

Surfing with Goldfish

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OPENING: THE TIME TRAVELER

Brace yourselves, because I am about to reveal something unbelievable.

I am a time traveler.

Forty years ago, I sat as you do right now—full of hope in my cap and gown, yet unsure of what to expect as I stepped away from seventeen years of sheltered classroom life into the unstructured "real world."

It was as if the Wizard of Oz had handed me a certificate, patted me on the back with a "well done" and sent me on my way.

I felt lost. Excited. Vulnerable. Outfitted with nothing but a piece of paper—my diploma—and a question burning in my heart:

"What exactly am I supposed to do with this?"

Today, forty years later, I have the answer. And I've traveled forward in time to deliver it to you.

Yes, I'm a time traveler. But so are you.

You've been practicing for four years. Because that thing you've been doing here—reading—is the oldest time travel device ever invented. With a book, you can slip sideways in space and backwards in time. You can inhabit the minds of people long dead, walk through landscapes that no longer exist, hold conversations with thinkers who lived two thousand years ago. Socrates is still talking, if you know where to find him. Most creatures are locked into moving only forward through time. A reader is not.

And on top of that, you've spent four years here in conversation—real conversation, with three-dimensional human beings, in the same room. Learning to hold an idea in suspension. To test it, push back on it, let a worthy opposing thought strengthen it. Thinking, it turns out, is not a solo sport. It's a dialogue. And you've been training for it.

You leave here today not just with a degree, but with a toolkit for navigating time.

Now—I should warn you. I am also a voice actor, a shape shifter. I have spent four decades making a living by being many things that I am not. I have been a duck.

(Daffy Duck voice) "So long, screwy! See ya in St. Louie!"

I have been a clone trooper.

(Captain Rex voice) "In my book, experience outranks everything."

I have been a platypus—which, if you're curious, sounds something like this.

(Perry the Platypus sound)

I have been a flying bison, a lemur, a flying monkey, a box troll, and countless alien creatures.

I tell you this not to show off—well, maybe a little to show off—but because every single one of those creatures, those characters, my career, track back in some way to the education I received here. At this school. At the foot of those mountains. And it came together in ways I never could have predicted or planned.

Which is, in fact, exactly what I'm here to talk about.

Your time traveling begins today. The next forty years—the great middle half of your life—is a tidal wave already rushing towards you. You cannot see your future. But I can. Because I'm a time traveler.

Here's what I know.

PART ONE: IT WON'T GO THE WAY YOU THINK

The first thing I want you to hear—really hear—is this:

It won't go the way you think it will.

You may have a picture in your mind of how your life is going to unfold. A career. A city. A version of yourself ten years from now, successful in some particular way you've already imagined. You may even have a plan—a solid, reassuring, well-considered plan.

Here is what forty years of time travel has taught me: the plan is wrong.

Not because you're bad at planning. But because life is simply, gloriously, maddeningly indifferent to your plans.

And here's the thing—I'm not saying you'll be unhappy. You might be extraordinarily happy. I'm not saying things will go badly. They might go better than anything you could have designed. What I am saying is that it will be *different*. Wonderfully, sometimes harrowingly different from anything you're currently picturing.

So you can relax. The illusion of control was always just that—an illusion. You're not losing anything by releasing it.

When I graduated from Colorado College—a Philosophy major, lover of the German language, veteran of the choir and improv groups and more plays than I can count, enthusiastic alumnus of Invertebrate Biology—I had precisely no idea what I was going to do with myself.

I did not think: *I will one day earn my living making horrible, inhuman sounds for James Gunn and George Lucas and Nickelodeon.* I just kept doing what I had done at Colorado College. I followed my curiosity. I followed the fun and the weird. My fun. My weird.

And my fun and weird led somewhere extraordinarily well-tailored to who I am.

My major was Philosophy. My near-minor, German. Neither has anything obviously to do with voicing animated aliens or fancy talking squids. And yet—the analytical tools from philosophy come in handy every time I break down a character or a script. The grammatical precision I absorbed from German surfaces every time I parse a line of dialogue.

Nothing you love ever fades. It just may reemerge sideways in your life later—the way this education tends to deliver its gifts.

PART TWO: THE FIREHOSE

The second thing I need to tell you: you are stepping into a world that is changing faster than any generation in human history has experienced.

In my forty years of time travel, I have watched the world transform in ways that were, each time, genuinely unimaginable beforehand.

Personal computers went from room-sized machines owned by corporations to something you hold in your palm. The internet got invented. Cell phones. Then social media—which nobody, and I mean nobody, was prepared for. September 11th happened and the world rearranged itself around a single morning. A pandemic shut down the entire planet. And now artificial intelligence is ramping up to rewrite the rules of what human beings do and why.

Each of these was a firehose, a seismic event. Each appeared suddenly, hit hard, and transformed everything. Each happened since I attended school here. I remember a time before all of them.

And extrapolating from this, I can see the pace of change only accelerates. What you will face will be more disruptive, more surprising, and more world-altering than anything I've described. You'll look back on today in forty years and say, "Weren't those simpler times?"

I'm not saying this to frighten you. I'm saying it because of what it implies.

The most valuable thing you can carry into the next forty years is not a specific skill set. The landscape of what matters will keep shifting under your feet, and a narrow specialization can become a trap as fast as it becomes an asset.

The incoming tidal wave of change calls for something more fundamental. More flexible. More durable.

And—good news—you already have it.

PART THREE: THE ZIGZAG

But first—a confession. And a reassurance.

I did not arrive at my life in a straight line. I zigzagged.

After leaving Colorado College, I spent roughly twelve years trying on careers like hats I wasn't sure fit. Stand-up comedy. Children's theater. Improv. Theme parks. Sketch comedy. I was, at various points, a mall Santa, a singing telegram, and a game show co-host—which was, in fact, my first real voice-over job, on a show called *Legends of the Hidden Temple*. Yes. I was a rock god.

That game show brought me to Los Angeles. And somewhere in the middle of this magnificent zigzag, something clicked.

I realized that Hollywood needed creatures and monsters. Cartoons and video games and films were full of animals and aliens and beasts that needed voices. And I — with my lifelong fascination with animals, my memory of sitting in Invertebrate Biology at Colorado College genuinely delighted by things with too many legs, my years of live theater and improv, my deep love of monster movies and my apparently inexhaustible willingness to make strange sounds and appear idiotic—was precisely the person for that job.

It took twelve years to find this very weird career—and for it to find me. Twelve years of experiments, failed attempts, and dead ends.

I want you to think of your twenties—all the uncertainty, the frustrations, the false starts you're about to encounter—not as wasted time but as *decanting*. Like a bottle of wine that needs to breathe before it's reached its full flavor and is ready to be enjoyed. You're gathering intel. Course correcting. Sharpening the crosshairs. Even backsliding is essential in the end to your life's progress.

The sweet spot—the place where a happy career lives—is at the intersection of what you love doing and what you're good at. Not one or the other. Both. When those two circles overlap, you've found something worth building a life around.

Through the active trial and error of my twenties, I found a career I liked that liked me back. It takes time to bring that to clarity. And I didn't find it by planning—I found it the same way I found everything here: by actively following what interested me, staying curious, and remaining open to surprise.

Oh—and by meeting my wife Michelle while doing children's theater. She was the princess. I was Rumpelstiltskin. She deserves a lot of credit for how well this path has played out for me and for us. Thank you, Michelle.

PART FOUR: THE GERMAN FISH

I want to tell you a story about a pivotal moment in my career. Because it is, at its heart, a story about what my liberal arts education did for me.

Some years into my time in Los Angeles, I was called in to audition for a French fish.

I know that may sound weird—but for me, it's just another day in Hollywood.

A new animated series was being developed. There was a character—a fish—written as French. The casting note said: French fish. Every voice actor who came in that day brought their best French fish. Excellent French fish, many of them.

I walked in and read it as a German fish.

Why? Because at Colorado College, I had fallen genuinely in love with German. The language. The philosophers—Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein, the whole wacky lot of them. German fluency had not seemed useful at the time. It had seemed fun. And from years of improv—from saying "yes, and" and building on what the scene gave you—I had absorbed a deep instinct that the unexpected choice, the one that comes from deep within, is almost always more compelling than the safely obedient one.

I booked the role.

That character—Klaus Heissler, a German-accented goldfish in a fishbowl—became a principal on Fox's *American Dad*. Now in its twenty-first consecutive season, with our 400th episode airing in September. A role that has become one of the cornerstones of my professional life.

But this story isn't really about the career win.

When the producers hesitated after we completed the pilot—when they floated the idea of re-auditioning as a French fish—I said no. Firmly. Confidently. I told them that if they wanted a French fish, there were other brilliant voice actors who could do that. But I had brought them my best, my most authentic, the funniest offer I had—one that came from an idiosyncratic place deep inside me. I wasn't going to walk it back because I loved what I did.

I held my ground because I knew who I was—and I'd given them the best offer I had.

That confidence, that clarity, that willingness to trust and stand by what bubbles up from the idiosyncratic wells of your own enthusiasm—that is what your education here has been quietly building in you.

PART FIVE: YOUR INVISIBLE TOOLKIT

So let me tell you what you actually carry out of here today. Because it has real, nameable parts.

A flexible, energized mind.

The next forty years will throw things at you that don't exist yet. A mind trained to find change interesting rather than threatening—to make unexpected connections, to hold complexity without flinching—is the most durable multi-tool you can own. You have been training this here.

Knowing who you are.

"Know thyself," some old guy in sandals once said. You've spent four years excavating yourself—asked by books, professors, the block plan, the people around you: *who are you and what do you actually think?* That question, kept alive, is a compass that works in any terrain.

Knowing what you care about.

Not what you're supposed to care about. What *actually* moves you—what makes you stay up late, what makes you angry, what you'd work on for free. I cared about movie monsters. About the strangeness of living things. I took Invertebrate Biology for fun. And forty years later I was voicing Eagly—a superhero's sidekick eagle—for James Gunn's *Peacemaker*. The fuel of enthusiasm burns across decades.

Knowing what you love to do.

Follow the lights. I didn't study German to be useful—it lit something up inside me. Those enthusiasms that seem impractical, those obsessions without obvious payoff—follow them anyway. They animate you and eventually lead somewhere you want to go. Somewhere you couldn't have found with a map.

Shouldn't your life lead you where you want to go?

Knowing who you love to work with.

The theater taught me this, and improv made it unforgettable: your job on stage is not to make yourself look good. Your job is to make the *others* look good. Serve the story. Say yes, and build on what you're given. Improv is not just a performance philosophy—it's a life philosophy. And it makes you an invaluable collaborator, which is what almost all meaningful work actually requires.

Seeing yourself as a charged battery.

This is my personal credo, and I offer it to you. I don't think of myself as hired to perform a specific predetermined task. I think of myself as hired because I have a really good opinion, an energized mind, and the ability to be plugged into almost any creative problem and help make it work better. That's not arrogance. That's a liberal arts graduate who knows what they bring. Be a charged battery. Own that. Walk into every room ready to power whatever the room needs.

A habit of doing what you love.

Not just professionally—but as a practice of keeping your life battery charged. You will find a career, but never stop being an amateur: someone who does things for no other

reason than loving to do them. I maintain a website about my macro photography of insects. Another about my Halloween yard, built every year from scratch. Another—free, open to anyone—where I share everything I've learned about the art and career of voice acting, because generosity is part of the ethos I learned in theater.

I learned at CC that creativity is not a gift. It is a habit. Keep making things. Keep feeding your mind. Keep collaborating. Finish the job, take your bow, strike the set, and show up ready and curious for whatever comes next.

CLOSING: GO SURF

Buddha knew it. The Stoics knew it. Every wisdom tradition that has survived long enough to be worth reading has understood it:

Change is the only constant.

You cannot stop it. You cannot negotiate with it. You cannot plan your way around it.

You can only surf it.

And you—liberal arts graduates of Colorado College, Class of 2026—you have been handed a time traveling surfboard.

Lucky you! Because Colorado College understands that a mind trained to be curious, open, and actively engaged is the most practical advantage in life. The firehose of change isn't a threat to that kind of mind. It's an invitation.

The waters ahead will be strange. Strange in ways nobody here can predict, including me, your humble time traveler from a previous century. Doors you were counting on may never open—but others you never suspected will. The tides of time will bring things your way we don't yet have a name for.

And you—with your flexible minds, your particular enthusiasms, your hard-won sense of who you are and what you love and who you love to work alongside—you are ready.

Not because you know what's coming. Because you know how to ride it. The floodgates of time today have opened to you! So hop on your board and—

Go surf it!

Congratulations, Class of 2026.