

Commencement Speech

Good Afternoon URI faculty, friends, families, and soon-to-be graduates.

I am very honored to be standing here today. And I am very lucky. Sometimes, in the midst of midterms and essays, presentations and all-nighters, it is easy to forget that college is a blessing so many cannot afford. The knowledge you have gained here at URI will serve you in remarkable ways. Your experiences here will become one of the most powerful and influential tools you can wield in your next adventure. They will subtly define you, joining to form those foundational blocks that make you, you. Whether in wicked waters or serene seas, your college experiences will help you make choices during the moments that really matter.

By a show of hands, how many of you have had a defining moment during your life?

Many of you.

Defining moments are usually thought of as something that changes your life course substantially. Something happens, and it makes us question, and maybe even challenge, our place in the world, and whether or not we're satisfied with it. These moments shape our character, test our devotion to one another, alter the course of our careers. Defining moments are important to us, for they delineate which path we're going to venture down next, what adventure awaits us. We have a few of them in our lifetimes, and if you're a particularly audacious person, maybe you'll have several. But what about the un-defining moments?

Un-defining moments, as I like to call them, make up all of the time in-between those defining moments that I just asked you to recall. They are the moments that make up the rest of our days in the gaps between the extraordinary. Chatting with your coworkers. Checking out at the grocery store. Having dinner with your significant other. All mundane, all regular parts of our day that usually don't rattle up our subconscious too much. However, just because these parts of

our days may seem routine, it does not mean they are insignificant. In fact, I would argue that these un-defining moments are just as important, if not more important, than the defining moments.

The un-defining moments reveal how we fundamentally interact with the world around us, how we treat people. And it is in those moments where it is easiest to forget who or what we are.

It is easy to ignore a coworker who constantly asks frivolous questions. It is harder to be accommodating, to work with them through whatever problem they're trying to solve.

It is easy, after a long day at work, to snap at the grocery store cashier who can't find the right serial number for your produce. It is harder to be patient, to pause without irritation or exasperation.

It is easy to shut down your partner when they try to bring up something you don't want talk about over dinner. It is harder to open your mind to their thoughts and feelings.

These are actions that make up part of the more mundane aspects of life. And it is because we think of these parts of our life as nothing *but* ordinary, we neglect to devote our full selves to them. We don a mask of indifference during these moments, content to run on the treadmill of life without much thought or scrutiny. We box ourselves off to the people around us, submitting to our bubble existences to push through our daily tasks.

Over my four years at college, I heard the following phrase over and over again: "I'm sorry, I just didn't have the time." Whether it was a genuine reply from a friend to a friend, or a desperate plea from a student to a professor, we seem to say this phrase a lot. And we say it not only to strangers, but to our friends, our family, our loved ones. We seem content with that

excuse, because really, there is only so much time in a single day. Only so many moments that we can devote to serving the people around us. But it's a bad excuse.

Your graduation from the University of Rhode Island may very well be a defining moment in your lifetime. But in the days, weeks, and months that follow your graduation, there are going to be a lot of un-defining moments. Whether you decide to work full-time, travel, volunteer, or serve our country, there are going to be times when your interactions with the people around you are going to matter. You may think of these experiences as regular, and they may only last a few seconds, but they will be crucial in portraying your character and integrity.

Pausing to ask your boss how his or her big presentation went. Smiling at someone walking down the hallway. Stopping to help someone in need. Even the smallest bit of kindness, the tiniest act of benevolence, can stretch farther than you could ever imagine.

The biggest piece of advice I can give to my fellow graduates is this: invest yourself in the un-defining moments. You will *always* have the time to choose gentleness over irritation, sympathy over apathy. By isolating ourselves from the moments we believe do not matter, we fail to understand the world around us and our place in it. Open up your eyes, your ears, and your hearts to the people and places that surround you. You may be surprised at how much good you can find.