

UNC System President Peter Hans
UNC Wilmington Commencement Address
May 13-14, 2022

Everyone in North Carolina thinks of Wilmington as a happy place. They have good memories of the beach, the riverfront, the beautiful campus — good times with friends and family, joyful memories of road trips and long weekends and college days like this one.

Maybe I'm biased because I grew up about thirty miles away in the small town of Southport and both of my older siblings were Seahawks.

I also think it has to do with spending a lot of time outside, in the sand and the sun and the open air, away from screens and stress. And I think it has to do with connection, with close ties to friends and family and community. Wilmington feels like a place geared toward the good life, and I love being here.

We really don't give happiness the respect it deserves. We do recognize ambition, restlessness, drive and energy — which are all great things, and all qualities you have in abundance, or you wouldn't be here today.

Commencement is about celebrating your achievements, encouraging your aspirations, insisting that we expect great things from you. And we do! We need your talent and your ideas, and I'm enormously grateful you've spent the last four years — or slightly more, in some cases — thinking and reading and sharpening your ability to do good things in this world.

But I also hope you've spent time figuring out what makes you happy, because the world needs more of that, too.

I don't know if any of you have spent time on the internet, or turned on a television, or spoken with folks about politics recently, but there is a national happiness deficit.

Our public square is filled with more outrage, sometimes real, sometimes manufactured, and our days are filled with a lot more distraction.

There's a mountain of troubling data about mental health concerns among young people across the country, with many expressing anxiety, hopelessness and even despair.

The older you get, according to the data, the *less* likely you are to feel anxious or depressed. It's a far cry from the optimism and confidence we tend to associate with youth.

As someone with a few years — or decades — on most of you, I want to share a few hard-won insights about building a happy life, so you don't have to wait until you're my age and make all the mistakes I have.

Happiness is something you make happen, not something that happens to you.

We think of happiness as something we can acquire, a major goal that we'll achieve by hitting the right milestones. Get that promotion, buy that big house, save up for a fancy car or an extravagant vacation.

All of that is great! Those things can definitely help. But material possessions don't bring lasting satisfaction. There's always more to want, more to achieve, more that's just out of reach. Experts refer to this as a treadmill that never ends.

Actual happiness is built from the daily devotionals, the little habits of gratitude and joy — what the writer Arthur Brooks calls the “deeply ordinary” parts of life. That's something I've had to learn over and over again, something I wish I'd taken to heart much earlier.

We all need time outside and time for deep conversations with friends, and then time to be alone and recharge from those conversations. We all need to walk and move and be away from desks and screens. It's too easy to spend a whole day bouncing from one little task to the next.

As Annie Dillard writes, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing.”

What she means is that you don't make one giant decision about how to spend your time on this earth; you make a whole lot of small ones. And if you don't think carefully about those small decisions, then you might end up wasting your time with weapons of mass distraction.

All of you are now holding small addictive devices that are designed to stoke your anxiety and deliver troubling news from every corner of the world at every hour of the day. Some of you are probably looking at those devices right now.

And if you're using them to make party plans or watch a better commencement speech given by someone more famous than me, great! Those are all fantastic uses of technology.

But if you find yourself doom-scrolling Twitter, thumbing past endless photos of people who 'seem' to be living more exciting lives, or obsessing over horrifying or outrageous events happening somewhere far away — my guess is you're not coming away any happier or better equipped to live a full and meaningful life. My guess is you could have spent that moment on something better.

Don't wait for happiness; build it yourself, the right way.

And if you feel like there are more urgent concerns than living a good life, I understand that but remember that contentment doesn't mean complacency about the world.

There are genuine problems in the world, and you've spent the last few years learning about many of them and hopefully thinking about how you can help solve them. That's a good and healthy thing, to take stock of what needs changing and figure out how you can make a difference in changing it.

But it's also healthy to take stock of your blessings, starting with this — you live in the most prosperous, peaceful, and open era in all of human history. You live in the only country on the planet that draws millions of newcomers from all over the world. You have the opportunity to think and read and disagree with your fellow citizens without punishment or censorship. And almost all of you, by the grace of God and good fortune, have decades of life expectancy ahead of you.

These are not small things.

My own father was born in 1915, in the middle of a world war, a few years before last century's global pandemic, a little more than a decade shy of a crippling economic depression and then another deadly world war. He grew up with neighbors riding to town on horseback, and he died in the age of jet travel and space shuttles. You, too, will encounter alternating periods of deep adversity and amazing progress.

So don't let anyone tell you that this era is uniquely unsettled, that our challenges are truly unprecedented. Yes, there's a war in Ukraine, inflation in our economy, climate change, a racial reckoning, and another worldwide pandemic that upended lives and caused profound grief for so many. These are real problems to be tackled and real losses to be remembered.

But keep a sense of scale. As President Barack Obama wisely counseled a few years ago, "the next time you're bombarded with over-the-top claims about how our country is doomed or the world is coming apart at the seams, brush off the cynics and fearmongers. Because the truth is, if you had to choose any time in the course of human history to be alive, you'd choose this one. Right here in America, right now."

You'll be a far better advocate, citizen, and friend — far more able to fight for the things that matter to you — if you can hold onto that gratitude, maintain perspective, and find contentment in your own life. Be a happy warrior. It will ripple forth to many others. If you ever doubt that happiness is a serious and worthwhile subject, consider this: The Declaration of Independence — one of the most important documents in the history of the written word — names just three foundational rights. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The original charter for North Carolina's public universities, written way back in 1789, names "the happiness of a rising generation" as the core reason for higher education, the underlying goal of all the time you've spent here at UNC Wilmington.

What those authors meant by happiness is not just individual enjoyment, but a society built to enable full and fulfilling lives for all citizens. They considered the opportunity for a rich and rewarding life to be essential to the success of democracy, of education, of the entire American experiment.

I worry sometimes that we've lost that original, more expansive meaning of happiness. Or that we treat happiness as something selfish and a little bit frivolous — not something that serious-minded people spend time on. In our culture and our politics, it often seems that the cynical or jaded view of the world is somehow smarter and more sophisticated, that people who are outraged and aggrieved must be more serious and engaged than people who are content or grateful.

I don't think that's true at all. Take this as testimony from one person, but I've spent my life in public service, spent decades working in the realm of public policy. And the overwhelming impression I have is that our country is filled with earnest, well-meaning people who want to do right by their fellow citizens, who want to see their neighbors prosper.

I certainly want that for you. And I owe you, because getting to spend this morning with all of you and your families, to celebrate this moment of connection with your classmates and the generations of alumni you now join, has given me enormous happiness.

Thank you for that, and congratulations. May you all find happiness in your lives and bring happiness to others. Go Seahawks, go class of 2022!