

University of Washington Electrical  
Engineering Commencement

**Gloria Chen**

*Seattle, June 8, 2016*

Chairman Poovendran, distinguished faculty, staff, graduates and guests – thank you for the generous introduction and warm welcome.

I'm thrilled to be back on campus to share in this special moment with you today.

To the UW EE graduates – You should be incredibly proud of yourselves, you've just completed one of the toughest programs at one of the best universities in the world...

You've worked hard, your last final is behind you, and I'm confident your best days are ahead...  
Congratulations!

And let's not forget those who have supported you along the way – let's give a round of applause to all your parents, family and friends who are here to celebrate with you!

It's such an honor for me to be here. The University of Washington's electrical engineering department has been a part of my life since before I could remember. I was born when my father was a PhD student in the department, and ... this is a picture of my first UW EE graduation. (Those are my legs in the picture.)

My father's UW journey began in 1959, on a ship from Taiwan to Los Angeles and by Greyhound bus to Seattle – to the atomic era-style EE Building abutting Stevens Way. Back when he stepped aboard that ship, his goal was to get a PhD, but he had no idea where that step would eventually take him ...

- to making Seattle his adopted hometown,
- to a decades-long career at Boeing doing groundbreaking solar cell research,
- and together with my mother, spawning 3 generations of loyal Huskies across our extended family.

My father had hoped to be here tonight, along with my mother, but he is not feeling well. I know he would have been thrilled to be here with the rest of my family to celebrate with you.

I've been thinking about what I want to say for the past month or so. And last week, as I walked by a conference room that I pass every day on the way to my desk, the words etched on the glass wall jumped out at me. It was a quote by Martin Luther King Jr; "Faith is taking the first step even when you can't see the whole staircase."

Today, each of you are about to take the first step into your future, and it's both an exhilarating and unnerving moment because you can't really see to your destination.

- Some of you have already decided your first step – grad school or a job, a startup or big company.
- Some of you have a pretty clear destination in mind – and maybe even have the next three steps already mapped out.
- And still others of you are wondering what you'll be doing next Monday morning after the graduation partying is all over.

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I've always envied people who possess the certainty that comes from having a strong passion and dream. My husband, John, who is also an EE, is one of those people. When he was asked in 1st grade to draw a picture of what he wanted to be when he grew up, he didn't draw a fireman or a doctor like most normal kids – he drew an oil well spewing pennies up into the sky...

He always knew he wanted to be in business and has spent the past 25 years being an entrepreneur... and loving every moment of it. I don't know about you, but I'm not one of those people.

When I started college, I thought I had a dream – to follow in the footsteps of Ingraham High School's very own Mr. Wendell O. McCain, the best chemistry teacher ever. Unfortunately, that dream was shattered along with quite a few broken beakers and flasks in my sophomore year organic chem lab – so I had to look for a plan B.

Everyone I knew was an engineer, and EE and CS were the toughest programs to get into. So my competitive self quickly narrowed my focus to those two majors. I was convinced by a friend to choose EE by the argument that EEs can do what CS majors can do, but more. (Wouldn't you know, he left EE to become a lawyer.) And I remember those days in EE –

- Solving lots and lots of circuit equations that came down to some variation of  $V = IR$  – (Apologies to the faculty, but after 29 years that's about all I can remember.)
- Connecting those giant circuit elements in the required Power Systems class and getting a nice loud jolt when I put the cables in backwards...
- Testing my first program written in C, and keeping my fingers crossed that the TA wouldn't notice when chunks of source code started showing up in the output screen...C coders out there know that's bad.
- And a couple of us convincing the chairman to buy the department's first Macintosh Plus and the brand new software, Aldus PageMaker, so we could publish the first EE department newsletter.

To put this last one in perspective, it may seem like ancient history, but the state of the art in "social media" in my day was desktop publishing and a photocopier – proof that communication existed before the Internet!

Now despite the impression I may be giving you, I was a pretty serious student. And by the time I graduated, I knew the EE department had equipped me with a tremendous capacity for complex problem-solving and hard work.

But I still had no idea what I wanted to do when I grew up.

Over the next three decades, I pushed forward, compelled by this belief that even though I didn't quite know what I was looking for, I could keep searching and trying, and through the process of elimination – find the right place for me.

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You will be getting lots of advice as you graduate. The idealists will encourage you to follow your dreams, and the pragmatists will tell you to build a blue chip resume. But there's no deterministic roadmap for success, and the path you end up navigating has to work for you.

Each of us comes with our own unique stories – and I'm not talking about the version we present to the world on LinkedIn...

- I'm a woman in engineering, who's been asked whether I was there to fill a female quota.
- I'm a Chinese American, who's overcome my cultural instinct to defer to elders, in order to go toe-to-toe with older colleagues.
- I'm an analytical introvert, who's been called "Spock" at work, who's learned by necessity and practice to network and to embrace team brainstorming sessions when I'd much rather work quietly and alone at my desk.
- And *my* path has led me to being a chief of staff – the consummate, behind-the-scenes leader, strategist, and problem solver.

It took me years to find what I love to do, and as I think back to how I got here, there are 4 lessons I draw from my experience, which I'd like to share with you today.

### **Lesson #1 – It's OK to quit.**

I decided to go straight from UW to grad school to have better job options. Entry level EE jobs weren't very exciting, and I didn't want to be doing someone else's grunt work. I chose to go to Carnegie Mellon in part because of their leadership in computer-aided design research, and in part for the novelty of being in Pittsburgh on a small private college campus. I received a research assistantship with the head of the department that covered tuition and a generous stipend, and I was on track for my PhD.

Life as a grad student was good. By day, we were taking classes, doing research, and attending seminars. And in the evenings we hung out, transplants from around the world, engaging in intellectual debates about the state of education, politics, American culture and food.

And yet, something inside me said this wasn't me. The classes, research and seminars were interesting, but I was never interested enough to go a step deeper.

One evening I took a break from studying for my qualifying exams and went to a movie with my friend Marko. We were the only two in the theater, and during a lull in the dialog, he turned to me and proclaimed "It's not too late for you."

The very next morning I told my advisor that I quit.

My friends worried it was the stress of studying for the qualifying exams, and my family thought I had lost my mind. All of them begged me to reconsider, but I was at peace with my decision and stood firm. In my heart of hearts, I didn't have a passion for research, and I didn't want to end up "stuck" somewhere I didn't want to be.

We're taught at a young age, if at first you don't succeed, try and try again. That quitters never win. There's a lot of truth to that. Most of the time, you should keep trying until you get it right. But there are times when the best and most courageous thing you can do is to stop and walk away. Listen carefully to your inner voice to know the difference.

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### **Lesson #2 – Keep an open mind.**

Sometimes life's answers come from the most unexpected places.

I left Carnegie Mellon for an engineering job in Sunnyvale, California. After a couple of years as a developer, I thought – this is Silicon Valley – it's time for a change! I had been promoted and was getting pay raises, but I wasn't sure I wanted to code for the rest of my life. So I thought – should I go to law school? Reconsider teaching? Maybe something way out there like the liberal arts? I went through the motions of listing the pro's and cons of each option.

But it was serendipity that gave me the key insight I needed to figure out my next step.

Right around that time, my friend Marko (*yes, that Marko*) was in town to attend his college friend's wedding and asked me to go as his date. Seated at our table was a married couple – both recent graduates of Harvard Business School. I had never met any Harvard MBA's before. These people were down-to-earth and nice– not at all like the stereotypical Wall Street sharks I'd pictured in my mind.

For the first time it occurred to me – "Wow, that could be me!"

I decided to apply to a short list of business schools with the idea that if I got in, it was surely a sign that it was meant to be – and if I didn't, well, I'd go back to my original plan, do what other Silicon Valley engineers do, and get another job.

And behold – I got in!! I sold my car, gave away my TV, took out loans and moved back across the country to Boston to swim with the sharks.

Business school was a huge stretch for me – in my entering class of 800 students, about a quarter had been engineering majors in college, but very few who had actually worked as engineers, and even fewer were like me with absolutely no management experience. My goal was simply not to fail.

Little by little I learned to speak the language of business strategy, developed a new set of problemsolving skills, and launched my career into management.

This is probably the point where you're thinking the next lesson is to go out and Find Your Marko – that magical person who pops up into your life at critical junctures...

I don't know if everyone has a Marko in their life, but be on the lookout for the signals that life is sending you – they may come when you least expect it.

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### **Lesson #3 – Make a difference wherever you go.**

I've helped change the course of a company through major acquisitions, and I've helped steer how an executive team operates in order to scale. But when people ask me share the most memorable moment in my career, there is one story I always think back to.

My first management consulting assignment was in a manufacturing plant in Ohio. There I was, a freshly minted MBA sent by "corporate" to cut costs, facing a crusty crew of old men in steel-toed boots. I had never felt more unwelcome.

Every day I showed up, the plant manager was in my face, telling me, "Gloria, you have no f\*ing clue what you're talking about!" I would cry privately in the restroom, collect myself and then go about doing my job; leading brainstorming sessions to generate cost cutting ideas and helping the team make the business case for investing in automation.

This went on for months, and when the assignment ended, I was glad to be out of there.

Some time after I had moved on, I received in the mail a handwritten note and this little memento in the mail – a finished precision component assembled at the plant, which I still keep in my desk. They were from Gary, a forty-year-old who had worked at the plant since high school. He was an expeditor – that's someone whose job is to move assembled parts from point A to point B. He wrote to express his gratitude for being on my project team, and to thank me for taking the time to teach him how to use a computer and Excel spreadsheets. Acquiring that skill gave him the opportunity to apply for a transfer to an office job, which was life changing for him and his family.

No doubt some of you are already well on your way to making a difference on a grand scale, like saving lives by inventing heart pumps that don't require batteries, or making the world greener through smart power grids, or improving the security of everything we do in our increasingly connected world.

But remember that even in the small moments, what you do matters to someone.

I'll never know if my efforts improved that company's bottom line, but changing Gary's life is something I'll never forget.

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And so now I come to my last – and most important lesson, which is this: **Keep it all in perspective.**

In March of 2006, finally pregnant after 6 failed attempts at in vitro fertilization, I unexpectedly went into labor at 24 weeks gestation – that's 3 ½ months before my due date. Upon arrival at the hospital, the doctor told us that our baby had a 50% chance of survival, and that if he survived, there was 50% probability that he would suffer lifelong disabilities.

We tried to stall the inevitable but the next evening, I gave birth to Matthew.

He weighed 1 ½ pounds, his eyes were still fused shut, and he was unable to breathe without a ventilator because his tiny body just wasn't ready to be born.

In the morning as I sat by his incubator looking in, I wondered about his future – whether he would make it through the week or even the day. And every day for the next 99 days until he came home, I stayed by his bedside watching and waiting.

That put everything in perspective.

I had always lived my life believing that if I got all the data I could find and worked hard enough I could solve any problem and achieve any goal. But life doesn't always work out that way.

Each week while we were in the hospital I posted a blog to update family, friends and colleagues at work on Matthew's progress. The outpouring of online responses and encouragement sustained me and helped me realize how much every one of those people mattered to me. And they reminded me that the quality of life is not measured by our accomplishments, but by the strength of our relationships.

Today, Matthew is by all counts a regular 4th grader who loves Minecraft and skiing and is excited to start his summer vacation. But 10 years ago, as I took that first step into parenthood, I could not have imagined how unnerving and exhilarating parenting can be. Parents in the audience will understand.

So graduates – be thankful to your parents – they've given you more than you realize.

And remember, as you take your first steps into the future, even if you don't know where you're going just yet...

- Keep moving forward,
- Make course corrections with an open mind, and
- Try to make a difference to those around you.

If you keep pushing forward, I have all the faith in the world that you'll find the best place for you.

Again, congratulations ... and GO HUSKIES!!