

Read Gregory Kunde's commencement address to the College of Arts and Sciences of Illinois State University (May 13 2005)

President Bowman, Provost Presley, Dean Gordon, distinguished faculty and administrators of Illinois State University, parents and comrades of the graduates, ladies and gentlemen, friends, and – of course - Class of 2005:

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you on this most auspicious occasion. It is an honor to share this moment with you, as you move on from the College of Fine Arts and into the big, wide world. As I looked at the map to locate Braden Auditorium, it came to me. The last time I stood on this stage, it was 1977 and I was in a performance of La Boheme, and it hasn't changed a bit.

You've spent many hours, working to get here today. Congratulations to you all! You've stayed up far too late, too many times, skipped too many meals, broken up with your girlfriend, hung up on your mom, forgot that your favorite sweater was at the dry cleaners for nine weeks, lost your sunglasses, threw out your VISA bill instead of the junk mail, ran out of gas, and gained -- or lost -- twelve pounds. Why did you do that? Passion. For your art. For your life. It is your life.

You suffered all those mishaps and mistakes, because you believe you have something to say to the world that no one else can say. At least, that's why I hope you did. Because if you don't have that passion to pursue your art and perfect your craft, don't waste your time. Art...in all its forms demands that you be self-effacing and self-sacrificing. The external rewards, should you be fortunate enough to obtain them, will not sustain or satisfy. Find joy in your journey. Art requires it. Passion.

Webster defines passion as "a strong liking, desire for, or devotion to some activity." I think it goes beyond that. Passion lures you to make less than sound decisions sometimes. It's that whisper in your ear. Passion knows no rules. It transcends reason, driving us to our wits' end, only to realize that that is not what you meant at all, and now you have to begin again. Passion endows you with courage, so that you really can do that which everyone else rejected. It's what brought you to this school, this college, and this day. Passion.

You have to respect passion. It is powerful and mysterious and perhaps a bit combustible. It is the thing about artists that non-artists just don't understand. The tireless and tiresome struggle of discovery and improvement. How many times have you realized that you may never get it right, but you keep working on it anyway? But what a tremendous gift you have been given. The passion to feel more, see more, give more, dream more. You have an obligation to yourself and the world to go with that passion and create something that will compel others to stop. And think and wonder and watch and listen and learn and think again. Passion.

It will sustain you through the good times and the bad. You will be amazed by your abilities. As I was preparing for your commencement ceremony, I came across these words from the incredible Nelson Mandela:

"Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world."

In 1994 I was diagnosed with cancer, and for many months, I lived through surgeries, chemotherapy, sleeplessness, high blood pressure and low blood counts, and uncertainty. But it was my passion for my art, for my life, for my God that brought me through it all. I only wanted to return to that life, that art, which for nearly fifteen years

had proven to be a career fraught with too much stress, too little money, too many criticisms, and too many plane tickets. I prayed as I had never prayed, and found that passion could thrive while acknowledging a higher power. My desire for my cure grew. But my passion for music saved me even in my physical frailty, finally giving me the time and solitude to compose. Music is forever rolling around in my head, and at last, I had the time to harness that passion and put some music down on paper. And beyond my scribbles, my passion gave me a reason to wake up every day with the desire to beat cancer, to be well again, to perform again. You can't play it small. Passion.

Sounds as though passion will simply steamroll your life. Actually sometimes it's pretty quiet. That's when it gets a little more complicated. You may find yourself, moving right along, the career building and people noticing. But then you feel stagnant. Maybe even a little dry. Perhaps you've reached a plateau. Or it must be that your bio is outdated. Maybe a new headshot will help you through the blahs. Has it escaped you? Has your Muse forsaken you? No. Passion will also ask that you challenge yourself. Passion cannot work alone. You must feed it with your life experience. Read all you can. Meet new people. Travel. Fall in love. Return to your simpler self and find what first made you feel passion. When I finally listened to that whisper in my head, I knew that I needed to conduct music as well as sing it. I founded a choral group six years ago, and I have begun again to learn new music, teach amateurs how to sing as a single voice. I rediscovered the passion that first sparked my interest in music and in doing so, have found a way to feed the desire to go beyond just a vocation. I look forward to my time with these people, who have become another family to me; I am continually renewed and inspired by our modest successes and triumphs and realize that I have so much more to accomplish with my music. Passion.

Speaking of falling in love, I must admit that it helps. Your passion. Your art. I mean, if you want to sing the role of Romeo, let's hope that you've at least had a girlfriend or two along the way. I don't think you can seek out your soul mate, but I do believe that you have one. If you happen upon each other, your passion for your art and your passion for your life begin to blend, and on occasion, that can be challenging.

But it's all good, because what you will find in your soul mate's eyes will inspire you to even greater things in your art. My wife Linda and I met during a summer at Chautauqua Opera, which is located somewhere between Erie, Pennsylvania and Fredonia, NY. (And if that sounds like nowhere, it pretty much is.) But that's where we met, and I knew from our first meeting that this was my soul mate. Since that magical meeting, we have shared countless highs and lows – my first appearance at La Scala, my first recording contract, the applause that followed the legendary high F in the finale of Bellini's *I Puritani* in my debut at the Vienna Staatsoper, my diagnosis of cancer, and the subsequent loss of work as a result of gossip and rumor after my recovery. My point is – having someone to love, having that soul mate – can infuse your passion with more color and more depth than you might explore on your own. Passion.

So, in a few minutes you'll get the diploma. Which actually attests to the fact that you attended classes, put in your time, and turned in that final paper. You know what? Forget it. Not all of it. But remember, passion wants you to be unpredictable, impulsive, and certainly not studied. You must finally trust your own instincts, and after a thorough sifting and sorting of what you've heard and read and watched and memorized, embrace what works for you and nothing more. It's a difficult thing – it almost feels as though you are betraying someone. But, you are actually coming to terms with respecting yourself

and your opinions and your tastes. You know you have talent. Let the world know it, too. Passion.

But, let's say the world doesn't see it that way. And in ten years, instead of your art hanging on a wall at MOMA, it's on the wall in your garage. You sing in the church choir, not at the Met. You just played the "third guy from the left" in your town's production of *The Crucible*... never made it to Broadway. Passion is good for that, too. Success is a subtle thing, not easily defined or captured. So, it really doesn't matter if you make a million or not one penny. As long as you -- the artist -- realize that you are doing something that can heal a soul, mend a broken spirit, or just capture the moment, you are successful. And passionate, too. Passion will allow you the grace to know exactly where you should be, and how you can shine there. Passion doesn't let you off the hook. You'll be roped into all sorts of things -- the neighborhood holiday play, a city mural to beautify the new strip mall, a benefit concert for a family with four kids who just lost their dad to cancer. But that's passion at its best. Using your gifts, with no thought for your own gain. Passion.

No one can say what will happen to you in the next years. As you begin this new, non-academic life, there will be no end to the surprises in store. Passion will guide you, scare you, mock you, inspire you. And in spite of the unknowing of the future, and the fickle nature of fate, and the monotony of everyday routine, and the joys and sadness common to the human condition, you will be happy. Because you have one guarantee. You have your passion.