

UCLA 2009 Alumnus of the Year Acceptance Speech
Michael Josephson
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Chancellor Block, distinguished guests,

By any standard, this is a WOW! moment.

I'm grateful and touched to have been selected to receive this honor.

Thank you, thank you, thank you to everyone who had anything to do with my nomination or selection.

It's the most meaningful award I've ever received or expect to receive. I'm ruling out getting an Oscar, a Nobel Prize, and the Congressional Medal of Honor.

As Jack Benny said when he was given an award, "I don't deserve this, but I have arthritis and I don't deserve that either." So this sort of evens things out.

So I will set aside my suspicions that this is some sort of mistake and just graciously acknowledge how proud I am to be among the more accomplished and worthy alumni who are being recognized today and have been recognized in the past.

There is a splendid symmetry in the fact that UCLA Chancellor Block gives me this podium tonight. You see, the last time I spoke in the presence of a UCLA Chancellor I was the graduate student valedictorian at the 1967 commencement ceremony.

At that time, the looming issue was newly elected Governor Reagan's plan to impose tuition for the first time at the UC system. Now, just a few weeks before I turn 67, I've been given an opportunity for a return engagement just a few hundred yards from the scene of my first crime and just a day after a '60s-type student protest against the current Regent's plan to increase tuition.

To be honest, my speech 42 years ago to a packed Pauley Pavilion received mixed reviews. It elicited a boisterous cacophony of cheers and jeers. Chancellor Franklin Murphy was decidedly on the jeering side.

I guess it was something I said.

It started with: "If our generation does not take our leadership responsibilities seriously, our nation will be run by men with empty slogans and simplistic solutions."

I guess I should have stopped there, but I didn't. I went on to name the mayor of Los Angeles, one of California's Senators, and the state's governor. Oh, I also said some unkind things about President Lyndon Johnson.

So you can understand why I never expected to have another chance to speak, let alone be honored, at another UCLA gathering of importance.

Frankly, I'm not sure whether this opportunity is afforded me because I somehow redeemed myself in the eyes of my Alma Mater or whether my lack of discretion simply disappeared from institutional memory. It's also possible, of course, that this great institution of higher learning just made the same mistake twice.

But I'm here, and here's my problem: If this is really as good as it's going to get, if this is really the top of the "Hurray for You" summit, it means I won't ever have another opportunity to speak to a captive audience of the people who mean the most in the world to me – my family and friends.

Naturally, with so much at stake, I want to say something memorable and meaningful. I've condensed my thoughts into 100 single-spaced pages...Relax, even I realize that would be inappropriate, but I'm still under pressure to say something memorable and meaningful.

Reviewing my college years from 1960-1967 made me realize how much my ideas and ideals were shaped during those seven years but also how dramatically the nation changed – all without my help.

I entered college life in 1960 with Brylcreem in my hair and Bridget Bardot on my mind.

The symbols of youthful defiance were black leather jackets and blue jeans worn by beer-drinking, cigarette-smoking rebels. The music was tame and shallow. I knew about purple people eaters, itsy bitsy teenie weenie yellow polka dot bikinis, blue suede shoes, and hound dogs, but I couldn't have imagined the different content and tone of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, the Grateful Dead, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Jimi Hendrix.

In 1960, we were only dimly aware of the depth of discrimination and the commitment to segregation in the South or the undersurface of seething anger and frustration within the black community everywhere else. "Civil rights" was a concept without the sharp edges we would soon see.

No black person had ever been a mayor of a major city, let alone a Senator or Cabinet member. Intermarriage was a crime in some states (as was the use of birth control). For that matter, people suspected of crimes had no enforceable constitutional rights to a lawyer or protection from arbitrary searches and arrests.

We didn't have the Pill or women's lib. The sexual and feminist revolutions were just ahead. Nor did we foresee that our space race and Cold War with the Soviet Union would be surpassed by a shooting war in Southeast Asia.

By the time I graduated in 1967, society was dramatically different.

The youth culture had turned in two directions: militant and mellow. The militants marched, sat-in, burned draft cards and bras, and rioted. The mellows became hippie dropouts immersed in pot, acid, sex, and talk about peace.

All over the country portions of cities were burned and pillaged, and hundreds died in race riots. Civil-rights workers were beaten and murdered. Southern governors openly defied the federal government proclaiming the rightness of, and their right to, a segregated society.

And piece by piece, the U.S. became embroiled in an ever-escalating war in Vietnam that ripped the fabric of our society and took an enormous toll in human lives – 58,000 soldiers were killed and 153,000 were wounded.

But nothing took a greater toll on my psyche than the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, his brother Robert, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Who could have imagined that youth was so mortal and power so fragile?

During this chaos and turmoil, I and my classmates were safely ensconced in the groves of academe.

Although some compliment my resume of achievement, I look back on my college days with a bit of shame.

While others were riding Freedom Buses to register voters in Mississippi or marching in Selma and to Washington, I was tackling the problem of getting book discounts in our student store.

While I was challenging the system by proving I could get good grades even though I refused to buy books or go to class, others were fighting and dying doing their duty to their country.

While I was using my leadership skills to improve the UCLA Moot Court program, others were forming activist organizations that were doing real battle in the real world with real issues.

All this explains why I was so adamant in my 1967 commencement address that it was time for me and my classmates to pay their dues and to use whatever knowledge and skills they had to make a difference.

Presumably, I'm honored today for what I did in the four decades since my graduation as a professor, as an entrepreneur, and for my work with the nonprofit institute I founded in honor of my parents – Joseph and Edna Josephson.

I'm glad my work has been noticed and appreciated, and although I'm not embarrassed by my efforts, I'm not impressed or satisfied either. I truly don't know whether any of the things I've said or done will have any lasting social impact.

Kids are still cheating, violence is still rampant, corruption and irresponsibility in business and politics are far too common, and all the while civility and respectful discourse has been replaced with discourteous and unfair partisan rhetoric.

So if I can't claim victory in my life's work, how should I, or any of us, measure our lives?

It's tempting to think in terms of all the ways we've been scored, rated, and ranked in the past – gold stars on a wall chart, the reading groups we were assigned to, report cards, GPAs, IQs, SAT scores, which colleges admitted us, which firms offered us jobs, how much we earn, and of course recognitions and awards like this one.

There's no shortage of scorecards, but none of them answer the question: How am I doing?

I'm by no means the first to come to this conclusion. As much as we seek validation and acknowledgment from others, the feeling of satisfaction that these external assessments provide are short-lived.

Real contentment, enduring happiness, and fulfillment come from the gratification we get from two things: our work and our relationships.

I've been incredibly fortunate on the work front. I've been able to choose what I do, first as a teacher, then as an entrepreneur, and finally as a standup philosopher.

What could be better – giving speeches, writing, and even the luxury of a radio platform to say anything I want?

I love my work and the opportunity I have to do things I think are important to make the world better and to build what I hope will be a lasting legacy. The honor awarded me tonight, whether I deserve it or not, is an incredible gift I will always treasure.

But as important as my work is and as nice as it is to be recognized for a job well done, I confess with a real sense of remorse that there have been too many days in my life when I was so preoccupied with my work that I didn't pay enough attention to my relationships – as a friend, brother, uncle, husband, or father.

So as I receive this highly valued acknowledgment from this great university, I confess that nothing, absolutely nothing, means more to me than the love of my family and friends and the sense that they're really and truly proud of me.

The pride of the people I care about is, by far, the most coveted award I can ever be given.

How lucky am I to have so many friends and family to share this evening – former classmates, members of the Institute’s Board of Governors, friends who’ve helped with the work of the Institute (including Peggy and Barry Atkins who flew in from Tennessee), and four tables of aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, as well as people so close they’re like family (including Cristina Urias, who helped us raise our children, and Benny Castro, who literally holds our house together). Even my Rabbi, Stephen Carr Reuben, is here – on a Friday night!

But on this special night, I want to thank the one group that was there in 1967 and every major life event – my sisters Anne, Naomi, Pamela, and Susan and my brother Barry. They knew me when and are not taken in by the admiration or adulation of others. Over the years, I’ve given all of them plenty of reasons to write me off, yet they stuck with me. I’m so happy they all came tonight and so grateful to think they’re proud of me.

And, at the very core of my life, are my incredible wife Anne and my five children Justin, Samara, Abrielle, Carissa, and Mataya. They give my life purpose, meaning, and joy. Please stand up and let this audience see you. I love you all so much!

Finally, in accepting this award tonight for what I’ve already done, I pledge to you *I’m not done!*

My life’s ambition is to be better and to do more so that years from now when any of you hear my name, you will smile, think good thoughts, and just once more be proud of me.