

Faculty commencement speech centers on ‘secret to happiness’

by News Bureau - Monday, December 17, 2007

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/272/faculty-commencement-speech-centers-on-secret-to-happiness/>

Ronald Rindo, English professor, shared advice on how to find happiness at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh’s commencement ceremony Dec. 15.

Here is a transcript of his speech:

“Chancellor Wells, Provost Earns, colleagues, candidates for graduation, family and friends, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this morning.

“When I was a boy, my grandmother used to tell me, ‘Get a college education, kid. It’s something you can take with you no matter where you go, and it’s one thing no one can take away from you.’ I followed her advice, and she was right. And now you’ve followed her advice, too, even though you never met her. Congratulations on your accomplishments.

“As you leave UW Oshkosh, you will join other college graduates in search of more or less the same things. While the specifics of our dreams are unique to each of us, human beings have similar hopes, and yours are probably similar to mine and to those of everyone else here today.

“You will seek a loving lifetime partner if you have not already found one here in Oshkosh; you will buy your own home; maybe you’ll have children. Most importantly — and this will make your parents really happy — you will get a good job and make a lot of money. And once you have all that money, you’ll buy a lot of great stuff. You’ll do these things in part because other people do them, in part because you want to do them, and most importantly, because they will make you happy.

“But will they? Are these things the secret to happiness? Is there even a secret to happiness? Actually, there is! And in the next five minutes, I’m going to tell you what it is.

“Those of you who have studied psychology know that the last 25 years have witnessed the rise of a new field of research called Happiness Studies. This research is widely published in a variety of professional journals, and much of what has been discovered about human happiness may surprise you.

“Every four years, a team of social scientists conducts a survey all over the world to learn where people are the most happy. The results of a recent World Happiness Survey were published in 2003 in Britain’s New Scientist magazine.

“The nation with the highest percentage of people proclaiming themselves very happy? Nigeria. Followed by Mexico, Venezuela, El Salvador and Puerto Rico. The United States ranked 16th. Russia and Romania were last.

“These results are surprising only if we equate happiness with wealth, as we often do. In 2003, Nigeria’s

per capita income was \$560 a year; 71 percent of its people lived on less than a dollar a day. The life expectancy of a child born in Nigeria is 44 years. And yet the people in Nigeria reported themselves to be the happiest people on planet earth.

“Research into the origins of human happiness helps to explain these results. Let me begin by sharing what does not make us happy: material possessions. The Beatles knew that money can’t buy me love, and it can’t buy me happiness, either. In fact, in study after study, researchers have concluded that a desire for material goods is actually ‘a happiness suppressant.’

“Buying things provides a temporary thrill but no increase in overall life satisfaction. ‘Materialism,’ concludes University of Illinois psychologist Ed Diener, ‘is toxic to human happiness.’ The belief that increased income is associated with happiness is widespread but mostly illusory. In 1957, 35 percent of Americans described themselves as ‘very happy.’ In 2003, even though our per capita income has tripled, guess how many Americans described themselves as ‘very happy’? That’s right: 35 percent.

“But if money can’t buy happiness — and the data in support of this seem irrefutable — what can? Fortunately, the research provides some answers.

“Scientists believe about 50 percent of how happy we are is probably determined by genetics. So if you’re one of the lucky ones born with a smiley face in your brain, the sky’s the limit. For the rest of us, here are the secrets, a list of the top ten things you can do, to live a rich, satisfying, happy life:

“10. Fall in love and stay in love. People with loving partners are overwhelmingly happier than people living alone.

“9. Value friendships. People with five or more friends are 50 percent more likely to describe themselves as ‘very happy’ than those with smaller social circles.

“8. Find a job you love. People who love what they do, regardless of income, report far higher levels of life satisfaction than those earning a fortune who can’t wait to retire.

“7. Give money away. One of the most ironic discoveries is that people who give money away are far happier than those who spend money on material goods for themselves. (If you’re unsure of where you’d like to give your money, contact UW Oshkosh Foundation President Arthur Rathjen. I’m sure he’ll help you find a great use for it.)

“6. Buy a pet — cat, dog, it doesn’t matter. Owning a pet eases stress, lowers blood pressure and increases exercise, all of which can make us healthier and happier.

“5. Serve other people. Long before scientists studied happiness, novelist P.G. Wodehouse wrote, ‘As we grow older and realize more clearly the limitations of human happiness, we come to see that the only real and abiding pleasure in life is to give pleasure to other people.’ Turns out the data support him.

“4. Do not compare yourself to others. This means where you live, how you live, how you look and how much money you make. Banish envy from your life and your level of life satisfaction will rise.

“3. Discover things you’re passionate about and pour yourself into them. Golf, fishing, playing a musical instrument, traveling, collecting stamps — it doesn’t matter what you do, so long as you are challenged by the activity and feel a sense of achievement doing it.

“2. Learn to be grateful. Gratitude is one of the most rewarding secrets of human happiness. People who routinely feel grateful, even though they have far less, are far happier than those who have more and always want more.

“1. Learn to forgive others. Harboring anger or hatred is like swallowing poison to kill your enemy. Forgiveness, says University of Michigan psychologist Christopher Peterson, is the queen of all virtues — the single human trait most strongly linked to happiness.

“Graduates, there you have it. The 10 secrets to human happiness according to the past 25 years of social science research. As you leave here today to make a life for yourself out in the world, do everything you can to make every hour worthwhile. Fall madly in love. Find meaningful work. Live with a thankful, forgiving, self-confident heart. Get a dog (or a cat). Give generously of your time and treasure. Envy no one.

“If you do these things, happiness will find you, even if you’re not out looking for it.

“Congratulations on your achievements. I wish you the best of everything.

“Thank you.”