Light on the Hill Keynote Speech

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Today I want to share with you a revelation — one that has changed the way I look at my life and I hope might help change the way you look at your life, if you let it.

I am the one percent. Many of you are the one percent, too. We are the one percent.

We belong to a fraction of people who enjoy nearly unimpeded access to clean water and electricity.

We belong to a fraction of people who have been promised due process under the law, imperfect as that process sometimes is.

We belong to a fraction of people living the most resource-consumptive nation on this planet.

We belong to a fraction of people who do not have much cause to worry for their day-to-day safety, nor access to food, nor shelter.

And apropos of where we are, right now, we belong to a very, very small fraction of people who have access to higher education — and not just higher education but a university education.

Bring in whatever other variable you want here. Religious freedom. Access to the Internet. The right to a minimum wage.

And if you want to get a bit metaphysical, remember that we belong to the very small fraction of people who have ever lived who happen to have been born into a era in which humans tend to live quite long and relatively comfortable lives.

And then, as you would if you were seeking to assess the probability of any compound event, multiply these fractions — fraction by fraction by fraction.

Largely independent of anything we have done in ours lives, we have arrived in this very privileged time and place.

We are the one percent.

If you’re not comfy with fractions, here’s another way to look at this: $34,000.

That’s all you must earn, each year, to be in the top one percent of all wage earners in the world. Many of us are already well into that one percent. Most of us expect to be there at some point relatively soon in our lives. Nearly all of us are in a position to reach for that monetary ambition, if we’re ambitious in monetary ways.

None of this is to suggest that we don’t have real problems, that we don’t have legitimate grievances, that we can’t feel slighted or that we shouldn’t demand change. None of this excuses that one percent of the one percent who have sought to use their wealth to corrupt our leaders or control our government.

But for me, it has helped put things into perspective. I am the one percent.

When you are first confronted by this idea there are three things you can do:

First, you can deny it. You can try to convince yourself that the actions you’ve taken have been of such consequence as to render moot the multiplicity of fortunes that have been bestowed upon you merely by virtue of your birth.

This seems to me to be a reaction largely ignorant of reason, but… you can deny it if you wish.

Second, you can resent it. You can scream to the skies. You can shake your fist in righteous indignation of whoever it is, out there, who dared rob you of the opportunity to prove your mettle against the chaos of the universe.

This seems to me to be a rather childish reaction, but… you can resent it if you wish.

Finally, though, you can allow yourself to be blessed by it. You can take this beautiful life out for a spin. You can acknowledge that you have been incredibly fortunate to have arrived here in this time and place and situation — that you have won this incredible lottery.

And you can appreciate the fact that whatever good decisions you’ve made, whatever hard work you’ve expended, whatever intelligence you’ve applied has cemented your place here among these very privileged people. You can even be proud of that.
And you can feel thankful beyond thankful that whatever bad decisions you’ve made, whatever stupidity you’ve exhibited, whatever transgressions you’ve committed, you have not lost your footing upon this hill, and it is incredibly unlikely you ever will.

When you accept this and allow yourself to feel blessed by it and do not, —I beg of you do not — ever feel entitled to it, it will become very hard for you to see anything but joy in your life. And it will be very hard for you to feel anything but obligated to your fellow man.

And then the only question is: What will you do with it?

Released of the envy that comes from believing that there are so many people out there with so much more than you have.

Released of the bondage that comes from believing that in order to have a great life you must have a great bank account.

Released of the fear that comes from believing that all the stuff you’ve worked so hard for is so precariously balanced that you could lose it all in a single moment.

What will you do with that?

What risks can you take knowing that you are in the impossibly awesome position of not risking much at all?

What knowledge will you seek knowing that you can learn just for the joy of learning?

What joy will you share knowing that you will only be filled with greater joy?

What will you do to help your fellow man knowing that it won’t cost you nearly as much as it will help them?

We are the one percent. It is stupid to deny it. It is silly to resent it. The only thing left is to embrace it, to feel blessed by it, to be joyful about it and use it for what it’s worth.

And then go out and try to make yourself worthy of it.

Welcome back to Utah State University and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. I pray you’ll have an amazing year.
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