

University of New England  
Commencement

May 17, 2014  
Cumberland County Civic Center

Remarks of Gregory W. Powell

---

Good morning. President Ripich, Chairman Doiron, Trustees, Deans, faculty, family, friends, and most of all graduates.

Thank you so much for your kind words, Danielle.

And thanks to you Dr. Sandmire and to my good friend and Trustee Dick Roderick.

I am humbled and honored to accept the degree you have offered and to share a few words as we mark the commencement of this great and growing University.

In accepting this honor, I am deeply grateful to you, Danielle, to the University's board, to my team at Dexter Enterprises, to my fellow trustees of the Harold Alfond

Foundation, and most of all, to my friend and much missed mentor, Harold Alfond. Without you all, I would not be here today. Thank you.

To the graduates here this morning – all 1,374 of you -- Congratulations! Congratulations for all you have accomplished.

And congratulations and thanks to family, friends, professors and all at UNE who have nurtured and guided you graduates to this special day.

As graduates of the University of New England, you are part of a distinguished minority of American citizens who have had the benefit of higher education.

In fact, you have achieved this success at a time when less than 40% of our population has completed some form of higher education. Yet America is facing a future in which 60% or more of jobs will require higher education.

In this competitive, connected world -- as we congratulate you and celebrate your great accomplishments -- we know our nation needs you more than ever, and we trust that you will use your education to lead us to a better future.

Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, gave the Stanford University commencement address in 2005.

Like you, those Stanford students were anxious about their future as they listened to one of the great technology pioneers of all time.

Jobs told the story of a calligraphy class he took at your age and how, 10 years later, that course inspired his design of the Macintosh computer. Then he said:

*“You can’t connect the dots in your life looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future.*

*And you have to trust in something – your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.”*

Today, looking back, there are dots connecting Harold Alfond, the University of New England, me and you. Stronger connections than you might think. And on this fine Maine morning, they give us trust and confidence in you and your future.

Let's start with Harold Alfond. Harold Alfond grew up in Swampscott, Massachusetts, and graduated from high school in 1934 – over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a century ago. After graduation he moved to Biddeford and found work at Kesslin Shoe Company, not far from UNE's Biddeford campus. His pay was 25 cents an hour.

One summer day in 1939, Harold had big plans. He'd take his girlfriend north to the Skowhegan Fair.

Along the way, Harold picked up a hitchhiker. There was an abandoned shoe factory for sale in Norridgewock, Maine, the hitchhiker said.

Harold never made it to the Skowhegan Fair. Instead, he took the road to Norridgewock and visited the abandoned shoe factory. In the days that followed, he sold his car, used the money to purchase the factory, and moved to Norridgewock.

What happened to the girlfriend.....I can't say.

Soon after the move to Norridgewock, Harold fell seriously ill. But Harold was a lucky young man.

While medical help in rural Maine was scarce, Norridgewock had an osteopathic physician who took care of Harold and, as Harold put it, "he pulled me through".

Mark that down as one of those connecting dots I mentioned.

Over the next 50 years, his health restored, Harold built shoe companies and made shoes – lots of them. Hundreds of millions of them.

In 1993, some 36,000 shoes a day were being made by Dexter Shoe Company when Warren Buffett bought the Company in exchange for 25,000 shares of Berkshire Hathaway Class A stock.

To this day, Berkshire stock remains an important investment holding of the Harold Alfond Foundation.

Another dot.

On the same day Warren Buffett bought Dexter Shoe, I turned 39 years old. I had grown up in Waterville, Maine, where Harold Alfond and his family also lived. Harold was a good friend of my family, and Harold had followed my education and career. I was a trial lawyer. I had graduated from college, then law school, then clerked and joined a law firm.

As Harold was selling Dexter Shoe to Warren Buffett, I thought I had mapped my life out pretty well and that my future was clear. But something happened along the way that I had not anticipated, and the dots I had imagined for my future got scrambled.

You see, part of my law practice was representing health care practitioners in the courtroom.

Some of those practitioners were proud friends and graduates of the University of New England. On their invitation, I visited the University and was inspired by its passion, promise for growth and the determination and quality of its faculty and students. I was in awe of the University's leadership and all that had been accomplished with so little.

So in 1993, as Harold and Warren Buffett negotiated their deal, I wrote Harold Alfond the letter mentioned by President Ripich. I told him how I felt about UNE. Harold wrote back and offered to get together.

The following year, Harold and I met in Waterville over dinner with UNE President Hedley Reynolds and others. With no endowment and a very young alumni, the University had taken a leap of faith and boldly decided to build a state-of-the-art Health Science Center. The Center was critical to UNE's future.

But funding was short. Help was needed. And quickly.

After dessert, Harold agreed to make what was then the largest gift in the University's history. In making the gift, he recalled his days in Biddeford and his Norridgewock doctor. He suggested that I join the University Board of Trustees. I did.

Still more dots connecting.

But more help was needed to build the Center. The following year, Harold and I got together. Our plan? First, we would meet on the golf course and then, in the afternoon, we would meet up with UNE officials and take a boat ride.

On a beautiful August morning, as we rode along in a golf cart, Harold changed the dots of my life.

He asked me to leave the practice of law, set up a wealth management firm and come work with him and his charitable foundation. I agreed.

With that settled, he asked, "Greg, how much more should I give the University?" I gave my counsel, and our partnership began.



That afternoon, we joined UNE officials. We cruised Portland Harbor to Little Diamond Island where we went ashore.

Eating ice cream on the shaded lawn of the Island's restaurant, Harold agreed to make a second gift to UNE's Health Science Center project--- larger than the first -- a gift that assured its completion.

Since that summer day in 1995, the University has grown in leaps and bounds. Under the leadership of President Ripich and President Featherman, and with the help of legions of dedicated friends, trustees, faculty, staff and you students, the University has grown into its name. And in that same timeframe, you graduates found your way to UNE.

Still more dots in our story.

As we survey the landscape of UNE history since 1995 and connect the dots, what do we see?

- In 1996, the Health Science Center opened its doors and in that same year, Westbrook College and UNE merged. Westbrook's 166 year educational legacy and

stately Portland campus set the foundation for the University's explosive growth in health graduate programs from which so many of you here this morning will receive degrees.

- The College of Professional Continuing Studies evolved into the College of Health Professions which took on the Westbrook College name, expanding from 2 departments in 1995 to 9. 701 of you will receive graduate degrees from this College.
- Departments of study in the College of Arts and Sciences expanded from 7 in 1995 to 16. Just under 500 of you will receive degrees from this College today in some 48 majors ranging from Biochemistry to History to Sports Management.
- The College of Osteopathic Medicine became a nationally-recognized leader in primary care medicine. UNE graduates are specialists in all branches of medicine with more than half of the

primary care physicians in this state from UNE. 116 of you will graduate this morning.

- Research, with strong student participation, has expanded and deepened, ranging from understanding pain and its origins to the development of cutting-edge models for interdisciplinary health care. In 1995, there were no centers for research. Today, there are eight.
- On-line programs and graduate degrees have more than quadrupled.
- Nimble and responsive to changing health care needs, the University opened the first and only College of Pharmacy in Maine in 2009. 86 of you will receive degrees in Pharmacy.
- And, four years later, the first College of Dental Medicine in Maine's history was launched.

- As programs have been added, so have new dormitories, academic buildings, research centers and athletic facilities.
- Since your arrival at the University, athletics have excelled. Six CCC and three ECAC Championships have been won. Five of you have earned CCC Senior Scholar Athlete of the Year recognitions in your sport.

This past season's performance by the women's basketball team says it all --- everything at UNE is on the move.

- And just last month, the vision and passion of UNE was on the international stage with the official dedication of your campus in Tangiers, Morocco – a crossroads of civilization.

- Connecting these remarkable dots of accomplishment, your University has consistently ranked among the best in the nation both academically and for career economic return on investment.
- All of this growth and accomplishment has occurred with a teaching environment where your professors know you and you know them. Each of you have your stories to tell, but consider the professor who has opened her home at Thanksgiving for those students who could not get home themselves. Consider the professor who comforts his students sharing personal anecdotes and imaginative advice like:

*How do you beat your down moods?*

*Go outside to a big tree and feel its power.*

And consider the kindness, compassion and conscience of your University. It is everywhere.

- As Boots Fisher has battled leukemia, you have been there for him. “Boots to the Ground 5K”. “Do it for Boots” is your way.
- And when Matt Denger, cursed by the missing gene of Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, looked for blessings at UNE, you gave him friendship, love and respect. He was an orientation leader. He inspired you with his courage. And he was inspired by you. Listen to the words he wrote on the last Christmas of his life:

*“Orientation has changed me to be who I am supposed to be. Without it, I would not have met so many great people who are 100% genuine. I would thank them every day if I could. I hope you all know how important you are to me and that you have brought about the greatest change in my life... I will never step away from achieving my dreams.”*

You graduates have much to be proud of and great reason to trust that your future will be bright. Dots of accomplishment

reflecting great purpose, creative and responsive growth, hard work, bold vision, courage, creativity, passion and kindness connect across 19 years to bring us to this moment and the pride and thanks we feel today for what you have done and how your family, friends and professors have helped bring you here.

The ideal graduation speaker, I am told, is famous and wise – able to offer flawless predictions of the future and profound advice to the proud graduates. As you may have noticed, I am neither famous nor wise. But, I am your speaker. So I would like to conclude these remarks by proving my modest stature with six flawed predictions and some simple advice. First, the predictions:

- In Portland and Biddeford, every student will soon have their own reserved personal parking space.
- Dining will become gourmet on all campuses.
- Transportation between Biddeford and Portland will be by limousine.

- Student clothing in Biddeford will be whiter. The ban on washing clothes with Clorox will be lifted – all without compromising air quality.
- There will be parties. Campus parties. Even now, as I speak, President Ripich, it is rumored, has cut a deal: Run of the Mill in Biddeford and the Great Lost Bear in Portland have been purchased and both bars will be moved to the center of the Biddeford and Portland campuses.
- Academics will come to UNE’s Morocco campus. As confirmed by a YouTube video --- with over 3,500 hits of our Morocco campus --- students and faculty, led by none other than Dr. Majid and President Ripich, have been spending all their days doing the “wave”, dancing in the streets – all while singing “Happy”. But soon, the classrooms of Morocco will be filled with seated students and course work will prevail.

Now for the advice.



There is a poem by Robert Frost entitled “The Road Not Taken.” As you may have studied and, no doubt, your English professors know, the meaning of the poem has been a matter of debate. “It’s a tricky poem – very tricky,” the poet himself was known to say.

According to some, “The Road Not Taken” is a celebration of individualism and finding your own way. Others, more scholarly perhaps, suggest Robert Frost is saying we cannot know which road was better and, perhaps, the choice of roads makes little or no difference. If we listen to the poem, we can hear the playful interpretative tensions:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,*

*And sorry I could not travel both*

*And be one traveler, long I stood*

*And looked down one as far as I could*

*To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,*

*And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that, the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

Well, when you come to those diverging roads in life, my advice is trust in yourself. Don't try to connect the dots looking forward. Life is not a rigid plan or script. The beauty and opportunity in life is its random diversity.

Harold Alfond set out to the Skowhegan Fair and ended up buying a shoe factory, building a world-class business and giving hundreds of millions of dollars to charity.

I was intent on being a trial lawyer and, because of UNE, today run a wealth management company and lead Maine's largest foundation.

Your University could have been satisfied at any point along its journey. But it has never settled. It has trusted in its mission to keep pressing ahead, leaving one successful dot after another in its wake.

And you graduates could have chosen to receive your education anywhere, but you chose UNE. You could have left the University, but you stayed. You could have just snuck by – but you thrived. And here we are today.

So, as the great baseball legend, Yogi Berra, put it when asked, “What do you do if you come to a fork in the road?”

His answer: “Take it.”

Remember, too, it is not just the road you choose that counts in life, it’s how you travel your chosen road. So how should you live your life? That question leads us to my final word of advice.

Be like your University. “Be UNE.”

UNE is yours. No one and no event can ever take it away from you. And as the dots of the future are laid down on the chart of your life, UNE will always be a part of you. And you and your life a part of UNE.

So like your University, find your special place and purpose, never settle, work hard, be ambitious and bold, grow and change as the world changes, be visionary, creative, passionate and kind.

When I think of you and your university, I am back in time and feeling the hope and promise of UNE I felt nearly two

decades ago visiting the Biddeford campus with Harold Alfond. It was springtime. We could see the budding leaves ever so lightly filtering the blue tapestry of the Saco River and Atlantic Ocean, the expanse of land over which Stella Maris presided, the Ketchum Library nearby, students walking briskly.

We could imagine the Health Science Center rising, overlooking the river mouth, the ocean, the playing fields and distant cottage rooftops of Hills Beach Road. It wasn't the Ivy League. It was something better and bigger and more special. It was a great University in the making.

And today, UNE is great, and you are part of it.

So as I close my remarks, I ask you to take a moment and close your eyes. Picture your best moment at UNE – where you were and what you could see and feel. Snap a mental picture of that moment, that dot in time, and safeguard it deep in your conscience.

In the months and years ahead, when you are challenged by life's ups and downs, searching for that next dot, call back the picture, see it in your mind and feel it in your soul. Trust in yourself and be your University.

Be UNE.