

Erik Weihenmayer, Adventurer

Commencement Address (transcript) – Sunday, May 22, 2022

Thank you, everyone! Class of 2022, congratulations, what a special day, right? Awesome!

What a special day to celebrate here. It's a day of accomplishment, it's a day to celebrate all the achievements that you all have been through in your college experience, and it's a proud day. And so I thought about talking about achievement. You know, I've had some achievements, some summits - reaching the summit of Everest, the Seven Summits, kayaking the grand canyon - those are fun to talk about but I think what doesn't get talked about enough is the struggle, because it has been a struggle to live this life. I call it a no barriers life. First of all to define it, it's so deeply personal for each and every human being to push the parameters of what it can mean, and then there are the days where you will just have to accept that you are failing it and bleeding it. And part of the equation of understanding this life, I think, is understanding the learning process. The process of growth and change and transformation that we're all a part of, and then trying to dive into that experience - what does it look like, what does that template, that map, look like that we're trying to build to navigate our lives forward? And what do those elements look like along the way? How do we dive into them? These elements, these universal elements that exist along that trail, that we have to confront, that we have to harness. They're like signposts, they're like way points on GPS. They're like cairns on a trail, like holding on a rock face that lead us forward and give us clues to where we're going, where we are, why it's so important we get there.

I was, about a year ago, on this very cool TV show, called "Welcome to Earth" and all these National Geographic explorers went out investigating the world, the natural phenomena of the world and I went all over the world, but the coolest adventure was going to Vanuatu, this incredible island chain in the South Pacific to go investigate the most active volcano in the world. Little did I know that we were going to be rappelling right down into the very depths of the volcano in order to set-up scientific equipment to be able to understand the sound waves

of the volcano and be able to, perhaps, predict future eruptions and save lives around the world. And down in the depths of that volcano, I heard the most beautiful and most intense sound I've ever heard in my life: Truck-size magma bombs, shooting like cannon shots a kilometer into the sky and then exploding back into those lava lakes and creating a reverberation that smashes up against the wall of the caldera like the waves of an ocean. [gasp] It was beautiful. And scary. [laughter] And it was a stark reminder that we wish growth was this nice, neat, smooth, arc upward with a nice crescendo, and some violin music plays or maybe some bagpipes, like this morning, and you eat some popcorn and everyone goes home changed forever. It just doesn't work like that, you know that. Growth is like that volcano, it's tumultuous, it's red-hot magma spraying into the sky, annihilating everything in its path and then slowly over time it cools and it lays a second skin over the earth and it nourishes the soil, and all life comes blazing back even stronger. It is this continual process of endings and renewal, death and rebirth, and as my buddy Jeff says, "it ain't for the faint-hearted."

And that's the way I felt on my very first trip to the Himalayas. You hear about my Everest climb but the year before – you don't hear about the first trip. And that was work as a whole team and to climb a peak called Ama Dablam, we wanted to really get—we wanted to practice as a team, and become a team. It was a beautiful peak Ama Dablam, it's about ten miles from Everest, even more daunting in some ways than Everest itself. It's Ama - Mother, goddess - Dablam – is jewel box - you have to climb up this giant overhanging glittering glacier, reach her shoulder which is literally the width of your body and crawl up to this ridge and stand on the crown. It was my dream to stand on top. We were a good team. Within two weeks we were at 20,000 feet ready to head up the mountain. And that's when everything changed. The monsoons came in blasting our tent with snow and wind. We were stuck in our tent for 8 days. Couldn't get out. And then finally the team got back up to us. PV, our team leader, pushed the route a little higher, he radioed down and said, "guys, this is suicide, we got to go down while we still can." We packed up all our gear; tottering down the mountain with these giant packs. The wind is picking you up, slamming you against the face. Crossing these sections, we called them abject terror - you're just hanging in space – and my friend Eric Alexander, who I spent those 8 days with, on the way down in that storm, he stepped on a rock that gave way under

his foot and he fell 150 feet down the rock face, he landed on a ledge that saved his life. We threw a rope down, got him up to safety; he went into pulmonary edema, his lungs are filling with fluid. We got him down the mountain, put him on bottled oxygen; he was stopping every ten feet or so near collapse. We put him in a Gamoff bag at Basecamp - it's this hyperbaric chamber, you pump air into the bag to increase the air pressure - to save his life. He wasn't psyched though, because through that little bag there's a window, and through that window he was watching PV, our team leader, read the instruction manual so... not very confidence-inspiring. But we pumped air into that bag for three days and nights, and then a very brave Nepali colonel flew in and saved Eric's life.

That was my first trip and I've been fascinated by how individuals and how teams – how they move forward in life. Or how they don't.

And so my second book was this book called the The Adversity Advantage. I teamed up with this scientist, Dr. Paul Stoltz. He's an expert in adversity, helping to change people's relationship with it. He did a study around the world and we came away, very simply put, understanding that people fall into three categories. We call them quitters, campers, or climbers.

Quitters are self-explanatory, we're not going to talk about them this morning. But campers, we found, were a fascinating group because we found they made up so much of the world. People that start out climbing, as I think we all do, with excitement and hope and optimism and then somewhere along that ascent, things get in the way. They get in the way. We lose belief in ourselves, or in the cause, or in the team; or we feel cynicism smashing down around our minds like prison bars. Or maybe we try something out of the box. Everyone says "step out of the box, try something!" You try it, you get shattered, and you get beat back. That sends a trauma through your soul, and you say, "Why would I ever do that again?" Or maybe we reach a certain degree of prosperity, get to that nice flat plateau, say "I'm staying right here, the cheeseburgers are great right here. I'm not going any higher. Too scary." Or maybe we wake up like we did in the pandemic and you just feel so overwhelmed, you don't even know how to attack it any more. Or maybe we're plodding up the mountain like we're supposed to do, slowly but surely; one barrier after the next, they get in the way, they start killing our momentum, they drive us

to the sidelines. Now we're camping. We're in a dark place sometimes and personally we stagnate. But worse than that, worse than that, all our energy and contributions and life force, they're lost to the world.

Climbers are a rare group. If I could see, I know I'd be looking at a lot of climbers out here today. There are those people who continue to figure out a way to grow and evolve and explore and challenge themselves every day of their lives until the day they die. So I think the question I ask myself every day is: how do we climb? Wouldn't it make so much more sense -- it's so much easier to camp.

My climbing journey was kind of a literal journey: I wanted to climb the Seven Summits. My first was Denali - "the great one, the high one" in the Inuit language. Nineteen days after landing, we struggled up to the summit. It was Helen Keller's birthday when we stood on top. And we had timed it perfectly. So now we're near the top... my family were all -- they were in an airstrip near the mountain and they flew up and they were circling above us in a plane, watching us take the last steps, and we're all waving our ski poles and cheering at the plane. And I turned to Jeff, I said "hey Jeff, do you think they know I made it? That I'm here?" He said, "yeah, they're gonna know, Erik. You're the only one waving your ski pole in the wrong direction." Good to have friends, I think. And we got down to our igloo -- Chris Morris, our team leader, he's famous for these positive pessimisms, these philosophies, these witticisms: "positive pessimisms." You know, you're sitting out in a terrible storm, so miserable you can't even believe you're there. Chris will look up, big smile on his face, he'll say something like "sure is cold out here. But at least it's windy." Or he'll say "we sure have been climbing a long way, but at least we're lost." Or an Aconcagua, the tallest peak in South America, I got to the top behind him and he said "Big E," he said, "you may be blind, but at least you're slow." I wasn't expecting that, I said "Chris, you're not the nicest guy I've ever met. But at least you're stupid." [laughter]

I love positive pessimisms. Maybe you'll adopt them into the UVM culture and into your lives. Like, I don't know, I'm going to take a risk here, maybe try this one, try maybe "it took me 7 years to graduate, but at least I'm moving back in with my parents." [laughter and applause]

How's that? "Inflation is crazy, but at least I've got a massive student loan to pay back."

[laughter] Or "it's hot as can be, but at least this guy is droning on and on." [laughter]

But positive pessimisms, such a wonderful way to say hey, it's a hard road, it's always going to be a hard road, but we own it. We own it. We own that road. I also understand camping, because when I was 14 years old, I went blind from this rare eye disease. It was like winning the lottery, but the exact opposite. Being led into school as a newly blind person, being led to the cafeteria, sitting at a table by myself, listening all the excitement and laughter and joy and food fights over there that I wanted to desperately be a part of. And I was afraid to go blind, but what I was way more afraid of was that I would shoveled to the sidelines, into that dark place, I'd be left there, I'd be forgotten, I'd never be in the food fights. A life lived for nothing, a life that was meaningless. That was way more terrifying than anything blindness could do to me. And I could see a little bit out of one eye, just a tiny bit for a few more months as I lost the last traces of vision, and one of the things I could do is watch TV. I'd press my nose right up against the screen and I was watching this show one night; they were focusing on a guy named Terry Foxx. He had lost a leg to cancer and he decided that he was going to run across Canada.

Now, I'll tell you, that is not the normal decision a guy in his situation was supposed to make. Most people when bad things happen, you curl up in a ball, you shrink; you protect, protect, protect the little bit that you have left. It's abundance to scarcity like that. But nobody taught that to Terry. He understood counter intuitively perhaps, that between the things that happen to you and the ways that you are supposed to react, as Viktor Frankl said, there is a space. And in that space, there's a choice. And Terry chose to attack. And see, he watched kids die of cancer, younger than him, in the hospital and instead of allowing that tragedy to crush him, he gathered it up and he converted it into something else, something bigger. Darkness into vision. And he used that as energy to propel himself. Every faltering step along that road. And it wasn't a fairytale, right? The miles took a terrible toll on his stump. Covered with blisters. The look on his face, an absolute contradiction: full of exhaustion, yet at the same time full of exaltation. And I thought to myself, there's something inside of us, inside Terry that I could only at the time describe as a light. A light that seemed to be able to transcend that fragile shell of a body. A light that seemed to be able to feed on frustration, on setbacks, to use those things like a fuel

source. The greater the challenge, the brighter that light just kept burning, and I hoped it existed in me. I prayed it existed in me. And if it did, it was just flickering. Because I'd been looking out into the world, you know, predict my future, but all I was doing was staring into this brick wall. I couldn't see through it. I realized that vision was not predicting the future. Leave that for Wall Street and the COVID experts, I mean they don't even do a good job at it.

But vision was -- it began with that light of Terry, that source where all our dreams, all our values, all our goals, it all springs from there. And so I began that difficult process of converting my deepest anxieties and hopelessness into my deepest aspirations. See, I wanted to live an adventuresome life and I wanted to take people's perceptions of what was possible and not and shatter them into a million pieces. I wanted to be part of great things and great teams, and most importantly I wanted to break out of that prison, partly constructed of my own fear. And so I found that that light became like a head lamp in a storm, lighting my way forward and with the faith that I would emerge on the other side of that storm, not just damaged as little as possible, but actually stronger and brighter. And it was a few weeks after that I got this newsletter in Braille of a group taking blind kids rock climbing. I ran my hand up the wall in my room and I said, who would be stupid enough to take a blind kid rock-climbing? [laughter] So I signed up. [laughter] I was tired of building walls around myself, protecting myself from loss. I wanted to tear down those walls and attack. I found through trials and error, that I could use my hands and my feet as my eyes. They became my eyes and I'd scan my hand across the face, just before I was ready to lose strength in my forearms and fingers and had to fall. I'd dig into a little crack or a pocket to keep me stuck there, do another pull-up, scan my other hand across the face... I'm usually not wearing this gown when I'm rock-climbing... And I left a lot of blood and skin, but I got to the top and it was so exhilarating, it was so vibrant, it was so beautiful. It was almost painful. It was a rebirth. I gotta say, though, as beautiful and vibrant as it was, it was also scary. And there's one thing that has not changed since that very first time I went rock climbing 35 years ago, and that's the reach.

It doesn't really matter whether you're blind or not, we're all in the same boat. We're all reaching into darkness, we're all hoping and praying and predicting and calculating that we will find what we are looking for, but we understand there's no guarantee. It's that moment we've

committed to the reach; we know it's almost impossible to turn back. The fear, it's foundational. It's overwhelming, the fear of flopping on our face, of making a mistake that affects so many others. The fear that we're not as good at something as we wish we were; we give 100% of our heart and we still fall short. Or the fear, for some of the older folks in the group: we've climbed as high as we can go, there's nowhere else to go but down. These fears they conspire against us and they paralyze us, so that maybe we decide to stop reaching. I think there's a big difference between many people and climbers, climbers understand life is an ongoing, never-ending process of reaching out into the darkness when we don't know exactly what we'll find, constantly reaching towards immense possibilities. They are never seen. They're only sensed. While so many others allow that darkness to paralyze them, I reached out that day. I know you guys have reached out every day, and it's leading you to some great adventures, that's for sure.

Here's the catch, though. You're waiting for the catch, right? There's always a catch. When you reach, when you climb higher up the mountain, climb higher than you've ever climbed, maybe higher than anyone's ever climbed. You're not asking for an easy life. Adversity will find you. I think there's a very powerful relationship between the extent of our reach and the amount of adversity we accept into our lives. The two go hand in hand. I don't know how to separate them. And I think that relationship works just as powerfully in reverse, because when we look at the ceilings in our lives and the world, how do you feel at first? I know I feel helpless. And then we commit, to attacking it. And it does the opposite of what we might have thought: it releases tremendous energy and potential within us and our teams. But I don't think it's enough just to solve problems or keep up with the pace of change, that's so boring. I think we have to relentlessly reach out to those adversities; the small ones that wear you down, that make you feel like you're treading water but you're still drowning, right up to the most complex issues that face us as human beings, on the horizon, ready to bear down on us. It takes such a courageous person and team to be able to not just bury your head in the sand and ignore it, or see the world through your interests, but to square off with adversity and walk into the storm.

I've met people able to do this; my friend Mindy Shire comes to mind. She's a UVM graduate, 1993, I believe. You guys know Mindy? Anyone? Yeah? Well, good, because I'm about to tell the

story. [laughter] Well, Mindy is a mom of three kids. One of them was born with muscular dystrophy, a rare form, and he came home from school in third grade crying. He said, “Mom, I want to wear a pair of jeans to school, all the kids wear jeans and I have to wear sweatpants.” That’s because he couldn’t dress himself, so the routine was just to get him in sweatpants, it’s easy, path of least resistance. That broke Mindy’s heart. She was a bit of a seamstress, she’d had some experience in the fashion world, and so when she got over those feelings of helplessness she got to work. She took a pair of jeans and she widened the legs, so that they’d accommodate his leg braces. And she put rubber bands in the buttonholes so the waistband could expand, and eventually got rid of the zippers and the buttons and replaced them with magnets and Velcro. And he went to school the next day –even though she had a sleepless night – and he held his head high, wearing that pair of jeans. He could dress himself, he could go to the bathroom, get those jeans back on. He was so happy and she realized this was not a one-off, she realized she could do this for thousands of people, so she started an organization called The Runway of Dreams. They advocate for adaptive fashion. She works with the biggest apparel companies out there in the world – Tommy Hilfiger, Target, Zappos – all enabling thousands and thousands of people to live lives with more dignity, more joy, more self-esteem.

This is alchemy. Some of you read about those alchemists in the Medieval times, trying to take lead and turn it into gold. This is modern-day alchemy. They take the lead that life piles on top of them and they figure out a way to transform it into gold. With an alchemist like Mindy, they don’t do the things that you always hear about. You know, they don’t avoid adversity or ignore it. They don’t just deal with it or survive it. They don’t even overcome it. I never knew what that meant. What these alchemists do is different. They figured out how to seize hold of that storm of adversity that swirls around us, to harness its energy and use that energy to propel themselves forward to places they would have never gone to in any other way. With an alchemist, you can throw them in the midst of a fierce uncertain environment, strip away their resources, throw roadblocks in front of them. They’ll still find a way to win. You know it. Not despite adversity. Because of it. I think if we want to win and grow and innovate and create strong connections around us, and create a paradigm that maybe the whole world can follow; the way we harness the challenges in our lives, it’s our greatest advantage. Imagine if adversity

weren't the enemy, it weren't the dead-end, it weren't the reason why we stop short. What if it were the pathway?

My friend Hugh Herr is another alchemist; he cofounded No Barriers along with me. He's an amazing climber. We climbed this beautiful, crazy corkscrew of a tower outside of Moab, Utah a ways back. It's just a stunning peak where you stand on this tiny little summit above the desert. So I got to know Hugh, and Hugh is an alchemist too, as I said. When he was a teenager he was a brilliant climber and he was pushing his way up Mount Washington, not too far from here, in the winter and he got lost in a storm – went down the wrong side of the mountain. Long story short, his legs froze, they had to be amputated. He was rescued, he woke up in the hospital. He looked down at the sheets where his feet were supposed to be protruding. Instead, the sheets dropped into space and he wailed from as deep a place as pain could come from. He told me though, he said "Erik, the greatest breakthrough of my life was one day," he said, when he looked down at where his legs were supposed to be and instead of seeing loss, instead of seeing pain, what he saw was a blank canvas And he was the artist. He was free. In that space he could build anything his mind could conceive and it was a misnomer that that space was just a vacuum or a void or nothingness. No, it was loss – loss is energy– and over time he had begun to transform that loss into the seeds of creation. So he got to work, started testing these composite materials and different-shaped feet. He finally stumbled upon these crazy little feet that look like door stops. He could jam them into seams no human foot could even stand up in. By practicing and innovating and iterating he became a better climber than when he had feet. He was ranked in the top ten climbers in the country. There's a climb where I live in Colorado. Nobody could get to the top of this thing. Hugh goes up, he flashes it and somebody says, "Hugh, my gosh, how did you do it? Tell us your secret!" He said, "well, I noticed there was a hold out of people's reach... so I just made my legs a foot longer." [laughter] That's what an alchemist does.

[laughter]

And so it's beautiful, he got back to climbing. But the cool part of these alchemy journeys is that they take sideways turns because, he never saw himself as a student, but through that struggle

he realized he was an inventor. And so he went back to school, worked his way through his Community College, finally worked his way through a bioengineering degree. He now runs the Biomechatronics laboratory at MIT. He builds the most sophisticated prosthetic legs in the world, they think a thousand times a second, enabling people to walk for the first time and even better than that, to dance for the first time.

So this is alchemy. It's struggle into wisdom, into innovation, into empathy, into joy, into love. It's something we spend a lifetime perfecting and pursuing, and we come back to it time and time again in moments of challenge. I can only imagine your struggles. Your struggles. I'm sure you've had them. You know, COVID. Elephant in the room that made us all feel so isolated and alone. I heard a student yesterday say it was a collective trauma that you guys will experience as a generation. Maybe those miserable nights just staying up all night cramming for those midterms and those finals. Maybe you had crisis in your family. Maybe you struggled academically or on the sports field. Lots of struggle. And then maybe a little bit beyond your lives, there's challenge in the world. Challenge in the world. There's poverty and disease and a broken health care system, and a marginal public education system at best. And there's climate change, and environmental devastation. I mean, bottles in the ocean that can be seen from space. And there's conflicts, like in Ukraine, Syria, Yemen, there's -- like these ideologies and religions that compete and clash and create terrible violence, so much challenge. And I'm going to be blunt: those things may be the things that wind up crushing us.

Or, they might become the most potent fuel source we have for transformation. See, I think the world's crying out for alchemy. It is begging for it. And you may be the alchemist, you may be the world's best hope for alchemy. I hope you'll heed that call.

Standing up there on that pinnacle with Hugh, I asked him, I said, "Hugh, describe what's out there?" He looked down, he said, "wow! The desert floor is flat, and there are these sharp -- hundreds of sharp orangish-red pinnacles of every size imaginable... unique and spectacular, each and every one of them... rising up and piercing the sky." I thought about those rocks that were eroded and sculpted by wind and rain over thousands and thousands of years. It was a process that was miraculous. And I thought to myself, in some ways we are those rocks, we are

those pinnacles, we are shaped by those elements. We don't have a choice on that, but I think we do have a choice on how we are shaped. Do we allow adversity to diminish us, to pulverize us, to shape us into something bitter and ugly? Or do we allow it to shape us into something beautiful and purposeful and profound? That is our choice.

I wish you a life rich with adversity. Adversity that will sculpt you, that will stretch you, that will test you, that will push you to reach maybe just a little bit farther. That will propel you into the world in chaotic and unexpected ways towards new discoveries. I promise you it will never be easy. But it'll be a great adventure. To the Class of 2022, keep climbing. Thank you so much.

[cheering and applause]