

Charlie Day: Always Sunny in Philadelphia Creator Says You Shouldn't Just 'Do What Makes You Happy'

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When you think “bearer of wisdom,” actor Charlie Day probably isn't the first name that comes to mind. The creator and star of the popular TV series *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is a professional goof but is more recently known for his work in Jason Orley's romantic comedy, *I Want You Back*, steaming on Amazon Prime Video. Written by co-screenwriters Isaac Aptaker and Elizabeth Berger and working with Jenny Slate, Gina Rodriguez, Scott Eastwood, and Manny Jacinto on the project, Charles Day surprised critics with his dimensional performance.

Back in 2014, the *Monsters University* actor addressed graduates at his alma mater Merrimack College and the filmmaker had some very interesting advice for the students.

While acknowledging that he's no Steve Jobs – “I don't know how my computer works; I don't even know how my toaster works!” he told the audience – Day had some genuine lessons to Merrimack College grads nonetheless.

He spoke about the time, fresh out of college when he had to decide between taking a “big boy job” at Fidelity Investments (how he got the offer in the first place is a long story) and moving to New York to pursue acting.

As you can probably guess, he rolled the dice and moved to New York. While it wasn't always easy going – Day recounts a casting director who told him he'd "never work in comedy" – if he was going to fall on his face, he'd do it chasing something he loved.

It's a simple, but profound message: Success always requires the risk of failure. "I don't think you should just do what makes you happy. Do what makes you great," Day said. "Do what's uncomfortable and scary and hard but pays off in the long run...Let yourself fail. Fail and pick yourself up and fail again. Without that struggle, what is your success anyway?"

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Taking risks isn't enough, though. To achieve greatness, Day told the graduates, they must also create their own opportunities. In 2005, Day had to decide whether to accept a leading role (accompanied by a big paycheck) on a network show he didn't believe in, or scramble to develop a show he'd been filming with his friends, for no pay. He rolled the dice again. The network show, *Life on a Stick* lasted one season. The show he was developing? That became *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, which has filmed 15 seasons since it hit TV screens in 2005. As the show's executive producer, he also starred in the role of Charlie Kelly, working with the likes of Danny Devito and his wife Mary Elizabeth Ellis, with whom they share son Russell Wallace Day. Day took the comedy to new heights and since developed the *Sunny Podcast* to unpack every season.

Sometimes, it pays to be scrappy. "It was the riskier road and again I could not have made a better decision," Day said. "Creating the job as opposed to having it offered to me accelerated the process. Draw your own conclusions here but I think the lesson is obvious. Don't wait for your break. Make your break. Make it happen for yourself."

Before I Want You Back, Day started working on his film formerly known as El Tonto. He's also known for working with Jason Sudeikis, Jennifer Aniston, Jason Bateman, and Colin Farrell in Horrible Bosses. He's the creator and producer of comedy The Cool Kids, and the series Mythic Quest. He's also slated to play Luigi in the upcoming Super Mario movie with Chris Pratt and he has become a fixture in the Lego movie franchise.

Read the full commencement address below:

Good morning Merrimack. I'd like to thank President Hopey, trustees, faculty, students, parents, and my apologies to all the grandparents in the audience who have absolutely no idea who I am.

You are graduating from an excellent school today. Alumni have gone on to be CEOs, doctors, politicians, and professional athletes, however this year you get to receive wisdom, knowledge, and life lessons, from a man who has made a living pretending to eat cat food.

I do however have some qualifications, and some insight because I like you are becoming today, am a Merrimack College Graduate. I know what it took to get here. I was in this very room. I sat in those uncomfortable chairs. I dressed like some sort of medieval pastry chef and I too desperately hoped my hangover would wear off. If you can just make it to brunch you should be alright.

Take note. A quick observation.

Apparently the higher in life you climb in life the more ridiculous your hats become. Like the one I'm wearing today, or the popes or Pharrell. So if in some way you fear success, just think of the hats and that alone should motivate you.

This may be hard to believe but it was roughly twenty years ago that as a freshman I first set foot on this campus. I

remember it well. My parent's eyes filled with tears. My own nervous excitement. I entered the Ash dormitory. I walked to my room. My heart was pounding with what the future might hold. I reached for the door handle, and grabbed it tight, only to discover it had been covered with Vaseline.

It was a real lame prank being pulled by the boys on the third floor. "So this is how it's gonna be," I thought to myself. "Okay. They have no idea who just arrived on campus." I had to take action. I befriended a guy named Ed with a similar penchant for mischievousness. And late that evening Ed and I went to the third-floor community bathrooms and cut all their shower curtains at waist high. Leaving the third-floor boys with a diabolical option the next morning. Pass on a shower or take the most embarrassing shower of your life. My apologies for the destruction of school property. I'll donate two shower curtains. You'll have to dig up Ed to get the third.

Merrimack has come a long way since my time. The campus has grown. The quality of students improved. U.S. News & World Report ranked Merrimack as one of the top ten regional colleges in the north. In my time there was a young man at this school who scored in the zero percentile on his SAT meaning nobody in the nation did worse than this man. This was a man who once mistakenly said "he wished he lived when it was black and white." A man who with complete seriousness told someone, that "he would take their advice into cooperation." This man, of course ... was my roommate.

Did you think it was me? Come on. You're confusing me with my tv character. No. I was a decent student and I'm actually a doctor now. I have a Ph.D. I'd like to thank the school with bestowing me with this honor and highlighting to all the students and the other Ph.D.'s in the room today the complete and utter unfairness of life.

And although I join the ranks of fellow prestigious Honorary Doctors like Mike Tyson and Kermit The Frog and although I

fully acknowledge that Dr. Charlie Day sounds like some kind of club DJ. I assure you all that I intend to go by this title from here on out. And as a doctor, I plan to start writing my own prescriptions immediately.

Now, I know that having an honorary doctorate degree will do nothing for me, but I'm here to tell you today that your degrees, the ones you toiled to get, the ones you actually took classes to earn, those degrees, will also basically do nothing.

Let me clarify. You can't exchange your degree for cash. You can't have a degree audition or interview for you. You cannot eat it. Please don't make love to it. You can maybe smoke it but I wouldn't advise it. A college degree collects dust. It does nothing. It does however mean something. It represents something, to yourself and your community. It tells your community. "I have expanded my mind and destroyed my liver but I didn't give up. I pushed through. I made it, man." And although 44 of you today took more than 4 years to achieve that goal, nobody has to know that. Think of the plus side, you gave your parents a couple more years of nobody living in their basement.

Of course, jokes aside, you all should be very proud. This is the end of an impressive chapter and in many ways just the very beginning of what your lives will be. And I know that you are curious about how things will go from here. Well let me tell you, Dr. DJ Charlie Day is here to help.

I have been in your shoes. Not literally of course. I wouldn't go anywhere near your shoes. I'm sure half of them reek of stale beer and vomit.

No, my point is this. I was here and I have the rare opportunity today of looking back at myself on this day and giving myself advice. What would I say? First off, "Charlie, lay off the dark beer and the bread. You're getting a little

puffy, bud. Also, get over that girl. She's not that into you. You're really wasting your time, trust me she'll regret it. Oh, and you don't need to worry about Y2k it's like not even going to be a big deal or anything." Okay perhaps this exercise isn't too helpful but the truth is I don't have a ton I would say to myself. I'm happy with my choices. Let's face it, my life is pretty sweet.

I'd like to tell you instead of three quick stories about some of those choices. The choices that led me from there to here and although most of you are not planning on becoming actors and writers I'm sure there are some parallels you can draw to help guide your own experience. If not, feel free to tune out. If you're anything like I was at your age I lost you somewhere around "Good morning Merrimack."

When I left this school I was presented with two options. Move to New York City where I knew next to nobody and begin my pursuit of acting or take the entry-level position that had been offered to me by Fidelity Investments. I know what you may be thinking. "Why would a major financial services corporation offer this numbskull job?" The answer is simple because I tricked them.

Merrimack's business program was offering interviews with the company. The students would be given a score on their interview. I had no desire to work at Fidelity Investments but I had never been on an audition and I thought it would be a similar experience. I wanted to see if I could pull off the role of aspiring banker. Or whatever they do at Fidelity.

I had a game plan. Deflect from me. Get the guy to talk about himself. I wasn't going to lie. I just thought I'd basically interview him. We had a pleasant conversation. If I recall correctly we talked forever about the intricacies of water skiing, an activity I know nothing about.

Look, had the man asked me what eight times seven was there

would have been an unbearable pause in the room. But he didn't. The interview went so well that they offered me a job. Now this threw me a little. It was a real job. A big boy job. It was also more money than anyone had ever offered me for anything before. "Should I take it? Is this my destiny? Am I the next great financial genius? Should I come up with a plan B? Work in Boston for a few years at Fidelity. Make enough money to have a cozy transition to New York."

Well, I've always had a half-baked philosophy that having plan B can muddy up your plan A. I didn't take the job. I moved to the city. I bussed tables and answered phones. I lived in a basement apartment next to a garbage chute. The apartment was filled with cockroaches. I couldn't have made a better decision. Well, maybe not the cockroach part. I should have found a different apartment. You'll find better apartments. Just avoid the trash area.

There is an obvious lesson here about believing in yourself, and there is the plan A plan B stuff but forget all that for a second. I think the lesson is this. Had I worked at Fidelity I'm sure they would have fired me eventually. I'm no financial genius. I can barely do long division.

But I didn't want to fail at Fidelity. And I didn't want to fail in Boston. If I was going to run the risk of failure I wanted it to be in New York. I wanted to fail in the way and place where I would be proud to fail, doing what I wanted to do, and let me tell you ... I did fail. Time and time again. I was too short for this or too strange for that. I even had one casting director for a movie say "he'll never work in comedy." I was taking my punches but I was in the fight. That's a metaphor, of course, I highly doubt I have any ability to take an actual punch.

My second story is a story about creating your own opportunities instead of waiting for them to be given to you. After a few years in New York, my foot was in the door. I was

working. I was doing bit parts in film and television like mail kid #1 and junky #2. I couldn't get that big break. After many, many failed attempts at getting cast in television something popped up. It looked as though I was going to be offered a part on a big network show called "Life on a Stick."

Around that same time because I was tired of waiting for the big break I, along with my friends Rob McElhenney and Glenn Howerton, started filming a show in my apartment.

We had a sense that maybe we could make a better show than what was being offered to us at the time. We borrowed cameras asked friends to hold microphones and shot this show that we would eventually call "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia."

Suddenly there was another decision to be made. Another crossroad. Do I do "Life on a Stick?" Take the big network opportunity, the big paycheck, or bet on myself and my friends, make no money and try to sell what basically was a home movie as the next great television series.

Do I try to convince people that I'm a writer and a showrunner even though I didn't own a personal computer at the time? We were talking about a real long shot. It was the scarier thing to do but I said "no thanks," to "Life on a Stick" and went with "Sunny."

"Life on a Stick" went one season and thirteen episodes. We are currently filming our tenth season of "Sunny" we've written and produced one hundred fourteen episodes and are signed on for another two seasons making "Sunny" one of the longest-running comedies of all time.

Again the bet on myself and my friends paid off. This time in spades. There was power in numbers. "Sunny" changed my life. Not only did I have a career as an actor and a writer now, but I also had complete control over it control it too. If I wanted to dress in a full-body green spandex suit it went in the show. If we wanted to drink wine from a coke can as

perhaps some of you are doing today it went in the show and if someone thought mittens were funny on kittens it went in the show.

It was the riskier road and again I could not have made a better decision. Taking matters into my own hands changed everything. Led to everything. "Horrible Bosses," "Pacific Rim," "Saturday Night Live." Creating the job as opposed to having it offered to me accelerated the process. Draw your own conclusions here but I think the lesson is obvious. Don't wait for your break. Make your break. Make it happen for yourself.

My last story of what led me from there to here is the literal act of agreeing to be here. When President Hopey came to Los Angeles to sit down with me my first thought was, "here it comes, they're gonna ask me for money." But when he asked me to speak to you today, I quickly accepted. Then as is the case with all great opportunities, the reality of what I had to do began to set in. "Dear God," I said to myself, "I'm actually going to have to give a speech." I am not a public speaker. I have a voice like a ten-year-old who smokes. "How am I going to do this?"

I YouTubed commencement speeches given by Conan O'Brien, Steven Colbert, and Steve Jobs. This ... was a terrible idea. Their speeches were so intelligent, so well informed and so eloquent that only more panic began to set in. "What am I thinking?" "How could I ever compare?" And the truth is, I can't. I don't host a talk show or do stand-up. As an actor normally you have cut away from me ages ago. I am not nearly as smart as Steve Jobs was. I don't know how my computer works, I don't even know how my toaster works! And the YouTube comments, Oh the snarky comments! We live in a world now where things don't go away. And that perhaps is the most terrifying thing of all.

But I didn't back out. I'm here today speaking to you. And I know I will be posted on YouTube and judged and compared by

all who care to see. But my lesson is this. I don't give a shit.

You cannot let a fear of failure or a fear of comparison or a fear of judgment stop you from doing the things that will make you great. You cannot succeed without the risk of failure. You cannot have a voice without the risk of criticism. You cannot love without the risk of loss. You must take these risks.

Everything I'm truly proud of in this life has been a terrifying prospect for me. From my first play to hosting "Saturday Night Live," getting married, being a father, and speaking to you today. None of it comes easy. People will tell you to do what makes you happy, but all this has been hard work. And I'm not always happy.

I don't think you should just do what makes you happy. Do what makes you great. Do what's uncomfortable and scary and hard but pays off in the long run. Be willing to fail. Let yourself fail. Fail in the way and place where you would be proud to fail. Fail and pick yourself up and fail again. Without that struggle, what is your success anyway?

As best we know we have one life. In it, you must trust your own voice, your own ideas, your honesty, and vulnerability, and through this, you will find your way. You don't have to be fearless just don't let fear stop you.

Live like this as best as you can and I guarantee you will look back at a life well-lived.

You are capable of greatness in your profession and more importantly in your quality of self. Stay young at heart. Stay hungry. Take those risks.

You are going to change the world around you in small ways and in big and I greatly look forward to being a part of the future you will shape. Congratulations graduates. And good luck.

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