Dean Steinberg, SU faculty and staff, class of 2014 and distinguished family and friends, I am honored to have the opportunity to address you today. Class of 2014 you have done it – well, almost – I am all that stands between you and a graduate degree. You have endured the rigorous study, the exams, the snow, the roommates, the food, the part time jobs, the winter flu epidemics and more to get here, so surely you can endure a few words from me. Each of us with a graduate degree knows that in order to get that degree, we needed some help along the way. So I will take the liberty, on your behalf, of thanking the family, friends and faculty who gave you the gift of their support.

I would like to tell you a few stories about finding passion and purpose in my career and why it is the best time ever for you to do the same. Mark Twain said, “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” I like what Twain said, and, I would amend it to say “the days (plural) you find out why”. Passion and purpose don’t remain static throughout your life. And often, we only recognize a change long after it happens.

Looking back, one of those pivotal days happened to me when I was a high school senior in February 1972. All my college bound friends were weighing their acceptance letters. I hadn’t applied to college and did not intend to -- a source of considerable friction with my parents who were first generation college graduates – my Mom an English teacher and my Dad a Mechanical engineer. At the dinner table, where such things were discussed, my Mom asked for the hundredth time, ‘Marc, don’t you think you should at least give college a try?’. ‘No, Mom. I want to be a poet and I don’t need to go to college for that. I need to bum around, be a hobo and have real life experiences so I’ll have something to write
about”, I replied. ‘Poetry?’, she said, ‘I didn’t know you wrote poetry. Do you mind showing me some?’ ‘Sure’, I said and handed over a few beat up notebooks.

A week later at the dinner table my mother announced, ‘Marc I read your poems and I think that you should be an engineer’. To remove any doubt she added ‘I think you should be an engineer or you will starve.’ She was absolutely brutal and absolutely right. My passion for making things was obvious to anyone who knew me. From the age of four I took things apart and created gadgets – shortwave receivers, radio transmitters, pinball machines, bombs, rockets, bombs on top of rockets. I went to a special high school where I studied electronics for 3 periods a day for three years. Yet suddenly at 17 I wanted to abandon this passion in favor of being a hipster poet because I wanted to be cool. I learned a few things from this episode: first, never turn your back on a true passion to live someone else’s idea of cool and second, sometimes we need to trust those close to us help us see what is obvious. (And, never, ever show your poetry to your English teacher mother)

So off I went to college to become an engineer. After graduation I worked for General Electric Aerospace on military radars, which I loved. The work was challenging, the tools were great and everyone was smart and willing to teach. In 1985 I was assigned to visit Silicon Valley to help troubleshoot a recent GE acquisition. I was stunned by the explosion of technology companies and free-wheeling startup culture in the Valley. The PC revolution was at the knee of the curve. As a big military contractor, I felt like a silver miner in the middle of a gold rush.
A few weeks later, my boss told me that he was leaving to start a new company and he wanted me to join him. I was tempted. But I was on the fast track at GE. I was the sole provider for twin three year old girls, a wife and a big mortgage. My head said no, but my heart said yes. My trusted personal advisors agreed with my head. I can still hear my grandmother shouting at me, ‘You’re going to do what? You’re going leave a great job at the mighty General Electric Corporation to do what? That’s the craziest thing I ever heard!’ Remember what I just said about listening to those closest to you? Well, sometimes, you have to listen to your inner voice and make a leap of faith.

I made the leap to help build a new company and I never looked back. With financial backing from family and friends we grew from 7 to 700 people. I found the adventure, travel, technical challenges, leadership challenges and global friendships I had longed for. And, in the process, I found an important life purpose – making air travel safer. Every day, three million people safely fly through the hardware and software we built and that makes me feel good. Aviation connects people in a way which the internet never will – face to face with all the sights, sounds and smells that go with the physical world. When you travel to a foreign land and break bread with someone there you become connected -- and it is hard to hate someone you are connected to.

That’s my story and I can guess what you are thinking -- “Gosh Marc, that is swell story. Passion and purpose would be nice but I have a lot of other worry beads – like financial security; finding a job with a reliable paycheck to pay off my school loans; affordable health care, a decent place to live and, if I am lucky, finding my soul mate”. These are legitimate worries and I will not try to tell you otherwise, but here is a little secret I will share with you, This
is the single best time ever to be a newly minted graduate with a technical degree. Best Time Ever. Period. Full stop.

When I say best time ever, I mean ever in the history of mankind. Better than the Renaissance. Better than the Age of Enlightenment. Better than the Tech boom of the 90’s. Today, as creators and makers, we have access to Gigaflop-class computational power which runs on a battery and fits in our pocket. This computational power can be linked anywhere in the world at nearly the speed of light for $50 a month. We have at our disposal desktop 3D printers which can produce any mechanism we can imagine, or print any circuit we design, or create a living organism, or probe structure at sub-atomic scale. On a desktop! And, you don’t have to be a multi-billion dollar corporation to own one. The exploding open source movement for both software and hardware allows small teams to reliably create complex systems by standing on the shoulders of the very best coders and designers in the world. For free! We are witness to the most robust, fecund intellectual commons the world has ever seen. If you can imagine it (and it doesn’t violate physical laws) you can build it – in short order with a very small team. I would give my left arm to be in your shoes today!

Beyond this technical revolution we are in the midst of social, marketing and financial revolutions which are equally empowering. Traditional paths to market, long controlled by large corporations, have been disintermediated by the likes of Amazon and Ebay; Etsy and Tindie. Now anyone can get their product, service, or art to market in short order. The public mindshare long controlled by Madison Avenue is now eclipsed by social media like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The ability to connect consumers, producers and like minded people is available to
anyone with a smart phone. Access to capital has also changed dramatically with angels and venture capitalists trolling the halls of our universities looking for the next Big Thing. If you don’t like VC’s you can crowd source your funding via Kickstarter. And, miracle of miracles, it is now cool to be a nerd. We even have our own TV shows like Big Bang Theory and Silicon Valley.

Welcome, graduates, to the new and improved renaissance. Where nerds are cool. Where the balance of power between nation states, corporations and capital on the one hand, and networked individual creative talent on the other, has shifted decisively and irrevocably towards talent. The war with talent is over and talent has won. And, not a moment too soon. Because coincident with this revolution we are faced with a hot and crowded planet; a planet with diminishing natural resources and looming environmental catastrophes; a planet with increasingly dysfunctional governance structures. We need this new renaissance and we need your talent.

So, citizens of the new renaissance, you have the tools and opportunity to save our planet and, along the way, pay off your school loans, find a soul mate and affordable health care. Because, This is the Best Time Ever. Find your passion, find your purpose, and as Steve Jobs said, ‘Go put a ding in the universe’. Dream big. Be big. Be builders.

Thank you and Good Luck.