

"Art, Heart & the Future"
By Daniel H. Pink
Commencement Address
Ringling School of Art and Design
Sarasota, Florida
7 May 2004

(Daniel H. Pink is contributing editor at Wired Magazine, American's leading writer and commentator on workplace trends, and author of the best-selling books, Free Agent Nation and A Whole New Mind.)

President Thompson, Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, excited families and friends, and, most of all, the talented class of 2004:

Thank you very much for inviting me to share this wonderful evening with you. Congratulations to the soon-to-be graduates – and their soon-to-be-relieved parents.

As President Thompson just told you, in another life, I worked as a political speechwriter. So every now and again, people ask me, "Dan, what makes a good speech?" I've thought a lot about that question. And I've discovered the three most important elements of speeches in general – and of commencement speeches in particular.

The three most important elements in any speech are: brevity, levity, and repetition.

Let me say that again: brevity, levity, and repetition.

So I promise to be brief. I promise not to be too, too serious. And I promise to repeat the important stuff in case you aren't paying attention the first time.

But I'd like to begin by telling you about one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made.

A decade and a half ago, I did something that I very much regret – something that I'm slightly ashamed of, something that I wish nobody would ever know. I'm willing to tell you tonight – if you promise to keep it in this room, just between you and me.

When I was a young man, in a moment of youthful indiscretion, I went to law school. Now, I didn't do very well in law school. In fact, I graduated in the part of my class that made the top 90 percent possible. I didn't enjoy law school. I never practiced law a day in my life. If I could press the rewind button and do it over differently, I would.

So why did I do it? Why did I go to law school? Why, oh why, did I go to law school?

The answer is actually quite simple. It's an answer some of you have *given* before. It's an answer some of you have *heard* before.

It's my parents' fault.

Let me explain.

When I was a kid—growing up in a middle class family, in the middle of America in the middle of the 1970s—most parents dished out the same plate of advice to their kids. Get good grades, go to college, and pursue a profession that would offer a decent standard of living and perhaps a dollop of prestige. If you were good at math and science, become a doctor. If you were better at English and history, become a lawyer. If blood gussed you out and your verbal skills needed work, become an accountant.

That's the advice my parents gave me. That's the advice most middle-class parents gave their kids. Doctor. Lawyer. Accountant. Engineer. Those were the jobs that led to the promised land of financial security, professional prestige, and overall happiness.

The advice was so widely believed that if you deviated from the path, everybody tried to step in and steer you back on course. For example, in college, I majored in linguistics. And I got the same question over and over again. It's a question some of you have *asked* before. It's a question some of you have *heard* before.

What are you going to do with *that*?

Linguistics? What are you going to do with that?

Sound familiar?

Go to law school, my parents told me. It's something to fall back on. Go to law school, everyone said. It will keep your options open.

Now, to be fair, that advice was well-intentioned. And at the time, it wasn't exactly wrong. Back then, going to law school was a wise pathway into the respectable world

But today, class of 2004, that's no longer true. These days, that advice is not just boring. It's dangerous. Because the future you're facing looks very different from the future I faced when I graduated from college 18 years ago.

Today, the future doesn't belong to those engineers, lawyers, and accountants. It belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind. The future belongs to artists and designers, photographers and illustrators. It belongs to creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers and meaning makers.

In other words, it belongs to people like you.

Let me give you an example. A few years ago, a man named Robert Lutz took over a top job at General Motors. Now, Bob Lutz is in many ways a typical auto executive. He's a white-haired, white man in his 70s—a former Marine.

But when a reporter asked him how his approach would differ from that of his predecessors, here's what he said:

"It's more right brain. I see us being in the art business. Art, entertainment and mobile sculpture, which, coincidentally, also happens to provide transportation."

Let those words settle in for a moment. The *art* business. General Motors – General Motors! – says it's in the art business.

In the middle of the last century, Charlie Wilson, a GM executive who became U.S. Defense Secretary, uttered a line that helped define an era. He said, "What's good for General Motors is good for America."

Well, I think it's time to update Wilson's soundbite for a new century. What is happening to General Motors is happening to America. Today we're all in the art business.

In the U.S., the number of graphic designers has increased tenfold in a decade; graphic designers outnumber chemical engineers by four to one.

Since 1970, the U.S. has 30 percent more people earning a living as writers and 50 percent more earning a living by composing or performing music.

More Americans today work in arts, entertainment, and design than work as lawyers, accountants, and auditors.

And that's just the beginning. Because several powerful forces are converging to make my parents' advice obsolete—and to make your degree from Ringling more valuable than you ever imagined when you enrolled here four years ago.

One of those forces is automation. Computers have begun to shake up the lives of white-collar workers this generation much as they disrupted the lives of blue-collar workers last generation. Computers can now do many routine tasks—processing claims, adding figures, searching data—faster, cheaper, and better than humans can. So accountants lose work to TurboTax and other accounting software. The same thing is happening to lawyers. The typical lawyer charges \$180 an hour. But now you can get basic fill-in-the-blank legal forms on the web for 15 bucks. You can even go online and get a divorce for a mere \$249. That will leave a lot of lawyers unemployed.

Then there's globalization. As we've seen this year, there are millions of capable white-collar workers in India, the Philippines, and elsewhere willing to do work like basic computer programming and financial analysis

for a fraction of the pay of workers in the west. That will leave a lot of code slingers and number crunchers unemployed.

These two forces—automation and globalization—are profoundly changing the world of work. They mean any job that is based on simply following a prescribed set of rules—that can be reduced to a spec sheet or configured to produce a single right answer—is a goner. And that means that the jobs that remain will be the sort of things that computers can't do faster and low-wage overseas knowledge workers can't do cheaper. The jobs that remain will involve creating beauty and touching the human soul. They'll rely less on the sort of left brain, SAT kind of intelligence we've been schooled to respect and hectored into worshipping – and more on the right brain qualities of art and heart.

Art and heart. Creating something the world didn't know it was missing. Forging meaningful relationships and empathizing with others. These are qualities that are difficult to replicate. These are qualities that will define the workforce of the future. And these, I'm happy to say, are the very qualities you've been mastering here at Ringling.

But wait, there's more. You see, that economy filled with left-brain workers did pretty well. This country, and most of the developed countries, became wealthier than any group of people in the history of the world.

This has changed the nature of business – and it will change the course of your working lives. And if you don't believe me, look at this.

This is a toilet brush – but not just any toilet brush. It's a designer toilet brush – designed by Michael Graves, one of the world's most famous architects and product designers. It costs \$5.99 at Target. Yes, when we've got designer toilet brushes, life in America must be pretty good

But there's a serious point here – a very serious point. In business, it's no longer enough for a company or an individual to offer a product or a service that's simply functional – that merely works. Anybody can do that. In today's overstocked, materially abundant marketplace, that product or service also has to be physically beautiful and emotionally transcendent.

Now, where do you learn about physical beauty and emotional transcendence? At law school? No, at art school.

And that explains why an art degree is now perhaps the most valuable degree in business. And if that toilet brush wasn't sufficient proof, just take a look at what's going on in American graduate schools.

Last year, Harvard Business School – the premier MBA program in the world, the place where even the President of the United States earned his degree—admitted only about 10 percent of its applicants. That's pretty tough. But there are several places where the admissions standards are even tougher. For instance, the graduate program of the UCLA Department of Art admitted only three percent of its applicants. In other words, it's easier – much easier – to get into Harvard Business School than UCLA Art School.

With applications climbing and ever more arts grads occupying key corporate positions, the rules have changed: the MFA is the new MBA. In world of breathtaking material abundance, in which General Motors is in the art business, in which what used to be good jobs are going overseas or being done by computers, in which people are yearning for beauty, uplift, and meaning, an arts degree is the most valuable degree a person can have.

Now, that's not why you chose to become artists and designers. You chose this path because you listened to your heart. You answered the call that all creative people hear in their souls but that few have the courage to act up – the call to create, to express yourself, to push the limits of what had ever been done with paint or clay or pixels, to surprise the world and put a dent in the universe. You didn't choose your profession because it was a savvy career move. But you know what? It was a savvy career move. Your BFA is not a one-way ticket to a dingy artist's garret – at least not for all of you. Your BFA is a passport to the economy of the future.

In fact, one of these days, mark my words, a young man will come home from college and tell his parents, "Mom, Dad, I've decided to go to law school." And his parents will look at him – shocked, disappointed, worried for his future – and respond, "Law school? What are you going to do with *that*?"

Let me leave you with one last thought. About ten years ago, well before I decided to work for myself, I began a new job. I became a speechwriter for then-Vice President Al Gore, whom some of you may remember . . . though you can never be too sure . . . especially in Florida.

I was nervous when I started that job—just as many of you are nervous about the careers you're about to begin. Then I read something that Peggy Noonan once said. Peggy Noonan, who wrote speeches for President Reagan, said she had a three-stage reaction to working in the White House.

Stage One: I hope nobody figures out how stupid I am.

Stage Two, after few months in the White House: Hey, I'm as smart as everyone else.

Then a few months later came Stage Three: Oh my God, *we're* in charge?

That three-stage reaction has been the same no matter where I've worked. It may be the defining recurrence of my adult life. And trust me: I guarantee you'll have a similar reaction no matter where you choose to ply your trade.

And so, Ringling class of 2004, on this happy day, I've got some news for you: Oh my God, you're in charge.

But in a world that demands art and heart – that requires artistic sensibility and emotional acuity – I can't think of anybody I'd rather have leading the way.

Godspeed to you all.

###