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Otis College of Art and Design
2009 Commencement Address
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Thank you, President Hoi . . . and thanks to the faculty and staff . . . It's a tremendous privilege to receive this honorary doctorate from OTIS.

As with every worthy experience, I have learned something from today, and that is this . . . Always have the grace to accept the things you don't deserve – whether they're good or bad – because you'll experience both through no cause of your own.

Today that grace comes easy. **Thank you.**

And to all of you – lucky students, relieved family members, and supportive friends – it's good that you're here to celebrate this important day . . . not just in the lives of these graduates but also in the life of art and design.

Every time someone leaves OTIS, art evolves and design gets better. And that's really your job when you leave here . . . to move things along. We humans have an infinite capacity for the status quo. We'll do whatever it takes to make sure there's nothing to do. That's where you all come in . . . to change and

challenge the people and the world around you . . . to move things along.

That's as close as I will get to a theme today . . . I have no deathless prose on the future you are supposed to create. I have no single “big lesson” to offer, because life doesn't come at you in one big lump. It comes at you in a stream of small but significant experiences. If you remain open, those experiences will fill your life with meaning and potential.

All I can offer you today is envy. It's a gift to be creative. And it's great to be young. Exploit them both. It's not about money and it's not about power. Those things are not enough to sustain a worthy life. It's about exploration and adventure – taking risks. I rarely regret something I've done, but I often regret the things I don't do. I remember when I was a kid back in New York a couple of buddies asked me to go away for the weekend to a concert. I begged off and stayed home. To this day I can't remember what it was I had to do that weekend, but I remember the concert I missed . . . it was Woodstock. That one haunts me to this day.

At Nike we have a set of 11 guiding principles. We call them Maxims. They're not rules. They're just little nuggets of insight into how we work and relate to each other and to the world. They

seem to work really well, so I thought I'd take a similar approach and offer 11 short nuggets for you today.

The first is this . . . PERFECTION SUCKS . . . Let me give you a little context on that. I am not formally trained in design. I graduated from Penn State with a degree in political science. I was also a competitive runner, and I was always tinkering with my shoes, modifying them to improve my performance. I guess you could say I was indulging my right-brain bias. So when I walked into the Nike R&D Headquarters in Exeter, New Hampshire, 30 years ago, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to design shoes.

I learned design by designing. It gave me an appreciation for rough & primitive things - design that is refined but not precious, not perfect. By all means, focus on the details, but don't let yourself be paralyzed by the pursuit of perfection . . . Perfection is like a guitar player who smiles too much. I'd rather see a little blood on his fingers.

Nugget #2 - EMBRACE HUMILITY . . . Certain words are sacred and should not be tossed around like a Frisbee. Words like passion and innovation - these are rare and powerful and hard to come by. Never say them about yourself. Let others say them about you. There's nothing more inspiring than humility, and nothing more poisonous than arrogance.

#3 – BE A SPONGE . . . Engage every culture you encounter. Soak it all up. Look for ways to connect the dots and cross-pollinate ideas and influences. It'll make you a better artist and designer. Develop wide peripheral vision. There are great ideas lying around like diamonds in the dirt. The brightest are those you see out of the corner of your eye. The best thing you can be is curious. The worst thing you can be is arbitrary.

#4 - EXPECT REJECTION . . . There's a Greek philosopher named Diogenes. He used to speak to statues, begging them for money. When asked why he did this he said, "I want to practice accepting rejection." You, too, will meet rejection. You will experience failure. If you don't, you're not trying hard enough. But failure is temporary. Giving up is permanent. Never give up.

#5 – LET IT FLY . . . Discipline is invaluable. It's important to master the fundamentals. That's what you have achieved here at Otis. You have learned the skills and earned the right to do more than represent your craft – the world needs you to express yourself. Like the great athletes of our time – Ali, Jordan, Tiger, Lebron – you have the potential to innovate and improvise and flow at a very high level, in ways the world has never seen. All you have to do is work harder than everybody else. Squeeze that potential for all it's worth.

#6 – STAND YOUR GROUND . . . There will be plenty of times when you'll be asked to change or obey or conform or compromise in some way. If you deal with those moments by staying true to your principles and your knowledge, you are a genuine rebel.

#7 - BUY AN ERASER . . . Love and learn from your mistakes. That's one of the things I regret seeing disappear in design, the evidence of mistakes. In our world, the design world, there is tremendous power and efficiency in the computer. But there is great humanity in the eraser – to see the smudge of indecision, the evidence of the thought process, the moments of clarity and insight, all living together in the same sketch. I like that.

#8 - ASK QUESTIONS . . . The most successful designers at Nike are the ones who ask the most questions – of athletes and consumers, of other designers, and of themselves. I can tell you the best question I ever heard. As a young designer I used to present new ideas to the Nike board of directors. On that board was Bill Bowerman, the legendary track coach and the co-founder of Nike.

Bill was a tireless and obsessive innovator, and he was Nike's first designer. He was fixated on the weight of a shoe. Lighter meant faster. He was all about performance. As I took them through the shoe, Bill listened quietly and then said, "Toss me that shoe." I did and he pulled out a postal scale from his old, weathered brief case. He put the shoe on the scale and just grunted. Then he asked, "Is this the best you can do?" That's the best question I ever heard, and the one I ask myself everyday.

#9 - RESPECT YOUR HISTORY . . . It's the height of arrogance to dismiss the people and the sacrifices they made to create the world that surrounds you. The best artists, the best designers, the best athletes I know are all students of their craft. They study and build on ideas that came before them. They plug into the stream of consciousness rather than dismiss it. Be wary of people who "live in the moment." Their context never extends beyond their fingertips. The more you know about your past, the further you can reach into the future.

#10 - DREAMS ARE GOOD, BUT OPTIONS ARE BETTER . . .
Focus on your options, the things you can work with today. And be patient. Excellence takes time. Establish forward momentum . . . and nurture that. It will take you places you never imagined . . . or better yet, take you places that didn't exist until you created them.

#11 - Finally . . . STAY CONNECTED . . . Community is important. You have that here at Otis. But it's easy to lose that sense of community, and once you lose it, it's very hard to get back. We have over 600 designers at Nike working all over the world. We spend a lot of time making sure we all stay connected. The world will offer you plenty of opportunities to withdraw. Don't do it.

One last thought . . . stay in touch with the people who raised you. That gets more important with every passing day.

Congratulations. Thank you. And good luck.