

San Francisco City College Commencement Speech
Senator Mark Leno
May 27, 2016

Thank you Chancellor Lamb for the warm and gracious welcome and for the invitation to join you on this celebratory day. Let me also express my appreciation for your decades of service in higher education. Your leadership is inspirational. I also want to thank the dedicated faculty, staff and Board of Trustees for your commitment to this bold and brave institution.

Commencements are by definition about new beginnings. They are also about recognizing the accomplishment of concerted effort, focus and study.

For those here today who are the first in their families to reach this achievement, I offer special congratulations. We all have much to rejoice.

I am here to join you in celebration of your success as well as the success of this proud place which we all love, the City College of San Francisco.

No rogue commission is going to succeed in closing these doors of opportunity, denying us accreditation or destroying all that has been built since its establishment 81 years ago. We will not only survive, we will continue to thrive and excel. As state and national champions, Rams Rule!

Let me take a moment to note the lack of any protesters, acts of civil disobedience or the exercising of first amendment rights here today. I read recently about the discord Mills College was experiencing for inviting former Secretary of State Madeline Albright to deliver their commencement address. A friend's son just graduated from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service where protests erupted due to Jeh Johnson, the Secretary of Homeland Security, having been selected to speak.

What does it say about San Francisco and our City College that a Jewish homosexual who fights for transgender rights, a statewide \$15 an hour minimum wage and the political demise of Donald Trump is invited to speak and there is peace in the land? And out of respect to those here who may support him, I meant no more disrespect than he does when he speaks of women, Muslims, immigrants, Mexicans or the disabled.

For those of you not familiar with me, I have had the rare privilege of representing San Francisco in the California state legislature for the past 14 years preceded by 5 years on our County Board of Supervisors. I am otherwise a small business owner. It was by appointment by then Mayor Willie Brown in 1998 to fill a vacancy on the BOS that I was dropped into public service. There had been no plan in my life to pursue elected office as I had absolutely no interest in public life or any background in public policy.

Accepting the offer to jump into the political world was among the best decisions I ever made though it was a frightening one at the time. I didn't know that I could keep my business going while putting in 80 hours per week at City Hall which then paid only a part time salary. I didn't know that I could take the political heat, of which there is some in this town, as I'm a lover not a fighter.

As ambivalent as I was about taking the job, what led me to accept was that I thought "You, know, I don't want to wake up ten years from now and wonder what that would have been like".

My father once taught me that when faced with a big decision in business or in life to always consider what the very worst outcome could be. Once you envision the worst and realize you can survive it, then go for it. It was great advice. So don't let any situation or opportunity intimidate you. Whether you are considering furthering your higher education, your career technical education or pursuing a new venture or job. It is likely a little unnerving, trying something new. But think it through. If it all heads south, can you survive it? If yes, proceed with confidence.

I had introduced myself as a Jewish gay man for a reason. It is an understatement to say how fortunate we are to live in this beautiful and welcoming city and state. Hardly perfect and with its challenges but unlike any other place in this country. The opportunities and possibilities for inclusion, acceptance and success here are so much greater than in most other places. That is likely why we stay and struggle to manage with the traffic and cost of housing. California has always been at the forefront of change. And I have certainly experienced that change in my lifetime.

When I came out as a gay man after high school 47 years ago, homosexuality was still considered a mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association did not remove it from its list of mental disorders until 1972. Consensual relations between adults of the same gender were considered a felony in this state until 1976. Imagine, gay and lesbian people were sent to prison just for hooking up. So to come out as a gay person at that time was to announce to the world that you were a mentally ill criminal. Lives were destroyed and careers were ruined. It was not many decades before that you could see signs reading "No dogs or Jews allowed". Anti-Semitism and racism were in many places just the norm.

I share all of this social history with you to make a point. Don't limit yourself to any dream or aspiration that you can imagine or even those you can't imagine. When I finished school the thought that I could be elected to the office of state senate would have been laughable. It was not even in the realm of possibility. So never forget that times change, our social norms evolve and the world tomorrow may hardly be recognizable today. There is no reason to believe that you cannot do something because it has never been done before. The unimaginable and the unbelievable are happening all around us. For many in this graduation class, today's certificate or diploma was once out of reach, a distant dream. Today, as a result of your determination, your commitment and your effort, it is now a reality. Just imagine what you can do next.

When I finished college I applied to and was accepted to the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, a long name for a rabbinical school. I entered with the thought that I would become a reform rabbi. Well, that did not work out too well and after two years of a five year program I dropped out. But a few things that I learned while I was a rabbinical student have stayed with me through my life. One of them is a Hebrew prayer that I would like to share with you, as it has proved to be a great benefit to me over the years. I will recite it first in Hebrew, followed by the English translation. Baruch atah Adonai elohey'nu melech ha'olam, she'asali kol tz'arki. Blessed are you, Creator of the Universe, who has provided for me all of my needs. Now, whether you are Jewish, Catholic, Christian, Muslim or any other religion or not a person of faith, is not the point. What this prayer or silent meditation, which I internally recite, among a

few others, throughout the day, means to me is to remember to be grateful. It is a prayer of gratitude.

We live in a world that is forever reminding us of what we don't have and what we need to be happy, fulfilled, successful or satisfied. Entire multi-billion dollar industries exist to profit off our perpetual sense of being less than, of feeling incomplete, insecure and unworthy - that is until you buy their product which will make you rich, beautiful and make you sing well too. Advertisements are everywhere telling us that our hair doesn't shine enough, that our teeth aren't white enough, that our skin is not smooth enough. Buy this car or this suit or dress or smartphone or computer and your life will finally be heavenly. On one level we all know this is complete nonsense but how often do we actually buy into these messages? And at what personal cost? If only, we often think. If only I were more like her, if I could do what he can do, if I were smarter or better looking. The flip side of this unfortunate, debilitating and disabling message is to stop to count our blessings. Whoever we are and whatever our circumstances, we are blessed. If you ever doubt that fact, take a minute to imagine how additionally challenging life would be without your sight, hearing or mobility. One in four San Franciscans is food insecure meaning they do not know where their next meal will come from. Over 6,000 of us have no place to call home and may sleep without a roof over their heads tonight. Children grow up without parents or siblings or suffer the tragedy of senseless gun violence. Others live in daily fear that immigration services may knock on their door at any moment and rip their family apart without notice or due process of law. And those in refugee camps wonder and fear if they will ever return home.

The power and competence we experience at times when we are feeling grateful are surprisingly intense. We have all had those moments. When a friend or partner comforts us when we are feeling pain and have been hurt, emotionally or physically. When a brother or sister unexpectedly offers assistance with a problem or needy situation. When we accomplish some task that we didn't imagine could be accomplished. At such times, there is the feeling, the inclination to pass it on, to share the joy and the wealth of our good fortune. Gratitude breeds gratitude.

Let me once again congratulate you, your family and friends, all of those who have offered you support in all its many forms through your success here at City College. Do take some time to recognize your attainment, to really digest it before you take your next life steps. You deserve every achievement that lies before you. Enjoy what you can along the way because before long you'll be an old guy like me rattling on to anyone who will listen. In closing I want to share with you the lyrics of a song by Ira and George Gershwin, written nearly a century ago. Do not worry, I am not about to break into song. The title is "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries".

Life is just a bowl of cherries, don't take it serious, life's so mysterious. You work, you save you worry so, but you can't take your dough when you go, go, go. So keep repeating it's the berries, the strongest oak must fall. The sweet things in life to you were just loaned, so how can you lose what you've never owned? Life is just a bowl of cherries, so live and laugh at it all.

Go Rams!