

Remarks by Gov. Mitchell E. Daniels, Jr.
Franklin College Commencement
May 22, 2010

Mr. President, parents, graduates, the entire Franklin family, I received your invitation with a sense of privilege, duty, and good fortune. The privilege of this podium I will try to honor; the duty is to say something even mildly original or interesting and, especially, concise, when everyone is eager to get on to the main event. The good fortune speaks for itself.

But it did bring to mind a favorite old clipping I've kept, of a classified ad in the "Lost Pets" section of a newspaper. It read "Searching for lost dog. Walks with limp, blind in right eye, bad case of mange, missing one ear. Answers to 'Lucky.'"

"Luck" is a word one hears everywhere on commencement days. "Good luck" is probably the second most frequently used expression, right behind "Say cheese."

There's no denying that luck plays a large part in human affairs. Napoleon, when someone recommended a general for promotion, extolling his bravery, leadership, and strategic shrewdness, replied "Yes. But is he *lucky*?"

These days we hear constantly about luck on a grand scale. The most recent Powerball winner, a convenience store clerk from Marshall, Missouri, won \$258 million dollars. Don't you often wonder what happens to these lucky people? Not everyone knows how to handle luck that good.

I heard about a Hoosier Lottery winner of many millions who turned up dead broke a couple years later. When a reporter asked him how this happened, he said "Well, I spent the first half on liquor and loose women. And, to be perfectly honest, I wasted the rest."

That one's made up, of course, but this does happen in real life, and it's no joking matter. Mack Metcalf, a 42-year-old forklift operator from Kentucky, won \$65 million back in 2000. He was dead three years later, his millions dissipated on frivolities and his life dissipated on alcohol. Looking back, it's hard to call him "lucky."

A current lawsuit making its way through Indiana courts caught my eye. In Donovan v. Grand Victoria, plaintiff Thomas Donovan is protesting the practice of Indiana casinos in refusing to permit card counters to play at their blackjack tables. Donovan's sin in the casino's eyes is not that he is inordinately lucky, it's that he's inordinately smart. He has taught himself to count the cards as they are played, then constantly and quickly to calculate the odds on his winning the next hand. In a game where luck still plays a large part, Donovan has through hard work learned to improve his chances.

Around the country, most courts have allowed the casinos to throw the counters out. But the world is not a big casino. We can't banish luck from our lives, but we can all be card counters, who take actions and decisions that move the mathematics of life to our side of the table.

I've never met a card counter. The closest I've knowingly come was watching the movie "21", about the MIT students and their raid on Las Vegas. But what's clear is there's nothing sentimental about what they do; it's all about the numbers, and the data, and it's serious business.

Franklin is a great academic institution. Here you've learned to search for data and follow the facts objectively wherever they lead. So let's look, empirically, at some of the ways you can be a card counter at the game of life.

One obvious realm is your own health. Practicing even minimal levels of exercise, sound diet, and preventive health will radically tilt the odds of living a longer and healthier life. Seven hours of exercise a week lowers your risk of dying ahead of time by 40%. Cranberry juice reduces your chances of urinary infections, carrots your chances of macular degeneration, blueberries of memory loss. (Garlic and onions are reported to stop cold and flu viruses, but maybe it's just that if you eat enough of them, contagious people don't come near you.) There are no real surprises when it comes to wellness; we know about these rules whether we practice them or not.

But did you know that one of the most powerful preventive health moves you can make is to get married and stay that way? The Centers for Disease Control finds this consistently, across every age, ethnic, education, and income group: married Americans are five times less likely to die from infectious disease, 38% less likely to die of heart disease, and 64% less likely to have a stroke.

When it comes to wealth, you've already tilted the table steeply in your direction. An American who simply finishes high school and gets married before having a child has only a one in five chance of ever living in poverty. You, of course, have lengthened the odds even further by winning admission and now completing a degree at an excellent school of higher education. That raises your average lifetime earnings by 73% compared to the prospects if you had stopped at high school.

But longevity alone, or wealth for its own sake, is not what I suspect most of you hope to find in life. By themselves, they're not what I wish for you. I wish for your happiness, a sense of contented fulfillment, and while health and some basic material success may make happiness more likely, they're no guarantee. It turns out that there are other cards you can count to improve your chances of true happiness.

Marriage shows up on this list, too. In surveys, married Americans are twice as likely as those never married or divorced to say they are "very happy." Married people are six times more likely to say they are very happy than that they are not too happy.

Religious belief is important, but trickier, because it's faith we're dealing with, and that's not entirely a matter of conscious choice. The guy seated next to the card counter and feeding the pot has lots of faith, after all. But if faith has found you, you've drawn a good hole card; practice that faith, virtually any faith, and your chances of winning happiness shoot way up: those who often attend church are twice as likely to be very happy as those who rarely or never do.

Putting marriage, children, and faith together is the equivalent of drawing two aces and splitting them. You triple your chances of winding up happy compared to your neighbor who shares none of those three experiences.

What doesn't produce automatic contentment is money. The data is overwhelming that, beyond subsistence levels like those found in the poorest Third World countries, more money does not bring more happiness. Despite being much wealthier, the Americans of today are no happier than those of thirty or forty years ago.

Actually, the best way to turn the money you'll earn into happiness is to give some of it away. Those who make charitable donations are 43% more likely to be happy than those who don't. And giving more leads to higher levels of satisfaction: it turns out "give 'til it feels good" is not a sarcastic statement.

Regardless how hard you studied, how often you work out, how carefully you eat, health, success and happiness cannot be assured. Many of the best-prepared workers have lost jobs and income in the current economy. Any of us could be stricken with a terrible illness, or injured going home from this ceremony. Card counters can't guarantee themselves a win every night, only a lot better possibility of one.

Luck has already entered into your lives in at least two very large ways. When I said to my own four daughters, as I said to you, that life is not a lottery, I made one exception. As I see it, we all won the lottery the day we were born, or permitted to enter, the United States of America.

As the aforementioned data suggest, this is so only incidentally because America is wealthy. It is so, rather, because America is free. Ours remains the land most conducive to upward mobility, and the never-dying hope of the ultimate source of human fulfillment. In the phrase of Arthur Brooks of Syracuse University, whose scholarship furnished many of the facts I just passed on, that source is "earned success", the sense that one has achieved something of meaning through one's own efforts.

I believe the happiest people I've met are those who started a business from scratch and led it to growth and marketplace success. As you listen to such folks, it's clear that what made them happy was less the money the business brought them than the joy of seeing large numbers of other people obtain work, support families, and realize their own dreams because of what the creator of the business had done. Living in a country where such "earned success" is still possible and even commonplace is a great piece of luck we all share.

Not all your luck has been so good. Your generation enters adulthood saddled with the largest debt burden ever left by one generation to another. Think student loans are a load? Through no fault of your own, each of you already owes \$100,000 to pay for the retirements of those who went before you. Each of you will be providing half of some old-timer's Social Security and Medicare costs, not to mention all the other costs of government, before the remnants of your paycheck ever hit your bank account. You didn't have a say in this, but at least you will have a chance to weigh in as our nation tries to avoid the kind of Greek tragedy we're watching unfold in Europe right now.

I don't know how that court case is going to turn out, but I don't mind saying I'm rooting for Mr. Donovan. I'd like Indiana always to be a place where people get ahead by talent, and good judgment, and hard work, so that they tilt the odds as far as possible in their favor. We can't take all the luck out of the game of life, but, through wise choices, we can shift the odds in our direction. You're at the table now. With the help of your wonderful parents, and this fine institution, you've been dealt a promising first hand. From now on, you're the player. Count the cards and the luck will take care of itself.

I leave you with a favorite story I've used at previous commencements, but never more aptly than today. A man's friend was expanding his business, so he ordered a floral arrangement sent to the grand opening. On arrival, he was shocked to find his flowers with a card reading "Rest in Peace." When he called to complain, the florist told him "Calm down, sir, think of it this way. Somewhere today a soul was buried under a sign that said 'Good luck in your new location.'"

And that's what I wish each of you. Good luck in all your new locations, luck improved vastly by the learning and diligence with which you have earned the distinction this outstanding school is about to confer upon you.