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Business & Engineering Colleges

No Soup for You!

Thank you very much Dean Noori. It is so good to be at Cal Poly today.

Good morning, Cal Poly graduates of the class of 2009!

President Baker, members of the faculty, administration, staff, parents and family members and friends of today's graduates, it is great to be with you.

Graduates, this is a special day. I am privileged to have the honor of speaking with you. I realize you have many things on your mind – memories and dreams, partings with close friends, plans to see them again, possibly a ski trip given the predictions for snow in the CA mountains *and* the fact that you may never take another final exam...and excitement about what comes next in your lives.

You graduate at a challenging moment in American history. Unemployment is at a 30 year high, the housing market is a mess, California and many other states are struggling to pay their bills, and despite all the shakeout so far, the world economic system still faces daunting problems.

On this momentous day, though, I want to assure you that you are the solution...not the problem. Why? Because you have earned a Cal Poly education.

In thinking about what I could say to you at your graduation, I recognize the possibility that – despite your joyous achievement – you might worry about what awaits you in the world. So I thought a little comedy was in order. Fortunately for you...not my comedy.

Not long ago, America was booming as never before. It was called the nineties – *not* the 1890s but the 1990s. And one of the most popular comedies ever to hit television made its debut. I'm talking about the Seinfeld show. If you didn't see it growing up, you have probably seen it in syndication. Can I see by upraised hands among our graduates how many of you have seen the Seinfeld TV show?

Whew. I'm relieved. Because if only a few of you raised your hands I was in big trouble and this was going to be a really short speech.

For those of you who haven't seen it, the Seinfeld show is about four New Yorkers confronting everyday experience in ways ironic, outrageous, glib, sarcastic and strange.

The series when California and the nation were in ascendancy. It is a reminder that for

the determined, the innovative, the adaptive, the kind of people who think *and* do as Cal Poly graduates learn they can, opportunity truly does await.

For those of you who have studied the Great Depression, or for those relatives here whose families experienced it, the soup line is a frightening image of desperation. During those extraordinary years, millions of unemployed Americans stood in soup lines to get a decent meal, because they had nothing else to eat, because there were no jobs.

Today, we can be excused for fearing that the soup line is returning. All across America, people are suffering, and frankly there probably are more people going hungry these days than at anytime since the Depression. This is serious, serious stuff, and we've got to fix it. In the 1990s, a classic Seinfeld script was able to use the soup line in a different way. You could joke about soup lines then, because in the 1990s they seemed so implausible.

At the center of this story was an especially good soup maker with an especially bad attitude. The four main characters in the show – Jerry, Elaine, George, and Kramer – had a nickname for this lunatic soup maker.

Do you remember what they called him?

The Soup Nazi.

Now I've said that nickname once and I'm not going to say it again, because in many ways the nickname isn't funny at all. It invokes the worst of humanity. But in that show, the characters used the nickname for comical and satirical effect. If you allow me the license, perhaps I can do the same with this idiosyncratic character.

As you know, the Soup Chef, as I'm going to refer to him, makes the best soups anyone has ever had. Wild mushroom. Cold cucumber. Mulligatawny.

The guy's soup is so amazing that people actually stand in lines stretching around the block for the privilege of buying it. Maybe New Yorkers are so used to standing in lines that they never want to miss a chance to join one.

If you've seen the episodes, you will recall that to get this amazing soup you have to follow a set of rules that are logical only to the lunatic Soup Chef.

Behind the soup counter, you see, stands the Soup Chef himself. Under his imperious gaze, you must approach his soup counter single file. You must already know what you want to order. You must state your order, once. Then, carefully, remaining perpendicular to the soup counter at all times, you must shuffle quietly, briskly to the cash register. And you better have your money ready. (Many of you may actually recall the scene that I am referencing.)

Now, with all these rules boxing you in, you can make any number of mistakes. You can ask for bread, as George does. You can kiss a girlfriend in line, as Jerry does.

If you do, the Soup Chef will note your unworthiness and make the declaration that will break your heart. It is the line that made the character famous:

“No Soup for You.”

No soup for you!

Graduates, let us on this day recall the lessons of the Soup Chef. His rigidity, his narrow focus, his lack of empathy and imagination are at the heart of a small life. They are everything that you must avoid.

The Soup Chef plays it safe, using inherited recipes over and over. But playing it safe as a young Cal Poly graduate is about the most unsafe thing you can do. I have worked with successful people around the world, and I am telling you that choosing to play it safe at this stage of your career is choosing to let your talents go to waste and to avoid the real challenge, the most meaningful challenge, the challenge of pushing yourself, of seeing the limits of your ideas and your potential. Remember, in real life, the soup restaurant that inspired these Seinfeld episodes went out of business. In real life Cal Poly grads excel.

The Soup Chef is rigid. He cannot adapt! He cannot change!

As the storyline in the show unfolds, Elaine finds his so-called secret recipes hidden in the drawers of an armoire. She threatens to share the recipes across the city. The Soup Chef is stunned by the threat. He believes there is no way to create new recipes. So he chooses, chooses, to be doomed. He does the only thing he can imagine: He leaves the country.

You, like generations before you, must in times like these be prepared to engage, to adapt, to change, to use the great flexibility of mind and imagination gained at Cal Poly to their full potential. Because whether you like change or not, change is certain. It is the rule of life.

Actually, you have been living through it every day. In the time President Baker has been leading Cal Poly, which is in essence your lifetimes, change has been part of the air you breathe.

This institution today is very different than the one President Baker joined three decades ago. The academic programs and the physical assets of this campus are now mature. It has grown academically so it now Cal Poly can enable *and* encourage use inspired research and its campus has matured so substantially that you wouldn't recognize it if you saw the Cal Poly of yesterday and today side-by-side.

That is an example of change.

And the world that existed when you were born and the world today are dramatically different too.

The Communist bloc is gone, and yet when most of you were born, we were caught in a Cold War with it. A nation of more than one billion Chinese that back then was seemingly hidden behind a Great Wall is today, by numerous measures, a constant influence on world affairs. The Chinese are determined to build a knowledge-driven economy so that in a decade China will be known not simply for “made in China” but for “designed and made in China.” And, the Chinese people have the ambition and engineering talent to achieve such a goal.

Google has become a verb. Cell phones, texting, Facebook, instant messaging – communication moves at a pace unimaginable 30, 20, even 10 years ago. We have elected an African-American president.

When you were born, the green movement was just a vision for some. Now wind power, solar, electric cars – how we heat our homes, power all forms travel, and relate to the environment, have all changed, and this is only the beginning.

All along, through days and years of ceaseless change, thinkers, doers, and dreamers found their way, created companies, built communities, innovated and adapted their way through it. Cal Poly too found a way to thrive. Now it is your turn.

Take inspiration from the fact that even as your world has changed day-by-day, year-by-year, Cal Poly alumni have become astronauts...and founders of companies in businesses ranging from computer software to specialty teas. They have become distinguished print and TV journalists, and accomplished lawyers and writers, and successful entrepreneurs in textiles, and in high-tech manufacturing, and much more.

These alums started where you are today. The education that you have earned is an education that says “can-do” if any education does. You earned your grades. You earned your calluses. Whether you were testing the strength of beams, analyzing securities portfolios, building small companies, designing marketing programs, creating integrative systems, or developing experiments, you were learning by doing even as you learned by thinking. This education we celebrate today was yours to earn, and you earned it. We celebrate you and your potential. And we need your best.

Which leads me to my final point, and it returns to that very image of the soup line. And that is...that we need each other. We need to help each other.

We need to find ways to expand opportunity, get people working again, marshal the powers of government and of business to expand opportunity and invest in the future, and recognize that change can happen if we make it. That takes entrepreneurship, vision, and a connection of ideas to action. It takes precisely what you have developed at Cal Poly.

You, the new generation of leaders and entrepreneurs – must be unafraid to get involved, take risks, innovate, advance, and grow. Your future depends on your doing so. And so does the future of everyone whose lives you will touch.

Today you are a graduate of Cal Poly. If I may slip into the soup again, you can help make the decisions not just to prevent the problems that create real soup lines, but to fling open the doors to new ideas, new ways, new successes – the changes a world is waiting for. It will be good for you. It will be good for others. In fact, I hope the next *founder* of a company like “Google” -- in terms of its impact and significance -- is a graduating from Cal Poly today. And, if that graduate produces only a quarter of Google in terms of jobs and wealth created – that will surely be ok as well! I want to encourage your dreams and ambition.

And so graduates, a last thought please.

The Soup Chef, and anyone like him, could not do what you can do. Each of you has an education that is alive with opportunity. You possess all the attributes that it takes for you, for your families, for your community, for this state, and for our country to thrive anew.

If someone tries to exclude you, ever tries to deny your potent voice and tells you, “**No Soup for You,**” then you remember that you have earned the capacity to change the world. You don’t have to wait in line. Your time is now. You are part of a distinguished history. You are a true vision of hope and inspiration.

I trust you are prepared to work hard. Because your world needs it, because your world needs you. Stay connected to each other. Stay connected to your communities. Stay connected to Cal Poly. None are better.

As I said earlier, change is certain. But, you are a Cal Poly graduate and can do anything you choose to do.

Follow your passion. Make a difference. And, have fun during your life’s journey.

Congratulations to you and your families, and thank you for letting me share this day with you.