

OSU Commencement Speech
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President Ray, Provost Ed Feser, Trustees, members of OSU faculty, students, distinguished guests, graduates and proud parents, thank you for inviting me to share this momentous occasion with you. It is a great honor to be among you today.

Fifty years ago I had the privilege to address my fellow graduates from this stage as ASOSU President. I came back 25 years later and I hope to be the first to be invited back again in 25 years!

Today I stand before you as a proud alumnus, celebrating your success. You are moments away from receiving your hard-earned degrees, a wonderful achievement for which I congratulate each and every one of you, and your parents. I know that Oregon State has done an excellent job in preparing you for the next chapter in your journey. Fifty years ago I was sitting where you are now. Let me take you back a little.

I grew up in Turkey and knew early on that I wanted to pursue my academic career in the United States. My parents' means were limited and in those days, it was not common for a high school graduate to venture out so far from home. I was however determined and applied to all the major universities, such as Columbia and Carnegie Mellon. I was accepted to all of them - but there was a major problem: none of them would grant me a scholarship. And without one it was impossible for me to pursue my dream. Just when I was close to giving up, my high school math teacher Mr. Grady Hobson told me about OSU, urged me to apply and said he would write a recommendation letter. I had never heard of Oregon let alone OSU. So, the first thing I did was look up Oregon State on a map.

Back then, OSU had the foresight to promote the enrolment of foreign students and kept their tuition very low. I was charged just 32.-USD per term where non-resident US students paid 300 USD. Mr. Hobson must have written a very favorable recommendation letter as I also received an interfraternity council scholarship for my freshman year covering my room and board when I stayed in one fraternity each semester.

As I set off for college from Turkey, my father gave me 1,000.-USD for my travel expenses and other needs. In those days and considering my family's limited means, it was a huge sacrifice. That day I decided to work as hard as I could to pay for my own tuition and not be a burden on my family.

It took me 8 days on a ship from Istanbul to New York and from there I bought a \$99 Greyhound bus ticket and started my 3,000 mile journey to Portland, Oregon. When I arrived in Oregon I had only \$100 left of what I had thought was a small fortune.

I was astounded by the OSU campus, especially the size of the football field. Our largest stadium in Turkey was half the size. I threw myself into life at OSU in every way. I was the only Turkish student in my year. But I didn't let that stop me and got elected to the Student Body. It was the first time in OSU history a foreign student had been elected to the Student Body in freshman class. I worked my way up and in my final year was elected as president of ASOSU. I had two secretaries working for me and a salary of 100.-USD a month. I was rich ! 😊

One of the most memorable highlights of my time as ASOSU President was hosting Bobby Kennedy. We drove together to campus in a convertible and as he was waving to the crowds who had come out to greet him I got so carried away that I began to wave as well. Bobby Kennedy gave an unforgettable speech at the Gill Coliseum that day.

This whole experience was to shape my future in another way. As I was so busy working to pay my way through college and with ASOSU activities my grades suffered. I graduated with a 2.17 GPA. I didn't let this put me off and applied to Harvard Business School. My application envelope was stuffed with pictures of all my activities as ASOSU president and pictures with Bobby Kennedy. I believe, as a result I was accepted.

My time at OSU was foundational for all that lay ahead in my life. I take this opportunity to remember with gratitude President Jensen, my American family the late Mr. and Mrs. Litchfield in Newport Oregon and all my professors and classmates who embraced me and made my time at OSU so memorable.

My story unfolded in so many unexpected ways over the years as I pursued business and philanthropy. I did not imagine at all 50 years ago how my life would turn out – just as many of you don't know today. For the lucky ones among you who have found your passion, your calling, your future endeavor - good luck. For those like me who didn't have a clear plan, understand that life sometimes enables you to choose and sometimes to be chosen but what **you** do, what you act upon is what determines success and fulfilment.

For all of you I have a few thoughts that I have strived to follow in my own journey.

Choose to be kind. What you will regret most in your life will be failures of kindness. We all have an inescapable connection with the outside world; we touch each other's lives simply by existing. Roald Dahl said: "I think probably kindness is my number one attribute in a human being. I'll put it before any of those things like courage or bravery or generosity." So make it your goal to touch as many lives as possible, raise your own voice on behalf of those who cannot, be powerful for the ones who are powerless.

Don't settle for conventionalism. Question, challenge and transform everything. But above all question, challenge and transform **yourself** to be better. There is always something you can do. In the words of Martin Luther King "If you can't fly run. If you can't run walk. If you can't walk, crawl, but by all means keep moving."

Failure in life is inevitable. I certainly have a number of failures I could share. They taught me things about myself that I could not have learned any other way. You will never truly learn your own strength until you have been tested by adversity. So embrace it, learn from it and move on to achieve greater things.

Don't let age or circumstance confine your dreams. To dream, to imagine is the seed of all invention and innovation. My ultimate dream was to establish a university and I realized that dream at the age of 63. In fact today 6000 miles away on the other side of the world over 1000 students from Ozyegin University are having their own graduation ceremony.

Above all - engage. The most important human need is connection. Widen your horizon, embrace other cultures, learn from them. Empathize with other humans whose experiences you have never shared. You will learn from this more than you will learn from anything else. Become a part of this world, don't just stand on the side lines.

It is your life, your future and so I will end with the words of the **Sufi mystic Rumi**: "Don't be satisfied with stories of how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth"

Class of 2017, I urge you all to unfold your own myth!

GO BEAVS!