



## College Commencement Address to the North Carolina School of the Arts Class of 2007

### Danny Elfman

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First, I'd like to begin with my sincere congratulations on successfully completing something that must have seemed, not too long ago, to be a remote, distant, semi-impossibility – and yet, here you are.

Second, a disclaimer. I'm reading from notes because, aside from having to rely on memory cells ravaged and pillaged by the onslaught of time and functioning more or less like a 1981 Commodore 64 computer with only 32K left intact, aside from that, one of my greatest fears is that of public speaking. And yet ... here I am.



Danny Elfman

And the question is ... what words of advice can I possibly offer that might in any way be useful to you?

I could talk to you about "following your dreams," which is a wonderful sentiment, but that seems just too obvious. This is a school of the arts and you are all, in one form or another, artists. So in fact, you are already, without my encouragement, following your dreams or you wouldn't be here.

So I began by looking to my own experiences, to see if I could find some shred of something relevant. At first I really didn't think so. As I reflected, it occurred to me as it often has in the past, that my life has basically been a bunch of random events, bizarre occurrences, and coincidences, some working out better than others. But then as I gave it more thought, it began to feel more like a season of "Lost" where everything happens for some strange "reason."

And I began the process of rummaging through those remaining memory cells to recall the many dreams I attempted to follow, to see if I could find any patterns that made some kind of sense. And slowly, (in a way) it did... .

And so, I will in fact, talk to you today about "following your dream" and "going down that road."

But I'd like to talk to you about how strange and unexpected the "real" process of "following one's dreams" can be. Because for some of you, that road might be a smooth, paved highway. I envy you, and I wish you well, but what I've got to say will have no relevance for you. (This might be a good moment to get those iPods and headphones out.) But for many of you that road might be like it was for me: twisted, bumpy, full of potholes, misplaced exit signs, and dead ends.

So now, with your permission, I'll tell you a crazy, meandering story. Mine. And like my life, I'm afraid it's rambling and a little complicated. And for that, I apologize. And I invite you to draw from it what you will. It will take some patience, so bear with me.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, I shall digress.

By the time I got to high school, I had only two interests: radiation biology and movies. I pretty much went to the movies every weekend I could remember. They were a major part of my life, but I had no dreams of actually working on them. Too impossible and distant – so science was my only option. I was quite sure of it.

However, I was a an odd, shy kid who didn't make friends easily in a new school, in a new neighborhood, with no old chums to rely on. My first couple of new friends were kind of odd and shy like myself and, to my surprise, were all artistically inclined in one way or another. Poetry, cartoons, writing and, in several cases, musicians.

This was a new world. Stuff rubbed off. Through my musician friends, I was exposed to 20th-century classical music and jazz. I was blown away, but I also felt that I'd long since missed the boat. I had no musical ability that I was aware of. They had all started playing music as children. It was, I wistfully observed, too late for me.

Now high school was over, the travel bug had bitten me, and my only dream at that moment was to beat it – as far and fast as I could. College could certainly wait for my return, and, as I had saved up a little cash by various questionable and sundry means, a year of world travel seemed quite reasonable. But – and this is where that "dream" thing came in – I decided to purchase a violin to bring with me, and to attempt to learn to play while I traveled. I thought, though my time may have passed,

why not? I thought just maybe ... . Well, anyhow.

Skip to several months later, in Paris, getting ready to start the “big journey” and staying with my older brother who lived there and worked there. One day, while I was practicing that fiddle, I was overheard by the director of an avant-garde theatre troupe who was visiting at the time, and to my astonishment, was given the offer to “join up” for a summer tour. No money. Room and board. He seemed to think I was good enough, and being a “rag-tag” kind of thing, I simply had to play along with a number of crazy songs they had in their show. I thought, maybe I could get good and become a violinist? Now that seemed like a worthwhile, though distant, dream.

But wait: This particular dream was supposed to be about a big world journey. The music thing, like college, would just have to wait.

I spent close to a year traveling across Africa ( I though it would take a couple of months) and lo and behold ... I didn't get good at the violin, but I did fall in love with percussion, and got to listen to a lot of incredible music and shipped quite a few instruments home.

Cut to ... finally back home ... off to college? Maybe music or film school or both but ... no go ... .

While I was traveling, my brother had come back to the States and founded his own street troupe, inspired by the French experience, and upon my return he immediately inducted me to be their “musical director.” I didn't even know what that meant, least-wise what I was supposed to do. I had still never taken a lesson nor could I read or write music. No matter. I played a poor but serviceable fiddle and had a bunch of cool West African percussion. And that was enough. To use the description “rag-tag” would be a wild overstatement.

We worked our asses off night and day. Because of the lack of money, there was a constant turnover of musicians. I think it took me about a hundred hours of work and maybe 1,000 phone calls to locate and find each replacement. But somehow we slowly improved. Every single night I wasn't bussing tables, I was rehearsing. I passed the hat for money.

I gave myself a year max to “follow that dream” before going on to school. The year turned into seven or eight. We loved old 1930s jazz so reluctantly, I was forced to teach myself to transcribe various Duke Ellington big band orchestrations because somebody had to. And I taught myself to write them down on paper.

We really believed in that dream. But we also starved. There seemed to be no way to make this thing viable, and we couldn't fit into any niche that might qualify for grants or endowments. The commitment and effort were enormous, but I finally came to the realization that maybe it had reached its limit – and the “dream” had no future.

Time for “a new dream”? Maybe I could refine some of these skills with the crude composing and arranging I had picked up. Could this be it? Perhaps. Also in that

troupe we had begun to build our own mini percussion orchestras. Maybe I could become an ethno-musicologist, or better yet, start a homemade percussion ensemble. Now that's starting to make sense, right? Wrong.

Woke up one day and heard this new up-tempo pop music from England called Ska. It reminded me of the West African pop music I used to listen to, and damn it, that's what I wanted to do. Gotta follow that dream ... again ... but now I'm really having a hard time figuring out: Exactly what dream was that?

Cut to ...

Now I'm playing electric guitar and singing in a struggling eight-piece rock band modeled after a West African pop group. Violin and percussion skills moot. Composing and arranging, useless. It was all very fun but I was kind of bitter that I'd wasted all those early years and got such a late start. I was 30 years old. Aren't you supposed to start your first band at around 16? Whatever ... .

A year became five or six. Again, we busted out asses and rehearsed night and day. We got better. We built a strong following. Even got a record deal. Things are going OK. I guess I'm finally realizing my dream?

Can't put my finger on it. Something's still not right. Still not quite seeing "the future."

Then a young animator doing his first feature film comes to see my band. He liked it and thought maybe I could score his film. How the hell am I going to do that? I have no training. I felt woefully inadequate. My newly acquired band skills now seemed useless for this endeavor. I came so very, very close to saying *no*. So, time for a big deep pause.

Remember back – all those movies I paid so much attention to (including the music)? Combine that with what I'd picked up with the theatre troupe – I developed a pretty good ear during those years.

I did learn to write down music on paper once. And I did remember all the film scores I grew up with. And so I reluctantly agreed.

The young animator kid, by the way, was Tim Burton, and the movie was PEE WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE. I did it, and guess what happened? It jump-started a new dream and a whole new career. But that's *not* the point of this story. *That was a lucky break.*

So here's the point.

Over the next 10 years, I busted my ass to learn this new craft and to my surprise, I found that every detour and dead end I had encountered in the past ended up giving me great advantages. I began incorporating all of my ethnic percussion and love of rhythm. As my teachers, I turned to a half dozen film composers that, although I didn't know it at the time, had embedded themselves into my soul and brain.

I drew from some of the crazy, irreverent stuff I did while banging it out in the street troupes, both French and American, and the ear training I got from transcribing those Ellington records.

And strangely, in a weird way, the “go screw yourself” attitude I got from being in a rock band paid off too, because it allowed me to be more fearless.

Even the starving years taught me to sharpen up my intuition and people skills and how to figure things out with nothing to work with. Things that proved to be really useful.

But most importantly, all those detours taught me not to lose hope from failure. One door closes, another opens up. And amazingly, in the end, nothing was wasted. All the time I thought I had lost wasn't lost at all.

So now finally I'm getting to the message. Time to preach a little.

Whatever field you're about to embark on, by all means, go ahead and follow that dream, but here's some simple lessons to keep in mind.

The only absolute promise that I will make to you today is this: While pursuing your dream, you will find that you're going to encounter tons of stuff, both good and bad, that I guarantee you will not expect. You may think you know where you're going, but in fact, it's likely you have no idea where any of your chosen paths will take you. It will be difficult.

But if your path is twisted and uphill and all over the place, you'll still acquire some tools, some skills, some experience, no matter how small, no matter how random, that could add up to something that is above and beyond your original dreams, in ways that may startle and surprise you.

So, whatever happens in your life, starting *now* – remember it. And use it.

You're artists. You can, and should, use everything.

There'll be many unexpected obstacles ... use them. There'll be many disappointments ... use them. There could be some real heartbreaks ... use them. Leave every possibility open all the time.

If you end up in the commercial arts, like I did, you may find yourselves up against an all too common beast: the combination of limited imaginations attached to egos larger than anything you thought possible. You may encounter small minds that judge you and whose approval you may need to move forward, and that will make you frustrated and angry. *Use it.*

In my first 10 years as a film composer I was up against so much criticism, slander and abuse from my industry, it was astounding. Mean-spirited rumors were commonplace and abundant.

And I can tell you this, the frustration and anger I felt toward my detractors and those who took shots at me from high safe places became my greatest fuel.

I know this sounds really sick. And it is. But the point is that adversity, and the need to prove yourself and to show what you're capable of can be a tremendous motivating factor. If you're unlucky enough to find yourself overflowing with frustration like I was ... *use it. Own it. Don't waste it. It's not just fuel, it's rocket fuel!* And when your weapon is your talent, *revenge is sweet!*

And now the platitudes.

Know that it's OK not to be the best at what you're attempting to do. That doesn't mean you don't have something worthwhile to offer. I never for a second imagined I'd ever be half the film composer that my idol Bernard Hermann was, and I was right, I'm not. But it's OK.

Expect your first pass at anything to be flawed ... and your second, and your third and sixth and maybe your tenth. It's OK. It's normal. It's something we all share.

Don't expect a lucky break. But they'll happen. They'll find you.

If you're lucky enough to find success, learn to accept praise warily. Those who accept and believe praise too readily – or worse, those who seek it inevitably suffer in their work.

There are no dead ends in your life ... until of course, you're dead.

But, believe it or not, there's one more point I'd like to make. I was discussing all this stuff with a writer friend who posed an interesting question: When and how does one know when to stick with their dream and when to bail for another? Sadly, there's no good answer for that. If I had stuck with the violin, I have no doubt that I would by now have become a mediocre violin player at best. It simply wasn't in me.

We all have to learn to find our strengths and weaknesses. To learn self-criticism but to sense when it's becoming self-destruction. We all have to have faith in ourselves but need to know when to stand firm without bending and when to become fluid, elastic, and agile.

There's no easy answers to that. We're all different. You've all heard the stories about listening to your gut, your instincts, and they're all true. Over time your instincts will evolve.

Observe it all. *Use it all.* Keep your eyes and ears open and learn from everything you can. Remember that it's just as important to discover what doesn't work for you as what does.

Today you're graduating. And you're beginning this long, wonderful, terrible, agonizing and ecstatic, draining and fulfilling process. Now your learning has just begun.

And may the elusive gods of inspiration at least occasionally reach down and touch you.

Good life, and good luck.

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