When I was a student at UW, I worked at the Daily Cardinal and covered the Badger football team. My job was to try to write positive stories about a football team that back then was only winning one or two games a year. That’s when I knew I had a future in fake news.

But today I am proud to stand with you. And I really am standing with you. I stand on this stage on this globally warm December morning feeling very much your kindred spirit. In fact, see if you can relate to this: I’ve spent the last several years working very hard doing something I love, but I’ll be moving on from that world in just a matter of days. The last four to seven years have been spent in a structured, yet friendly and fun environment. I’ve made amazing friends, lived through some emotional and historic times, and now in a few days it will all be over. I’m excited, but a little nervous. I’m excited, but a little nervous.

You say it won’t, but you accumulate things like toolboxes and photos and pots and pans that you really will never be the same. The only real difference between you and me today is that I probably have more stuff than you. It happens. You say it won’t, but you accumulate things like toolboxes and photos and pots and pans that you actually like. I even have a wife! But those are earthbound details. For all intents and purposes, and certainly for the purposes of this premise, I am you, you are me, and we all need a job.

So, in this your final lecture as students of the University of Wisconsin, I intend to share with you everything I know about being on the right path in life. This is a task I take very seriously. I want to make this count. I believe you don’t want bullshit philosophy, though, according to my records, that is what 249 of you are getting degrees in today.

How will you know, now that you are leaving academia’s protective embrace, whether you are on the right track or wrong track in life? Well, here’s what I’ve learned — sometimes the hard way:

You are on the wrong track in life, if, before heading out for a night with Paris Hilton, you think, “It would take too long for me to put on underwear.”

You are also on the wrong track if you are known by name at any of the following places: the local OTB, a pawn shop, that place that buys human hair for money. You are on the wrong track in life if you find yourself in a foreign prison facing charges you don’t quite understand.

You should also know that getting paid to do what you love is not a birthright. Sometimes it’s nice to just have things you love to do. To that end, not all of you should necessarily follow your dreams — for example, if your dreams are ridiculous. That’s what hobbies are for.

Graduating students, you are on the wrong track in life if you ever find yourself screaming the words, “Go Wolverines!” And you are definitely on the wrong track in life if your nickname is “The Widow Maker.”

Now that’s just about everything you need to know about the wrong track, but in the spirit of affirmation that is commencement, it is equally if not more important for you to know how to tell if you are on the right track. This is comparatively very simple.

You are on the right track in life if you are unaware of the time going by. That is all. If you look up from your evening’s reverie and find the sun lifting up over the horizon or you turn around to discover you are 80 years old and asking, “Where did the time go?” chances are it was not time wasted.

Excerpted from Charge to Graduates, December 2007