your performance will eventually suffer and so will the paychecks. Instead, do what you love, and that way you can be a star. So that's point one, do what you love to do.

Point two, do it as a team. Do it with teamwork. That's how you get there. You can't do it on your own. I learned a little bit about that rowing in college. I learned something about that in business school, something about venture capital trying to build teams, I finally started to figure out when I got to the Celtics. We assembled an ownership group, bought the team and realized that what we had there was not good enough. We couldn't win the championship with what we had at the Celtics in 2003. So we said to ourselves, and we said to Boston, we've got to be patient here. We've got to get a new general manager to make some draft picks, a new coach to patiently coach up the kids. We've got to tell the fans to hang in there. We've got to be patient, bide our time and eventually we'll have enough chips and pieces, we might be able to make a big move or two. And that's actually the way it played out.

I think because it was clear, and we didn't have mixed agendas, and we were all on the same page, there was simply no confusion and no in-fighting. We felt like a solid team. We hung together as a team. And then we won the whole darned thing in 2008. Maybe this is a good time to put this little ring on. [Laughter] [Applause]

I've got a hand free, but I can't forget what might happen. I'm not good enough to do this kind of thing on my own. I don't know if anybody is. But with my co-owners,
who are amazing people, the teammates, the players, the coaches, the general manager, they're all high-quality, top-notch people and it's a pleasure and a privilege to share victory with them and even sharing the pain of a defeat is much, much better than not having played the game at all.

I want to conclude with my third point. Along the way, please orient yourselves towards the needs of those who are less fortunate. I do not want to lecture you, of all people, about our responsibility to the needy. I am quite sure that many of you, all of you, are very dedicated to community causes already and I know that that's a very important part of the Suffolk education. I just want to give you one more real-world example from my life. People ask me, what is the most enjoyable thing about being involved with the Celtics? At a parade in 2008 was nice, the ring, beating the Lakers by 39 points in game 6. [Laughter] I've got a vanity plate and it says number 39 on it. You have to be a real Celtics fan to know why 39 is so important.

But my actual favorite moment ever with no exaggeration is a snowy night a few years back I saw a dad and his special needs daughter, his little daughter, who had cerebral palsy, I think, struggling to cross Causeway Street before a game. She was wearing a Paul Pierce jersey. It was tough for her to even walk in the snow. I saw her jersey. I stopped. I rolled down my window and I asked if she wanted to maybe meet Paul before the game. It was so easy to make it happen. It's almost embarrassing to talk about it. It really is. I feel so lucky to be able to do these things with so little, minimal effort. Anyway, we did take a picture of her meeting Paul. And a day or two later I received a note from her dad. He said you don't know me or my daughter. But may I tell you, I have never seen her smile quite like that. She told me later, it's the happiest day of her life. I've been involved with the Celtics for seven years, 400 wins, a ring, whatever else, and actually that is probably my favorite moment. So, I don't even remember if we won that night, so there you go.

To me, that's what really matters at this point. And I'm not the only one. The farther down the track you go, when you talk to people who have sort of been there and back a few times, you realize the more you start thinking about other people. And I think you're off to a great start in that regard. So looking back on the Celtics experience in all my 18 years, since I sat in a room just like this, about to receive my MBA, I think there might be a message. You won't be perfect. You may make some mistakes. But you can have a great future. You have so much you can do, so much you can give. If you decide to do what you love, do it with great people and remember why we are all really here, you've got a great shot to really make a mark. And 18 years from now, you're speaking to someone somewhere with a big smile on your face. So Sawyer Business School, Class of 2010, I truly salute you, wish you all the best and I dare you to forget this speech. Thank you very much. [Applause]