



**Christopher G Myers, PhD**  
Assistant Professor of Management & Organization  
Academic Director of Executive Education

## **Remarks to the Graduating Class of Ross PhDs, April 2018**

Thank you all for having me. I'm honored that you all invited me to give the recent graduate address for your PhD graduation. Don't get me wrong – I am completely baffled by your decision – but I am honored and humbled to be invited.

I was charged with speaking to you all – a room full of exceptional, and therefore intimidating, scholars – about making the transition to life as a junior faculty member. So naturally, when I was first asked, I lived up to research on threat rigidity high-stress responses and immediately defaulted to well-rehearsed behavior - I began preparing a talk about research. But in the intervening weeks, I came to my senses and decided against that, for a couple of reasons.

First, it occurred to me that for the average Michigan PhD graduate, you have spent 90% of the last 5 or 6 years thinking, talking, writing, presenting, meeting, and likely dreaming, about research, with the rest spent on a bit of teaching.

As a junior faculty, one of the most significant changes is actually that these allocations will shift, such that other things will start to occupy a greater percentage of your work time.

Moreover, this work represents only a fraction of your overall life energy, and if we come even remotely close to National Sleep Foundation recommendations, we should be spending an almost equal amount of time sleeping as we do at work.

So with that in mind, I thought that rather than focusing solely on research, I would try to share with you a few things I have observed about life in general since graduating from Ross. These are

perhaps blindingly obvious to you, but they were at various times revelatory for me over the last few years, and perhaps in hearing me flail about struggling to articulate them, something will reveal itself to you as well.

So here are four things I think I know.

The first is simultaneously the most straightforward and the most challenging in some ways. You need to articulate a set of priorities for yourself – what comes first for you in your life, what comes second, what comes third, and so on. You will be inundated with countless new challenges, opportunities, and exciting ventures to juggle, both personally and professionally, and having a guiding set of priorities can help direct your decisions about what to pursue.

At the same time, you will be inundated with suggestions for how to prioritize these different things – from colleagues, friends, family, and mentors. But these people will not live the full spectrum of your life – only you will live your life. So with all due respect to the loving parents and supportive advisors in the room, you must develop your own set of priorities, not theirs.

Because the truth is that you must have priorities, and they must be ordered. To try to pursue everything as if it is your top priority may end up causing you to lose out in many ways. To quote Ross Professor Lance Sandelands, quoting C.S. Lewis, “You can’t get second things by putting them first, you can get second things only by putting first things first.” “When first things are put first, second things don’t diminish, they increase.” So think about what things come first for you in life, and rest easy knowing that the other things will get done too.

The second thing I think I know is that, at some point, you are going to doubt yourself and may start to believe that you are lagging behind everyone else. This is the classic imposter syndrome, and I have yet to meet a junior faculty member who has not experienced it. In my first year after leaving Michigan, I found myself obsessing – clinically obsessing and panicking – over every tiny detail in my work, afraid that any misstep, any typo, would reveal me as a fraud – that I would reveal myself to be some imposter who somehow made it this far without actually knowing how to do anything. Our profession can sometimes exacerbate this, as we compare our crappy working

paper and rough preliminary analyses to the polished, seemingly perfect work getting emailed to us in journal tables of contents, or as we watch others navigate academic life with seeming ease while we feel seasick on the inside.

Let the statistics correct your heuristic – if all of us are feeling this way, then by definition these feelings are wrong! Developing a support system and working with these feelings – whether through personal or professional means – can greatly improve your experience, and in no way diminishes your accomplishments. For me, recognizing this has been incredibly helpful in finding a sense of balance in my career.

This brings me to the third thing I think I know, which is that no one else knows either. Not just among peers in our profession – but more globally. It is important to remember that the world runs on the hard work of human beings trying their best, but always generating imperfect answers. Even in arenas where we might expect evidence and experience to have constructed a degree of certainty, we are still at times masking fundamental uncertainty with a veil of confidence.

When my wife was pregnant last year, we would go to the doctor and ask about various things – such as her increasing occurrence of headaches during the pregnancy – with the hope of learning from medical science the reason and outlook for what to expect. More than once, we were told, “well, what we know is that for a third of women it will get better, for a third it will get worse, and for a third it will stay the same.”

Now, I know first year statistics was a ways back, but that does seem to be all of the options! I started laughing every time I heard it, because apparently I could invent a three-sided coin and open a medical practice. Indeed, this seemed to be the most scientific (and expensive) way of saying “I dunno” that they could come up with. Are our medical colleagues operating some advanced Ponzi scheme we don’t know about? – probably not. The reality is that we are often less certain of things than we’d like to think, and that is OK.

In fact, it might be worth extra wariness when you encounter ideas that people present with extreme, forceful certainty. To quote Robert Pirsig from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*,

“No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They *know* it is going to rise tomorrow.” When people are fanatically expressing the certainty of their beliefs, it is all the more likely that these beliefs are truly in doubt.

The final thing that I know is that we all get lucky sometimes. There will be moments where everything just seems to fall into place professionally – people hand you data, it seems to be raining research ideas, reviewers actively praise your work, students love your course, and even your office plant doesn’t try to die on you. But there are two important corollaries here:

#1: This also happens to other people. So when your colleague is posting about their 19<sup>th</sup> journal acceptance on Facebook, remember that all of our careers have peaks and valleys. It is OK to be happy for them, and to know that it has no bearing on you or your work.

#2: This means that there likely will be “unlucky” periods in your career. These do not mean you are a fraud or a failure, they merely provide the opportunity to try again. Louis Pasteur said that fortune favors the prepared mind, but I think fortune also favors the persistent heart – don’t let a bit of bad luck kill a project or interesting idea. You can only get quote-unquote “lucky” on a journal review by submitting it again.

It’s also important to note that this means that luck is only part of the equation, and it in no way diminishes your own hard work and effort. A paper based on data that someone gave you through a “lucky” encounter is no less valuable than one where getting the data required pulling teeth and animal sacrifice. Don’t sell your accomplishments short – “well, it only got in because of my senior co-author” or “well, I got that award, but thankfully nobody better was in the running this year”.

Though we at times loath to admit it, we all benefit from a bit of luck, and anyone who looks back over a successful career will tell you of at least 3 or 4 inflection points that came about by “luck.” Not that I fall in the bucket of looking back over a long career (nor certainly not a successful one), personally, my very first undergraduate OB professor, who got me into this profession, was an unknown young assistant professor named Adam Grant (now a three-time

NYT best selling author and all around superstar). When I started at Michigan, my first advisor was another young assistant professor who would go on to accomplish just a couple of small things – like climbing Mt. Everest and becoming Dean of Michigan Ross. I could go on and on, but the fact that you all have invited these great advisors to join you in celebrating today speaks to the good fortune and appreciation we all share for attending Michigan Ross.

These lucky turns no doubt shaped *my* career in important ways, and I am grateful for them as they fueled my hard work through the parts where I didn't get as lucky. You should celebrate all of the victories you get – they will help you weather the valleys.

So what should you prepare for in life as a junior faculty? As I reflected on these four ideas, it occurred to me that they really come back to the idea that all of this – work, family, sleep, miscellaneous, is all part of one life.

These are not separate things to be dealt with, they are subdimensions of one overall life, and it is completely yours to build in whatever way suits you. Prioritize what matters to you, know that you won't always be perfect, trust that no one else is certain either, and persist – you never know when a bit of luck is around the corner.

If you'll humor me with one more quote, one of my favorite bands sums it up far better than I ever could (and basically makes the last 10 minutes a total waste of time). So in the spirit of TL;DR, I'll just say this – Decide what to be, and go be it.

Thank you again, good luck on wherever your path as a scholarly superstar may take you, and as always, wherever you go, Go Blue!