Tufts Commencement Address
May 19, 2002
Delivered by Pam and Pierre Omidyar, J89 and A88
“From Self to Society: Citizenship to Community for a world of change”

PAM:
Thank you. Thank you President Bacow, Mr. Chairman and the members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, friends and family members, and – of course -- today’s graduates: Pierre and I are truly honored to share with you this special day, at an institution that means so much to all of us.

I know there was some speculation that Pierre and I might be a bit under-aged for the task at hand. I was flattered. After all, we do spend a lot of time in Silicon Valley—and I have to tell you, it’s a pleasure to be with a group where 35 is considered young.

But the fact is, for me and for Pierre -- Memory Lane is a short road. It really wasn’t that long ago that we were where you are now.

When I think back to my graduation, what I remember is sitting in the last row, watching the confiscated champagne bottles stack up next to us -- and not being able to liberate a single one of them because there was an officer standing guard.

I remember watching in awe as Dr. Stephen Hawking received an honorary degree, proving that -- however much our bodies may be earth-bound -- nothing can ground the arrow of the intellect.

I remember, after crossing the stage to receive my diploma, seeing my friends waiting for me at the bottom of the steps – and I remember how good it felt to hug them, how glad I was that we had made it, together.

But what I honestly do not remember about my graduation is the graduation speech. And not just the speech, but even the speaker -- which is really a considerable confession on my part, since our speaker was the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Now, I don’t want to be misunderstood -- I’m sure the Secretary General gave an eloquent, inspiring speech. I’m sure he spoke to the souls of my fellow classmates who – unlike me – were actually listening. And I’m sure my distractedness cost me a chance to take some wisdom away from the experience.

But the fact is, I couldn’t focus. I couldn’t focus because I was so excited about starting the next chapter in my life -- and I was excited because I knew Tufts had done such a great job of preparing me for the next stage.

I’m sure at least a few of you are having that same experience today… So if any of the Class of 2002 are just tuning in now – I’m Pam, and that’s my husband, Pierre, over there.
Tufts for me was a great gift – the kind of gift that comes with strings attached: Not only a responsibility to take in the opportunities offered here, but a responsibility to give back – and not just to Tufts, but to the wider world outside this campus.

For the next few minutes, I’ll share a few things that Tufts taught me.

As someone who’s loved biology for as long as I can remember, I’ve always been fascinated with the basic building blocks of life.

But it wasn’t until I got to Tufts, and took Bio Chemistry with Professor Feldberg that I realized: Enzymes make really great role models!

As any biology major can tell you, enzymes are the catalysts that make possible biochemical reactions – enzymes increase the rate of a reaction, but are not themselves consumed by the reaction.

To translate that into everyday English -- enzymes are Nature’s activists. Trying to imagine life without enzymes is an impossibility. Kind of like civil rights without Dr. King or Rosa Parks, or world peace without the moral courage of Jody Williams or the Dalai Lama:

The world as we know it would not exist.

And that really is the message we want to share with you today: Be an enzyme – a catalyst for change. Act on the environment around you. Make it your mission to make some small difference in the great scheme of life.

Pierre and I are making that the mission of our lives – every day.

Of course the path of an enzyme isn’t always straight. After graduation, I worked as a research assistant in an immunology lab. From there, I went the grad school route for a few years before I learned that – at least for me -- basic research was too far away from the applications that were my aspirations. I wanted to do work with more immediate impact. I came to see that the Ph.D track wasn’t for me – which, given that I wanted to be a biologist since I was 12 – was quite a painful realization to come to.

My question was, if I leave grad school – What will I do? Who will I be? I struggled with that, until one day Pierre asked me: “Do you read the last page of a book first?” I said, “No, of course not.” So Pierre said: “Then why do you want to know the end of the story now? Take life one page at a time and let it unfold.”

For me, that was very liberating. I took my masters and left school for a new career -- as a management consultant for the pharmaceutical industry. And when eBay was so successful, I realized the way to fulfill my dream – to really unleash the enzyme within -- was through philanthropy.

Take the work of The HopeLab Foundation, a research institute I founded a few years ago. Our vision is to improve the physical and mental health of young people coping with chronic illness. One of the main projects we’re working on is a state-of-the-art video game
for the X-box – a means for adolescents with cancer to learn and improve their quality of life through game play.

The idea for this game came to me my first job out of Tufts – when I was working as a research assistant. After a day of watching cancer cells multiply under a microscope, I sat down with Pierre to play a video game… And I thought: “How powerful would it be if kids could visualize blasting their own cancer cells in a video game?”

Well, it took 10 years and the right combination of circumstances, and the right combination of enzymes at HopeLab – to bring the idea of this video game closer to reality. That’s what we’re working toward at HopeLab – and in our philanthropy in general: The kind of catalytic impact that can bring change to bear on all manner of scientific challenges and social problems.

That’s the goal that guides the University College of Citizenship and Public Service here at Tufts. During his inaugural address, President Bacow put it perfectly – and I know you were all listening. He said: “How do we educate leaders for a truly global world? By teaching collaboration as a way of life -- and a source of answers… By helping our students become active, engaged, effective citizens… People comfortable dealing with ambiguity… Willing to take a risk to make a difference.”

And that really is the effort that must animate all of us: The effort to build a sense of community, citizenship and service into all aspects of life… Not only in the classroom but in the community, too… And not only later in life – when your learning years and earning years are over – but early on, and at every stage of life, so that the commitment to service has every opportunity to cascade out, and create a world of change.

Because the truth I’ve learned since I left Tufts is that there are lots of different ways to be an enzyme. Lots of different ways for me to do the work I’ve dreamed of since I was 12 – lots of different ways for all of us – for all of you -- to create a world of change.

But this is just half of the story today – with half of the picture Pierre and I want to paint of the world beyond the Hill -- and what it needs from you.

PIERRE:
Let me start by saying one thing:

Pam is right: Be an enzyme – a catalyst for change.

As a slogan, I don’t know if that’s ever going to be right up there with Ich Bin Ein Berliner, or “I Have A Dream,” but there’s a lot of truth to it.

By the way, for any undergrads here, if you can find a biology professor after the ceremony and recite the definition of an enzyme Pam inflicted on you a moment ago – that will fulfill your general science requirement.

But the fact is, you don’t have to have taken a single biology class – I didn’t, by the way -- to know what Pam means.
We’ve got to act on the world. We’ve got to add our energy to the forces for change – to create the world of change Pam talked about.

I know you’ve got other things on your mind right now – not just figuring out how to jam the last box of stuff into your parents’ minivan – but moving on to the next adventure, whether it’s the world of work, or graduate studies…

…Or some other scheme that allows you – for a while longer at least -- to avoid either one.

Which is why I came prepared today to share with you a simple concept that’s served me well since my time at Tufts:

When you don’t know what to expect…

…Prepare for the unexpected.

Contrary to what you might think – “preparing for the unexpected” involves a little bit more than being radically open to whatever the universe sends your way, while you lean back into the lawn-chair of life.

To truly prepare for the unexpected, you’ve got to position yourself to keep a couple of options open – so when the door of opportunity opens, you’re close enough to squeeze through.

To a large degree, life – like a software program -- is a linear thing. We all face the temptation to freeze-frame the past, and project it into the future. As Pam said, the future doesn’t always follow a straight line. So as a software engineer, you learn to strive for a certain flexibility in design: You learn to avoid being locked in to a single solution – to build a platform that can be used for a number of purposes.

As a result, to the outside observer, a well-written program might look a little bit wasteful… Cluttered when it should be clean… With dots that defy connection...

…Kind of like an education in the liberal arts.

You know what I mean: When you design your course of study, you build in some lines of code the purpose of which is not immediately evident – a course in poetry to go with a course in physics, Aristotle’s Ethics along with algorithms…

…And then, later, life takes a non-linear turn, and you draw on a different part of the platform for the new perspective you need.

So take the tools Tufts has given you, and prepare for the unexpected.

I can tell you, without the ability to prepare for the unexpected…

…There wouldn’t be an eBay today.
The key is recognizing that no matter how convinced you are in the power of your own ideas…

…Sometimes, ideas have ideas of their own.

That’s certainly true in terms of system design.

Almost every industry analyst and business reporter I talk to observes that eBay’s strength is that its system is self-sustaining -- able to adapt to user needs, without any heavy intervention from a central authority of some sort. So people often say to me – “when you built the system, you must have known that making it self-sustainable was the only way eBay could grow to serve 40 million users a day.”

Well… nope.

I made the system self-sustaining for one reason:

Back when I launched eBay on Labor Day 1995, eBay wasn’t my business – it was my hobby.

I had to build a system that was self-sustaining…

…Because I had a real job to go to every morning.

I was working as a software engineer from 10 to 7, and I wanted to have a life on the weekends. So I built a system that could keep working -- catching complaints and capturing feedback -- even when Pam and I were out mountain-biking, and the only one home was our cat.

If I had had a blank check from a big VC, and a big staff running around – things might have gone much worse. I would have probably put together a very complex, elaborate system – something that justified all the investment. But because I had to operate on a tight budget – tight in terms of money and tight in terms of time – necessity focused me on simplicity:

So I built a system simple enough to sustain itself.

By building a simple system, with just a few guiding principles, eBay was open to organic growth – it could achieve a certain degree of self-organization.

So I guess what I’m trying to tell you is: Whatever future you’re building… Don’t try to program everything. 5 Year Plans never worked for the Soviet Union – in fact, if anything, central planning contributed to its fall. Chances are, central planning won’t work any better for any of us.

Build a platform – prepare for the unexpected...
…And you’ll know you’re successful when the platform you’ve built serves you in unexpected ways.

That’s certainly true of the lessons I’ve learned in the process of building eBay. Because in the deepest sense, eBay wasn’t a hobby. And it wasn’t a business.

It was – and is – a community: An organic, evolving, self-organizing web of individual relationships, formed around shared interests.

And just as Pam in her life has taken different paths to work on an issue of enduring interest – I’ve come to see, in terms of my life, that community is the enduring interest in mine.

From the earliest days at eBay, I posted five core values on the site – not because they came from some business plan, but because they were values I’ve lived my life by – values I hoped would help govern the community. These are the five values I saw as essential:

We believe people are basically good.
We believe everyone has something to contribute.
We believe that an honest, open environment can bring out the best in people.
We recognize and respect everyone as a unique individual.
We encourage you to treat others the way that you want to be treated.

I’ll be honest: My motive in posting those core values was utopian – but at the same time utilitarian. After all, if people are basically good and treat others the way they want to be treated – then the system works better for everyone.

But what gratifies me most is just how much those values have been embraced by the people who’ve embraced eBay – and how those values have become a platform for an evolving, adaptive community.

Which leads me to the last lesson I want to share today from my eBay experience. When you’re looking at the way a collection of isolated individuals coalesces into a community… When you’re trying to understand what makes a network work – what I’ve learned is that it comes down to this: Can the system embrace diversity? And not just accept diversity – but embrace diversity – as the value of difference. To understand that what today seems odd, unnecessary, off-beat -- maybe even outrageous – may prove integral to solving tomorrow’s problems.

It’s a matter of finding the connections that make community – not just forging them, but finding them, because I think they already exist -- and encouraging each individual to think from self to society to service.

And that’s the challenge for all of us:

Can we create the proper balance between private pursuits and public service?
Can we find the connection, can we build a spirit of community – an ethic of citizenship -- that shapes every social unit from the neighborhood to the nation-state?
I believe we can – and I know we must.

Whether you look at today’s headlines – or back in history – it’s equally clear that no civilization can exist without community at its core.

Brian O’Connell, distinguished professor emeritus here at Tufts, quotes British historian Edward Gibbon on the end of Athenian Democracy: “When the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society but for society to give to them…

…When the freedom they wished for most was freedom from responsibility…

…Then Athens ceased to be free.”

I have absolutely no doubt that what was true for Athens in its day will be true for America in ours…

…Unless the enzymes among us get busy -- right now.

But, I’m stealing Pam’s lines – so maybe that’s my signal to sit down, and give her the last word.

**PAM:**
There’s only one thing I want to add, but it’s a big thing…

….Something Pierre didn’t say about the platform he built.

It’s important to do what you love – and to love what you do.

Love is the energy that makes the enzyme work – the passion that provides purpose…

…That gives every cell in the system -- every citizen in society – a role to play, a function to perform. What’s true for organisms is true for organizations. And perhaps it’s truest of all for the complex system we call Society.

Let me say that all of you have been very gracious and very patient -- and many of you have been a lot more focused than I was when I was in your seat.

And now, we’ve come to the place where our speech ends, and your journey begins.

So as Pierre says: Prepare for the unexpected. Build a platform of value that serves a broader purpose -- and a higher end.

Embrace diversity…

…Find the connections to community that make the human network work.

And remember: Be an enzyme – a catalyst for change…
…Just as this community of learning has served you so well -- choose always to serve the communities that you call home.

To all the members of the Tufts community… To all the proud parents and family members and friends here today… And finally, to the stars of our show – the Class of 2002 – congratulations.

Celebrate this day – share your achievement with the people who helped make it happen.

And know -- as you celebrate your accomplishment -- that Pierre and I wish you not only success in your life’s work – but success in life as well.

Thank you.

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