

**Otis Commencement**  
**Eli Broad Remarks**  
**May 12, 2012**

President Hoi, Chairman Miller, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and administrators, thank you for this great honor.

I think universities award honorary degrees so that the commencement speakers look and feel as uncomfortable in a cap and gown as members of the graduating class.

But the degrees *you* will receive today are far more important because of the hard work, sweat and tears that went into them. And I'm talking to the parents who are here!

Today is indeed a great day for the Class of 2012 because it marks an important milestone in your life.

I don't remember much from my own college graduation from Michigan State University in 1954. I was so eager to get out into the working world, I stayed in my cap and gown barely long enough to collect my diploma and take a photo with my parents. I was relieved to be done with school, and I wanted to get to work.

And once I got to work I never stopped. Unlike you, I did not pursue an artistic path, but I have been as passionate as an artist in my work. I went from being an accountant to building houses to helping people save for retirement. Now I work to give back everything I've earned.

Over the past weeks, I've given a great deal of thought to what I want to tell you today... how to make my experiences relevant to you as you enter the professional world and society.

The question I'm asked most often by college graduates is, "how did you do it? How did you start two Fortune 500 companies? How did you become an art collector? How did you create two family foundations? And how did you make so much money?"

To tell you the truth, I never set out to make a lot of money. I grew up in a lower middle class family, the only child of Lithuanian immigrants. My mother was a dressmaker, and my father started as a housepainter and eventually owned two five-and-dime stores in Detroit.

When I graduated from college, I had modest ambitions. I wanted to get married, start a family, buy a house, take the family on a nice vacation every year, and maybe, I would eventually own my own store like my father.

It wasn't long after I married my wife, Edye, that she identified the quality that would become the secret of my success. She gave me a paperweight with a quote by George Bernard Shaw that said, "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends upon the unreasonable man."

Time and time again, I have been told I am unreasonable. And by the conventional definition, I suppose I am. I am demanding. I don't take no for an answer. I am relentless in my pursuit of the things I believe in. I'm persistent, and I always find a way to get things done.

What I want to talk to you about today is the difference between being artlessly unreasonable and artfully unreasonable.

I started out artlessly unreasonable. I was fired from my first job after college because I kept asking for a raise. I had passed the certified public accountants exam on the first try, and I believed I deserved more money. My boss, who had taken the exam six times before he passed it, was more than a little annoyed by my demands, and he fired me.

But that turn of events led me to start my own accounting practice. After a year of that, I was bored and restless, and I decided I could start a homebuilding company. Getting fired turned out to be one of the best things to happen to me, since that started my lifelong journey of being unreasonable.

There are three things you need to do to master the art of being unreasonable.

1. The first is to ask questions.
2. The second is to take risks.
3. And the third is to give back.

In your class critiques and in your projects, you have spent much of the time at Otis asking questions—of your professors, and of each other. I hope you have discovered that there is one question that is the most powerful and the most important in every endeavor. That question is, “Why not?”

That's what you need to ask when someone tells you something can't be done .... or when you doubt your own ability to accomplish something.

When I started a homebuilding business, it was based on a simple “why not” premise: Why not build houses without basements? It had been done in Ohio and Indiana, so why not in Michigan?

By definition, artists and designers are “why not” thinkers. All of the great art and design in the world exists because someone wanted to do things differently. You do what no one else would think to do. By nature, artists will often work very hard with or sometimes without great returns or the prospect of any particular acknowledgment. You tackle, with brutal honesty, the politics and social issues of your time. You follow your vision no matter how strange it seems according to everyone else.

I can relate to that. It's why I'm drawn to artists and designers. You have a different way of looking at the world. I am fond of saying that civilizations are not remembered by their business leaders but by their artists—by all of you, not by me.

The second quality of being unreasonable is to take risks.

I have a rather simple definition of risk. It's when you try something new or different and it may or may not work out.

The first step in taking a risk is always the hardest because we fear the unknown. But I believe that clinging to safety is more irrational than taking risk.

Ask yourself two questions before you take on a risk: What do I have to lose? And what's the worst that can happen?

Those two questions have guided me in virtually every business, investment and philanthropic decision I've made through the years. When I left the world of accounting to start a homebuilding business, I knew that the worst that could happen was I would fail and have to return to accounting.

I encourage you to ask those questions when you're thinking about starting your own design firm or making any decision that involves moving in a different direction. As artists, you are already more comfortable with risk than most people. Every piece of art is a start-up. You invest time, resources, and hard work to pursue your work, your education, and your passion in an unpredictable field. Be proud of yourself for betting on you, and keep doing it. Set the highest possible expectations you can for yourself.

The third unreasonable quality I want to talk about is giving back. I know it's hard to think about giving when you're just starting out and you have college loans and credit card bills. But I'm not talking about money.

During your time at Otis, you have been encouraged to enrich our world through your creativity, skill and vision. You have already applied your creativity to the real world through your Integrated Learning classes. That's giving back to your community. When you have means in the future, of course, you can give back in monetary ways, too. But that's not the only way.

I'm happiest when my work and my life feel like one and the same, not two opposites to be balanced. You know what I'm talking about; artists and designers live and breathe their work. It's a passion so deep inside you that it drives your every waking moment.

That seamless intersection between work and life is the way we should view ourselves, others and the community we form.

To illustrate, let me share a story about art collecting. My wife Edye was the family's first art collector. I loved meeting artists. They have a vastly different world view than the bankers and lawyers and accountants I spent time with, and I found our conversations fascinating.

Eventually, Edye and I ran out of wall space in our home, but we wanted to continue collecting art. I had served on a few museum boards and knew that museums struggled to buy contemporary art because of dwindling acquisition budgets. So we got creative and applied an entrepreneurial approach to our collecting. We decided to create an art foundation that would

serve as a lending library to museums around the world. By establishing a public art collection, we could not only continue collecting artworks, which we loved to do, but we could also ensure the works would be seen by the broadest possible audience.

We use the formal term, “philanthropy,” today, but what we’re really talking about is giving back and getting involved in your community. Again, you don’t have to have money to give back. You have time, expertise, skills, ideas and other resources you can use to serve others.

Artists and designers are master problem-solvers. It’s how you approach every project, client, assignment or challenge. Apply those same critical skills to the broader world outside your door.

We need your creative vision, your unconventional thinking and your unreasonable approach to solve the world’s social, economic and political challenges. And I promise you, the more involved you are, the richer the rewards, and the more satisfying your life will be.

When I graduated from college, little did I know where my path would take me, and I wish for you that same journey into the unknown as you travel down a road of infinite possibilities.

As you begin your adventure, I leave you with some parting advice:

- Ask a lot of questions.
- Pursue the untried.
- Revise expectations upward.
- Take risks.
- Seek out the best of everything—the best in your work... the best talent... the best in yourself.
- And always be artfully unreasonable.

Congratulations, and thank you.