

University of Texas at Austin
College of Fine Arts

Keynote Speech 2/3/2001

Thank you Dr. Freeman, members of the faculty and student body. I'm very excited to be here and honored to be able to deliver this keynote speech.

I did my undergraduate at the Eastman School of Music, where I was a clarinet student of Mr. Stanley Hasty. I believe that I arrived in Rochester at the same time as Dr. Freeman – in 1975.

Dr. Freeman and I have stayed in touch over the years, mostly through correspondence. I've always considered him to be a mentor, and in fact, I have a book on eCommerce being released next month by John Wiley and Sons, and I honor Dr. Freeman as my mentor in the book's dedication.

Introduction

So “put your degree to work” – what does this all mean? Right now, most of you are only thinking of how to make it through your next lesson where you will be tortured over some difficult orchestral excerpt, or have to perform some intricate dance move in front of your highly critical classmates. What you'll be doing after you graduate is only some vague concept, and pretty much spelled out for you by the educational system you are going through:

- I want to be a concert soloist
- Play in a string quartet
- Be in the corps de ballet
- I want to be a professional musician, dancer, artist, composer, teacher, etc. etc.

Our early years are spent learning the basics of our craft, and they also define for us what “success” means. You come into this college experience young, impressionable and vulnerable, and you are swept up into a morass of competition with other students who are older and some of which are more advanced than you. And you look up, especially at the seniors, and wonder if you will someday become one of them – such a seemingly insurmountable hurdle, but to you – a worthy goal.

What is happening here? You very naturally are seeing other students and seeing some kind of predefined pathway to success: If I win this solo, or get this chair in the orchestra

or win this award, that means that I am being successful. Don't forget also that people come from different walks of life. I was lucky. I came from a public school in a large metropolitan area with lots of talent. I was just one of several talented clarinetists in my school. Some kids come from small towns where they were the star – the hero. It can be tough for them to come into a melting pot like this fine school where *everyone* is a star.

But wait a minute! What is this *star* business? Is the point of this college to create stars? Who decides what constitutes being a star? Is that right, and is that right for you? What does “being a star” mean once you leave this artificial microcosm of college and venture forth into the outside world?

My Experiences

I remember my own experiences:

I journeyed from my native Los Angeles to the Eastman School in Rochester, New York fresh out of high school, ready to set the world on fire and take it by storm. It was also a big change moving to an area that naturally gets a lot of snow, something I don't think quite applies here in Texas.

My first semester at Eastman was also the first semester for flute legend James Galway, who had briefly joined the Eastman faculty. That first week, they held a convocation where Galway played a recital in front of the whole school. We were electrified by his performances of the Poulenc and Prokofiev sonatas – and at the end, we leapt up en masse, screaming in ecstasy, kind of like the reaction my kids get when they flip the channels on TV and discover *NSYNC doing a commercial for some horrible junk food.

Dr. Freeman gave a speech before that recital, and in addition to the usual welcoming platitudes and directorial comments you would expect him to do, he took the opportunity to cajole us to think broader - to think beyond just the music on the stand planted in front of us.

“Think about what you can get out of your education here, about what the Eastman School has to offer you,” he would say. “The violinist becomes a composer, the clarinetist becomes a conductor.” This was a message he continued to say very consistently during my four-year stint in Rochester. I understand now what he meant then. Today we would call it “thinking out of the box” – getting your head out from being buried in that score, and thinking larger about what you *can* do as opposed to what you are being *told* to do.

When you enroll as an arts major, most of your courses of study are pretty much laid out from the very beginning. Your faculty lays out a formula for you to follow – they give you a structure. Part of the reason for this is that they are drawing on *their* experiences as pedagogues in determining what the masses that go through the programs here should be

expected to know by the time they graduate. I understand this, as I created my own curriculum for the eCommerce Management program I chair at Columbia University.

But this is just a framework, and like with statistics, it is designed for a broad range of students, and not necessarily the individual – you!

In high school, you are taught how to learn. In college, you are taught how to think, and this is where you need to take personal responsibility and go *beyond the curriculum*.

Computers At Eastman

I started working with computers my last semester of high school. I had graduated early and enrolled at a local college because I want to see what “college” was like, knowing that going to a conservatory was going to be somewhat different. That was where I took my first programming courses, and I loved it.

When I went to Rochester, I continued to take technology courses through the University of Rochester, and Eastman even offered a class my sophomore year called “Computer Applications to Music,” which was really just a programming class. It actually was a graduate-level class, so I got permission to take it, and then I discovered that I was in a class with both my freshman and sophomore music theory teachers – both grad students – to their great annoyance.

I had to do a final project and I was running the instrument rental department for Music Ed majors, so my boss suggested I write a program to automate the rental process. When I was most of the way through, he asked me if I was tracking my time so he could pay me for it, so I got paid for doing my final project, and I parleyed that into a part time job for two and a half years. He asked me what I should be paid per hour. I didn’t want to be greedy, so I said, “make it one cent more per hour than the piano accompanists” whom I knew got the highest rate. He did, and I became the highest paid student in the school – by one cent per hour. A year later, I got a raise!

Drapkin Reading Orchestra

Another endeavor that went well in school was my “Drapkin Reading Orchestra.” Eastman, like most music schools, doesn’t have enough string players to provide all of the winds with orchestras to play in, so they warehouse you in ensembles, telling you what an honor it was to play in groups like the Eastman Wind Ensemble. I didn’t buy that and being single-minded in my pursuit of an orchestra career, I started a reading orchestra in the middle of my freshman year. We typically read large symphonic works of composers like Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler.

I learned a huge business lesson organizing that group. At first, I picked the piece and recruited all of the individual players. That proved to be very time consuming, and I came to realize that I only really cared about a couple of things:

- What piece we were playing
- Who was in the clarinet section
- What part in the clarinet section I wanted to play

Ultimately I outsourced most of the work to other students. I had a regular grad student conducting, so each week I told him what we were going to play, I got the music from Eastman's fabulous ensemble library and handed the music to section leaders who then recruited people to play in their sections. It took me very little work, and I only retained control of the things that were important to me.

My ensemble was very successful and became very well known in the school, to the point that it became the subject of a discussion on orchestral ensemble experience at a faculty meeting, since we were drowning them out in the rehearsal room next door, playing *Also Sprach Zarathustra!*

Ultimately, I worked out a deal with the Rochester Philharmonic to borrow their music, and my senior year I was granted funds from the Student's Association and matching fund's from the Director's Office – thank you again, Dr. Freeman!

I still follow that great outsourcing model in my own business today. My wife and I are the only employees of my company, yet I leverage resources through my deep bench of partner firms. Again, all I care to control are my projects and my customer relationships, and he who controls the customer, is king!

Bass Clarinet Minor

Here's another one: I made the Bass Clarinet my minor and got the school to grant me private bass clarinet lessons in addition to my clarinet studies with Mr. Hasty. It wasn't a wasted effort on the school's part. I performed a bass clarinet recital, and I researched and published a book called "Symphonic Repertoire for the Bass Clarinet." I joke about it with my non-music friends – a book of difficult passages and important solos from the orchestral literature for the bass clarinet – I tell them that I am internationally famous among bass clarinetists. Seriously, though, virtually every orchestral bass clarinetist in the world has my book.

When I went to make my pitch to the Eastman faculty I made sure that I was fully prepared for why they should do this, and they agreed. I found out later on that other students went in to pitch ideas to the administration and when they were turned down, they said, "why does Drapkin get to do his things," and the answer was "because he came in with a fully prepared proposal."

I prepared for success, and part of it was just asking, and this is a great business lesson! It reminds me of the old job-seeking acronym AIDA: Attention, Interest, Desire and *Action* – *ask* for what you want! Promote yourself. We have this funny sense that things will magically happen to you – that if you spend enough time in the practice room and can regurgitate those orchestral excerpts well enough that success will be bestowed upon you. Maybe.

But I've always felt that you have to be ready to take advantage of success when the opportunities knock on your door. Are you ready to jump into the breach when someone needs you? Are you ready to take a risk or do you have to have everything spelled out for you? One definition of a great manager is someone who can make mostly correct decisions based on *partial* information. Can you make the intuitive leap?

I *like* being a maverick. I like to take risks, but I do it from a position of strength. I am ready to pounce if the opportunity comes my way, and I am ready to jump if it looks good. I don't need it spelled out. Life is more like jazz; only you don't always have the changes written down on the music in front of you.

Yes, I do technology and business, but I am an artist, and always will be one. What you specifically do really doesn't matter – you can be an artist in everything you do.

Now, we've talked about how the college curriculum provides a basic educational framework for learning, but how you really can go beyond what has been designed for the masses, and I've given you some examples of what I did in college: computers, bass clarinet, Reading Orchestra, and what I learned and got out of them. What are you going to do? Most people breath just enough air into their lungs just to stay alive, but we wind players know how to get a huge deep capacity out of our lungs to produce richness of tone. What are you going to do with your time in college to produce richness with your life? Let's talk about the role of the Arts school and what you can get out of it that can be applied across the business world.

The Role of the Arts School

I often preach and get asked in the press about developments in the New Economy, about what will be revolutionary. I tell them about how people haven't even dreamed yet about how some of the new technologies will be used, and that businesses on the scale of Amazon and Yahoo have yet to be formed. In my adopted field, we use the terms "incubator" and "accelerator" to identify venture capital-backed firms that provide resources, funding and infrastructure to budding dot-coms. Part of the role of the music schools and colleges of fine arts are as the incubators and accelerators for the budding minds of tomorrow. You. Your faculty is here to goad you into thinking beyond the music that is sitting on the stand in front of you.

When I was in school, invariably we would have discussions where we would question whether we were getting a college education or just attending a trade school, and we

wondered whether it would be just as effective to take lessons and practice on our own rather than spending all of this money to get a college degree when we were really just judged on how well we played. Ironically, there is a similar argument made about getting an MBA or “B-School” as some call it.

My friends who have MBAs all claim that B-school isn’t about the coursework or education but the vocabulary and business contacts you get. I always tease them that I am a “feral” MBA since I can use terms like “monitization” and “value proposition” just as well as they can. I think that the real difference between Arts school and B-School is really a question of markets. There are a lot more and higher paying jobs for people who get an MBA vs. a degree in the Arts, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t be equally as successful, because your education here provides you with a great number of things perhaps you weren’t aware of:

Advantages of Being from the Arts

[These are in no particular order]

- Freelancing as a musician and organizing ensembles prepared me for being an entrepreneur, a project manager and starting businesses. I didn’t start out working a traditional 9 to 5 job, so my perception of work is much different, and I am comfortable with that.
- I think creatively. This is a good thing, and ultimately one of the most valued attributes in business.
- I play solo as well as in ensembles, meaning I can do my own thing and work independently, but also work effectively in corporate settings.
- I competed in auditions and did live performances, so I am comfortable working under pressure, and am able to channel my enthusiasm into action. The ability and understanding of how to achieve is again highly sought after in the business world.
- I did programming for a long time, but I don’t enjoy that any more. When you program, you keep doing it over and over again until you get all of the bugs out. Life is more like sight-reading at an audition: who knows what they will put down on the stand in front of you – gain the inner confidence of knowing that you *can* sight read. Again, I am comfortable with that. Sight-read your way through life. Yes it is based on skills and experience, but at the end of the day, put yourself out there and go for it, and start getting that experience here.
- I write well. Yeah, I know that English classes in an arts school are lame, but DO NOT underestimate the power of the pen. Writing is the key to success. I’ve written several books and numerous articles, but my real power is as a wordsmith.

Because of my writing ability, I can get to people and arouse their interest. That means I can enlist them to promote my endeavors and business, and I'm talking about CEOs. And guess what? Just like with your instrument, writing requires practice.

- Finally, I am self-motivated. You have to be in order to get yourself to practice. That is so key to achieving success, and all of you have it here. That is your secret weapon; no matter what career you create for yourself.

Here is the harsh reality: you may enter college full of idealism, expecting that you will be a concert soloist, or will win a job with a major orchestra, but guess what happens when most people graduate? They have to get a job. They now get into the same rut every other working stiff gets into in our society. Out goes the idealism, as well as your career. That cradle that your faculty and school rocked you in – that structure is no longer there. Nobody will be there yelling at you to practice. No ensembles, no faculty advisors. Guess what? Most people drop out and do something totally different the minute they graduate. What happened to the idealism? What are you going to do *now* about what comes next? Let me talk about some of my own experiences.

Playing in Honolulu

From my early days playing the clarinet, I was convinced that what I wanted was to win a job playing with a major symphony orchestra. I practiced every day and three years after I graduated from Eastman I finally broke through the plateau. In one springtime – the “springtime of my assent,” I auditioned for six major orchestras, made the finals in five and finally won a job playing Assistant Principal Clarinet with the Honolulu Symphony. Sounds like I made it to paradise, right?

I hated it! Here's why:

The administration was horribly incompetent and the orchestra tottered on the brink of bankruptcy – the director was an ex-Army Colonel, can you imagine that? I realized that most good arts managers went into the business world where they could earn several times more, although if you are a talented administrator, like my classmate Mark Volpe who runs the Boston Symphony, you can have a stellar career.

The musicians were all unhappy and depressed because they were stuck in their job – usually the only one in their state, and think of the cost of flying to auditions from other orchestras when you live in Hawaii. I saw a NY Times study on job satisfaction a number of years ago that said that the lowest job satisfaction was in two categories: symphony orchestra musicians and prison guards. Now to be totally fair, my best friend has been playing in the Chicago Symphony for 24 years now, and seems to like it, even though he's performed the same pieces zillions of times.

Finally, the conductor: Good Lord! I remember the first rehearsal watching him flail his arms at us, and I looked at one of the other clarinetists who rolled his eyes and said the

immortal words: “welcome to the pros.” I also really learned the meaning of that famous orchestra joke about the difference between an orchestra and a bull – with a bull, the horns are in front and the asshole is in the back...

Seriously, that was a tough time for me. I wasn't happy, but at least I had achieved my goal, and I made my decision based on strength, instead of wondering for the rest of my life what it would have been like.

The problem then is “what do I do now?” That was a difficult. Fortunately I had technology to fall back on, and I was stunned by how different the model was. Instead of paying for the privilege of auditioning for an orchestra, companies were paying to fly me out so that I would consider working for them. I described myself as a *renegade musician*, which was actually considered attractive because of the way artists think! When they asked why I left the orchestra world, I would tell them that in an orchestra there is only one chief and everyone else is an Indian, and I am too much of a maverick to retire to an orchestra for the rest of my life.

So what are you going to do? Is the path you are on realistic? Is this *really* what you want to do? Who is pushing you? Will you survive being pushed out of the nest after college? Most don't. They hit the ground and scurry around looking for just the morsels you need to subsist; to stay alive. Take the risk – fly! The downside when you fly is that you may crash and burn, but do you think you'll die? Will you starve to death?

I was at a conference put on by a colleague of mine, which featured a keynote speech by Kevin Ryan, the CEO of DoubleClick. I asked my colleague afterwards whether he thought I should drop Kevin Ryan a note pitching some business. He looked at me and said, “Do you think that you'll get arrested if you do that? Will the police knock on your door?” He looked me in the eye. I laughed and sent the email.

What is Success

What does success mean to you? At the end of the day, the only arbiter of success is determined here, in your gut! Yes, only YOU can decide what success means.

However, to achieve success, it means that you have to take risk, and sometimes you fail. I love to ski, and one of ways I tell whether I really had fun skiing was whether I fell or not. If I didn't fall, then it meant I wasn't really having a good time.

Sometimes when you ski, you'll come to a point in the trail where there are people standing across the trail looking down the slope. That usually means that you've gotten to a point where there is a steep drop-off, and they are all trying to get up the nerve to go down it.

What a great metaphor for life! Are you going to stand around trying to get up the nerve, and possibly wimp out and take an easier route, or are you going to commit yourself to the mountain, knowing you might fall? Once you start, you can't easily climb back up,

and the truth is that you will get down one way or another. Do you make the mountain your friend or your adversary?

You were all smart enough to get into this school, so I don't think it is likely you will die if you take a risk in your career. Do you think you will become homeless if you take a risk and it doesn't work out? I don't think so. More likely, you will learn from the experience and do better the next time, knowing what things to watch out for.

What about Risk?

How do you feel about risk, because that really is the issue, isn't it? Taking a risk generates fear, because you stand to lose something. Some people just don't have a stomach for risk, which is why they end up being stuck as a 9 to 5er. You have to decide how much risk you are able to take, and by the way, companies devote huge amounts of money to what is called "risk management" – but at the end of the day, it is no different for you as individuals. Here's what you have to assess:

- What is the downside for attempting something? Is it time? Money?
- What is the upside? Does it sufficiently outweigh the possible risks? Is there a sufficient return on investment – ROI?
- Do you have the resources to pull it off? Skills, funds, whatever...

Do the analysis – run the numbers, as my B-School friends like to say. What does your gut tell you?

Remember what I said about practicing and writing? Well the same is true with risk, by the way. The more risks you take, the easier it gets. Sometimes you fail, but the optimist will say that each failure brings you one step closer to success.

You know this! This is like auditions. Remember the first one you took? I remember that I felt paralyzed with fear. But the more I took them, the better I got until being relaxed at auditions became my competitive edge. Let the next guy's fear screw him up! I'm going to focus all of my energy into achieving my goals

Concluding Comments

Now that I've passed the hurdle of my 40th birthday, I think about what my life means to me, and what I really want to do with my life. I think a lot about the things I want to achieve, but more about how I want to continue to live my life. I hope that when I finally reach the end of my days, that I can look back at my life with the satisfaction that comes having known that I have led an interesting and fulfilling life, filled with the usual trials, tribulations and milestones, but also knowing that I've taken risks, failed some, hopefully succeeded more, loved, laughed, and spent the shot I've been given in life doing interesting and fulfilling things to the best of my abilities.

So, in conclusion, when I look back at my college days, what did I gain? Did it prepare me for the world? Was it *relevant*? Yes, I learned proficiency on the Clarinet by studying with the masters, and I was able to achieve my professional goals on my instrument. But I will always think back on that first speech at that James Galway convocation/recital, where Dr. Freeman gave one of his many famous talks on broadening your horizons – the “clarinetist becomes a conductor” speech. I know now what he meant then, that college is a place where you *learn how to think*, and maybe all of us are lucky here, because as artists, we all perhaps think a little differently, and maybe that is a good thing. That is the gem that is ours to gain.

Learn to think. Challenge your peers, your faculty, even Dean Freeman. I think you’ll get a big smile out of him when you do, especially if you have thought your proposition out and made it easy for him to say “yes.” College is a time where you can safely take risks – they lay out the safety net for you. Take the leap – become the kind of mind that takes risks using your special kind of thinking. Take advantage of those opportunities while you are in college.

Then, when you graduate, DON’T STOP!!! Keep taking risks and keep pushing. Be a leader and a force for change. Change occurs when individuals are not satisfied with the status quo. Carve the world into what *you* want it to be, and keep pushing. Don’t just sit back and survive. Leap without the net, and keep leaping, even if you stumble. You will always have the knowledge and learning you will have gained from your college experience to fall back on.

Thank you.

Questions?