

"TO THE CLASS OF 93: WHY AMERICA NEEDS COWBOYS"

by Ben Stein

I have always wanted to give a high school graduation speech. That sounds like a strange ambition, but I can tell you where it comes from.

In June of 1962, I sat in the bleachers at my high school in Spring, Maryland, and listened to a speech so boring that I cannot remember one word of it. I can't even remember who the speaker was. I always thought that if I gave the graduation speech, I could do it better, and then all those cheerleaders who wouldn't give me the time of day might give me some respect.

So I always hoped that I would be called back to Silver Spring to address the graduating class of my high school.

And I always thought I would be. After that, I went to an Ivy League college and a fancy law school, and who else would they want to tell the kiddies what they needed to know?

But they never did ask me. They did ask someone I knew, though. When I was growing up, I lived next door to a boy my age who could barely pass in high school. He smoked and he drank and he stayed out late and he talked back to his teachers and he generally was the kind of kid I was supposed to stay away from. That kid, everyone said, was a sure loser. He was lucky at cards, but so what?

His name was Carl, and two years ago, he was invited to address the graduating class of my high school and receive an award of some kind. I never heard a word from my high school. I still haven't.

Well, how did it happen? It happened because Carl became the most famous reporter in the country, wrote two best-selling books, and was given credit for breaking a great deal of Watergate. He did all the groundwork for that while I was at the fancy law school thinking about how great I was.

It started me thinking about how people get the things they want out of life and why I was not getting mine. I looked carefully, very carefully, at the people I knew

who were successful, who got what they wanted in life. I tried to make a list of the things in my life that were wrong and the things in successful people's lives that were right.

Then I tried doing what the successful people did for a while instead of what I usually did. It worked so well I could hardly believe it. And I suddenly thought, how come no one ever told me this stuff before? How come while I was getting all those A's, I never learned which end was up? How come that jerk who spoke to me at my high school graduation didn't say a word about it?

Well, now I am going to tell you what I wish I had been told at my high school graduation. I call it Bunkhouse Logic and it isn't fancy but it works. There are 10 rules for getting what you want in life.

Rule #1: Decide what you want. Don't let your mother or your best friend or your shop teacher tell you what you are supposed to want. Don't assume that life will somehow magically show you a vision of what you want. It won't. You have to think, "What would I want to be, what would I want to have, if I could have anything in the world? Because you can.

Don't waste your time thinking about what you have to settle for, or what you can get by with. Think of your deepest wish, your deepest imaging of what you have always wanted, and that's it. That's how you decide what you want. If you want to be a professional football player, that's it - - not to watch professional football players.

Rule #2- : Ask for what you want. No one else on this earth will give you what you want unless you ask for it. Not your daddy, not your girlfriend, not your boss, not your teacher. No one.

I always wanted to be a writer, but I let myself be talked into being a lawyer. I thought some day a mysterious power would appear and take me out of my musty legal office and into the sunlit world of writers.

What a fool I was. The only mysterious power that will do it, for me or for anyone, is little me or little anyone. The world is full of secretaries dying to be actresses, and salespeople dying to be captains of industry. They are waiting for someone to give it to them. Forget it. It just is not going to happen. If you want it, you have to ask for it.

Rule #3: Don't ask for what you don't want. This is crucial. Half of all the unhappiness and frustration in a human being's life comes from pure wasted time. We ask for the wrong jobs or the wrong girlfriends or the wrong house, and of course, we are miserable with what we get. Well, of course we are. We asked for just what we didn't want, so how could we possibly be happy with it? How can a person who wants to be a farmer possibly be happy as an accountant? How can a person who wants to be an accountant possibly be happy as a farmer?

No way. It can't happen. If you remember this, you will avoid that tragic and horrible thing we call wasted time.

Rule #4, and this is the most important rule of all: You can't win if you're not at the table. If you want to win at Blackjack or Craps, there's no way on earth you can do it unless you're at the Blackjack or Craps tables. You can be the best Blackjack player in the whole world, but if you're not at the table, you are not going to win one dime.

It applies to absolutely everything in life. For years, a friend of mine wanted to be a rock singer. She worked for the American Express Company in lower Manhattan - - as a secretary, not as a rock singer. She dreamed about singing. She told everyone she knew that she wanted to be a singer.

It didn't do a bit of good. There was no way she could become a singer except by stepping up to the table and trying her luck. Now that meant that she had to go out and sing. She had to go to some dingy club in Greenwich Village and sing in front of a group of stoned-out dopers who couldn't care less if she were dead or alive. But she did it and now she is half of a group called Heart.

If you want to be cowboys or stock brokers or clothes designers, you have to go out there and ride herd or sell stock or design dresses. If you want to go out with that fabulous blonde, you have to ask her. If you want to find yourself alone with the guy who sits in front of you in history, you have to do it.

No amount of sitting around and moping will get anything done at all. No amount of wishing will get it done. You have to do it, to take a chance, to throw down your money or your time or your self-respect on that table and see how the dice come up. There is no winning without gambling.

Rule #5 also vital: Once you know what you want, think only about how to get it. Not about why you don't get it. This is slightly more complicated, but well within your grasp. Once you have decided you want to be Chair of the Board of Consolidated Coal Company, do not waste one second thinking about how you haven't got the right connections or you're too young or you have dirt under your fingernails.

Don't waste one bead of sweat explaining to yourself why it can't be done. Because it can be done, and you can do it. But only if you concentrate on getting it done, and not on setting up mental obstacles. Every moment you spend planning on how to get what you want is worthwhile. Every moment you spend discouraging yourself is unnecessary. The human animal can get itself up to do amazing things, and it can also let itself be brainwashed into failure and passivity.

The minds of men and women can construct great art and enormous railroads, or it can rusticate in doom and gloom. You can choose which it will be. You must choose which it will be. If you choose success, if you choose to get: what you want, you can only do it if you concentrate on how to get what you want, without wasting a moment's thought on the possibility of failure.

When you want to get to the top of the mountain, concentrate on taking each step, not on how far away the peak is. That's how you get to the top.

Rule #6 just as vital as all the other rules: Notice what is not what should be. I have a friend named Marvin. Marvin spends all his time explaining how the reason he's a bum is that the world is unfair; the world cheats him; the world is not a fit place to live. That's perfect - - for failures and losers.

Yes, the world is crooked and stacked against you. Yes, people are dishonest and bad. Yes, and that's your starting point. Now pay attention to the world as it really is if you want to get anywhere.

No one, not anyone, gets anywhere whimpering about how things should be. You get somewhere by taking the world on its own terms and setting out with your eyes open to what really is.

If people trick you and thwart you at every turn - - and I assure you, they will - - that is part of the territory you play on. There is very little you can do about it except to realize what's going on and adjust yourself accordingly.

Norman Lear, the man I work for, is one of the most moral people I have ever known. He has a code of behavior that would do justice to St. Francis. But when someone acts like a skunk, Norman recognizes it and deals with it. He does not go back to his room and cry. That's one of the reasons he's where he is, and my old pal, Marvin, is back in his room whining.

Let me tell you something important about these rules. They do not confer eternal bliss. They do not bring you rest from painful itching. They do not make you into the living Buddha. They do not offer remission from metabolic diseases. They do not make you live forever.

They do offer you the chance to get what you have always wanted from life - - whatever that is - - and to have a life so fine that you don't need to live forever.

Back to the rules. Here's one you probably already know. **Rule #7:**

Stay away from unlucky people. If you know someone who's always falling down or losing his job or getting expelled or picking his nose in public, stay away. I don't know why, exactly, but bad luck is catching. Let unlucky people stay with each other.

Rule #8, something you also probably know: **Nothing happens by itself.**

If you are waiting for that divine talent scout to come down and tell you that you will star opposite Jack Nicholson in his next picture, forget it. You'll be waiting forever. The world is a very slow-moving and lazy place, full of lazy people.

To get absolutely anything to happen, you have to make it happen. Nobody, nowhere, ever has goodies showered upon him from heaven, like manna upon Moses. It happened 4,000 years ago, and that was the last time.

If you want that job, go in for an interview. If you want that guy or gal, go talk to him or her. If your check is late, call up and scream about it.

To expect things to happen by themselves is exactly the same thing as expecting a car with a broken piston to heal itself. It just isn't going to happen.

Rule #9: There is no such thing as random chance. When someone gets what s/he wants, there may be some luck involved. There usually is. But it is not blind chance. That guy whose first album went double platinum cut the album in the first place. The woman who got the scholarship that you wanted did something right to get it. It

did not happen by itself. Do not: count upon chance to bail you out or to wreck you. It can do either, but never by itself. If you never treat anything as a matter of chance, if you prepare for everything as if there were no such thing as chance, you'll be on your way.

The **final rule** I will only tell you. I will not explain it because the very essence of the rule is that its meaning is unique to everyone. **Make time your ally.** Take it to heart. Make time your ally.

Now why on earth do I call this Bunkhouse Logic? The bunkhouse refers to the place where cowboys live. Cowboys are the essential symbol of what is great about America. They rode around all day on their horses, without any limitation on what they could do, or where they could go. They lived without restraints on their imaginations, or their accomplishments. They lived in an America that valued getting things done, building, creating, molding a refuge for all the oppressed of the earth, an America where the freedom of the individual included the freedom to take whatever a man or woman could by fair means and the sweat of his or her brow, and make a refuge for him/herself and family. In today's America, where too many people whine and whimper that we are growing too fast, putting up too many buildings, drowning too many garden snails, where we value the whimperer and the snob instead of the human being who gets things done. We need to go back to the philosophy of the cowboys. We need to get back their confidence, their optimism, their inner mobility.

Remember, for the man or woman who takes what he or she wants, there is only one danger. Not thinking big enough.

