

**Remarks to the Graduates of UNCG Department of Mathematics & Statistics**  
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Thank you to Shivaji and the faculty for the kind invitation to speak today. I must admit, it's a little weird being asked to speak at a graduation. If you want a lecture on the many wonderful existence and uniqueness theorems for nonlinear differential equations—I'm your guy. As my former students, some of whom are sitting here today can tell you, I'm rarely at a loss for words when I'm teaching a class, but it's another thing entirely to be given a completely blank slate. And I'm not really sure the University wanted me here. In a search for some inspiration for this talk, last week I went back to try to find the oldest email I could from UNCG. I thought I might say something inspirational about how I always knew UNCG was the right fit for me, ever since the first email. It turns out the oldest email I could find was a library overdue fine notice from 2016. That's when I also found out that they were shutting down my UNCG email account. On May 3—yesterday. So maybe the speech should be the State of North Carolina knows how to bleed you dry, and then delete your account. Maybe that should have been a sign. But that won't be my speech today, true though it may be.

Graduation speeches are normally some combination of life anecdotes and advice. In all the graduations I ever attended, I don't think I really paid much attention to the speaker. It was never about the one person who gets up on stage to speak. And today is no different. So I'll keep it short. I also don't feel qualified to give you much life advice. After all, I'm not THAT much older than most of you undergraduates. But now that I've made that disclaimer, I'll now bring up something that many of you will be too young to remember. In the early 1990s, there was an ad that ran on TV for Gatorade. "Be Like Mike" featuring Michael Jordan. And in those days, I probably thought I could "Be Like Mike". But my love for fried foods and lack of a competitive drive have probably made that goal unachievable. So if not Mike, who? I have a few suggestions.

I could suggest that you try to be more like your professors. And there would certainly be many good choices—but maybe, in such close proximity to final exams and masters thesis defenses, that's a little too raw. I promise they weren't TRYING to hurt you.

So I'll instead make some more unconventional suggestions. When people ask me why I went to UNCG, I usually say something about the faculty and how I was really impressed with their research capabilities. And that's true. But I think what's more telling is why I stayed. And the reason I stayed is because of all the other people. The hundreds of fellow students and staff members, who through simply acts of kindness made the long days of studying and exams a little more bearable. So if you want someone to be like, be like them.

Let me first tell you a story about a man who mystified me for the first year after I arrived at UNCG. I saw him for the first time at a colloquium. He was kind of hard to miss—tall, impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit, and wearing a lanyard of some sort around his

neck. He rarely said much, but all the faculty seemed to know him. He sat near the back of the room, listened carefully and thoughtfully to the speaker, and went up, shook the speaker's hand, and thanked him or her for coming. I, meanwhile, had been completely lost since slide number 3, was checking my email on my phone, and ran out the door as soon as the talk was over. That was colloquium number one. But the mystery man kept showing up—unassuming, polite, thoughtful, and seemingly appreciated by everyone around.

It took me several years to find out who the tall man in the suit really was. Many faculty in the room will of course by now know that I'm talking about Lloyd Douglas. Lloyd was at that time Associate Director of the Office of Sponsored Programs, having arrived at UNCG after a long and distinguished career working with the National Science Foundation and the Naval Underwater Systems Center. Lloyd has been active with the Mathematical Association of America, and is currently a member of the MAA Congress. In short, Lloyd was (and is) a big deal in the math community. But when he came to colloquia, he was just a mathematician trying to understand a little more than he did the day before. Eventually, we started chatting at the receptions before talks. I would, and still do, see Lloyd at a conference or two each year. And every time I see him, he always stops to speak to me and asks me how I'm doing. Lloyd doesn't owe that kindness to me, or to anyone for that matter. I'm sure he has more important matters and people to attend to, particularly at these big conferences where I'm a small fish in the pond and he's, well, Lloyd. But he does it, every time, without fail. And every time, I think about how at so many other universities, a person in Lloyd's position would have never taken the time to meet a graduate student, much less continue to check in on him at conferences and meetings across the country. It costs nothing to show humility and kindness to others.

So as we leave here, maybe we can all be like Lloyd. If you're an undergraduate, be a Lloyd for someone from your hometown who might be trying to navigate the college admissions process. If you're a graduate student, be a Lloyd for that undergraduate who everyone thinks of as being a little lost. Your kindness could mean more than you will ever know.

Over my five years at UNCG, I've also witnessed a lot of growth and change. But such is the nature of the academic enterprise. Programs that remain static are often programs in decline. New faculty have brought research expertise and teaching excellence to the university, while seeking to fill the rather big shoes of some of the retiring faculty they replaced. The undergraduate and graduate programs grew and adapted to meet the demands of a new generation of students. The Ph.D. program has exploded, and looks to be bringing in another outstanding class of students this coming year. There are a lot of people to thank for this of course—many of them sitting in this room. But one, in particular, is a person who often works tirelessly, without her name ever appearing in recognition. My guess is that many of the students here will know Haley Childers. I don't honestly know that it's possible to get a degree without knowing Haley, because at AT LEAST one point in your career here, someone told you to "Go ask Haley!" I have asked Haley a million questions, and watched Haley do

everything—from printing name tags for a conference, to putting out food for colloquia, to filing travel reimbursements—if she doesn't know how to do it, it probably can't be done. Without the work that Haley does, none of this works. And I don't just mean graduation. I mean this—the university—doesn't work without Haley and hundreds of people like her, who work tirelessly so that professors and students can engage in the academic endeavors for which the university is known.

If something is worth doing, be the person who's willing to do the work that will never show up in a newspaper or on the homepage. Be willing to do the dirty work. Be like Haley. Volunteer to be the Math Club president. Take notes at the group meeting. Send the email to organize that study session. They're thankless tasks that make people's lives better and easier—but if the work is worth doing, it's worth doing well.

So here we are, at the end of this chapter. At everyone of my graduations, I was told how exciting this time was supposed to be, but mostly, I felt unsure. Graduation can be scary. I'm a year out, and I still doubt, regularly, whether I'm doing the right thing or making the right choice. A thousand times a day, I wonder if I'm good enough. I couldn't do this on my own.

Graduation is a time to celebrate your accomplishments—sure—but it's also a time to acknowledge the people in your life who helped you make it here. Some days, maybe that was helping you with homework or proofreading a paper. Other days, maybe it was just convincing you to get out of your pajamas and take a shower. Success take many different forms on many different days. My guess is that you might have brought some of those people along with you today to graduation. And that some of those people might also be wearing robes like you are. And, maybe, some of those people are faculty or staff members here. I've named a couple of people, but my guess is that you have lots of people you could put in that blank. "Be like (blank)". Tell those people. Today.

Life is tough. You'll need these people and maybe more as you continue on from here. The poet Maggie Smith said it best.

*"Life is short  
and the world is at least half terrible,  
and for every kind stranger, there is one who would break you,  
though I keep this from my children.  
I am trying to sell them the world.  
Any decent realtor, walking you through a real shithole, chirps on  
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,  
right? You could make this place beautiful."*

So I guess I'm the realtor. I'm trying to tell you I feel like there are a lot of people here who have given our lives "good bones". Continue to surround yourself with these

people. And more importantly, let's all aspire to give someone else's life "good bones". Be like Lloyd, and like Haley, and like, well, you fill in the rest.

I'm trying to sell you the world, and while it may be imperfect, you've got "good bones". We've got "good bones". In part because this place and the people in it gave us those "good bones". This place—the world—could be beautiful. We could make it beautiful.

Thank you.