Thank you, Dr. Berg, for those kind words of introduction. And thank you, Dr. Attman, for your most kind remarks as well. Yesterday, I had the opportunity to spend the day with both “doctors”—Dr. Gary and his lovely wife, Dr. Patty. I have to tell you that I was so impressed to hear of Gary’s accomplishments. I certainly noted that he graduated magna cum laude and cum laude for his graduate and undergraduate degrees, respectively. I also now believe that Patty likely graduated summa cum laude, making the Attman family every laude that exists. When I graduated, in contrast, it was not with honors—with any laude for that matter—it was more like "Thank you, oh Lordy...."

The Attmans were kind enough to include me with the tour they had arranged yesterday. We visited every corner of this most fascinating and beautiful city and saw many juxtapositions between old and new, traditional and unconventional. They also ensured that I learned enough Japanese to navigate the city effectively ... so I will try it out, and you can judge either how well I learned or how well they taught me: Hajimamahshita. Hon jitsuwa, domo arigato gozaimasu!

I am especially honored to have been invited to address this distinguished, or soon-to-be distinguished, graduating class of 2012. Yes, I have faith that each and every one of you will in fact distinguish yourselves and accomplish great things, be it in the military or civilian life or some combination thereof.
You are graduating from an institution within the University System of Maryland that is a world leader in adult education. Whether you are receiving an associate’s, a bachelor’s, or a master’s degree today, that tells me you have the brains and talent to accomplish great things and make a difference in the world.

I had the opportunity a couple of weeks ago of speaking with Dr. Greg von Lehmen, UMUC’s provost, while I was preparing my remarks for you today. He suggested I provide a message to those graduates in military uniform, but I think his words are applicable to all of you.

He said the work that those in uniform perform is so vitally important. But your work doesn’t stop there. Because of who you are, because of your life experiences and the education you’ve received, you are and can continue to be major contributors to our prosperity and quality of life, in the United States and around the world.

So the key question remaining—one that each of you will have to answer—goes well beyond how smart you might be or how many degrees and titles you have after your name. The question is this: Will you allow your heart to play a significant role in your future? Will you find a fire in your heart to complement your brains and talent? Will you follow it closely and bring this fire to your life’s work, personally and professionally? Brains get you in the door, but that fire in your heart determines the degree to which the world around you will be a better place as a result of your efforts.

This is what I’d like to spend the next few minutes exploring with you—that melding of head and heart, of finding the fire in your heart, and the spark of imagination in your head at those pivotal moments in life.

I’ll share the roadmap I followed, personally and professionally, sometimes intentionally but more often by being flexible enough to re-imagine, to change
course when life events warrant. The one constant for me—and, I hope, for you, too—is never losing sight of the importance of finding that fire in your heart and acting on it.

Howard Thurman, an influential American author, educator, and civil rights leader who founded the first racially integrated church in the United States, certainly knew something about the importance of passion. He said, "Don’t ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

**Alive** means passion; it means lighting that fire in your heart. So before I dole out any unsolicited nuggets of wisdom with the hope that each of you will find something of value to hold onto, let me share with you a bit about my life journey to this point and how I came to stoke the fire in my heart, several times over. It was, admittedly, a circuitous route, including a major change in career direction early on.

I was born and raised in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in a suburb called Somerset. There were five kids in my family, two girls and three boys. My dad was an important influence in my life, perhaps my greatest influence. His parents immigrated to the United States from Hungary. As a first generation American, he worked hard and got accepted into Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. He loved geopolitics, spoke seven languages, and planned a long career in the U.S. Diplomatic Service Corps. But life dealt him a turn, and he elected to join the Navy as America entered into World War II. After the war, my father joined his dad working on the family’s small dairy to help him and my father’s 10 siblings.

Lots of entrepreneurial endeavors followed, including owning his own microbrewery, but with such a large family to care for, there was never an opportunity for my dad to re-engage with his original passion—the Foreign
Service. Yet he put his all into every business and every occupation, and he taught me to do the same—regardless of what I would do in the future—and to be the best at it.

I attended Rutgers University, not far from where I grew up. I entered the School of Electrical Engineering, which featured one of the first biomedical engineering programs in the nation. I was determined to get a jump on the pre-meds as I looked ahead to a career in medicine. I worked nights and weekends as an administrator and part-time emergency medical technician at St. Peter’s Medical Center in New Brunswick to pay for my education. In fact, I was the youngest hospital administrator in the state of New Jersey. I had many interests growing up, but medicine was clearly my passion. And I had my future all mapped out.

Then my dad died unexpectedly. I was twenty, and med school was suddenly out of the picture. I needed to focus on survival, on getting a job and helping my family, just like my dad did.

I realized I had a choice. I could have been bitter about losing the opportunity to pursue my dreams. Or I could open myself to the possibility of finding other endeavors that might spark the fire in my heart. I’m not suggesting it was easy. It wasn’t. I probably missed medicine for the next 15 years or so. But here’s the thing I would grow to appreciate. Sometimes that passion is there from the beginning and you are one of the lucky ones able to stay the course and make it happen as originally planned. For most of us, however, life gets in the way and re-engineers that roadmap. I’m sure many of you faced challenges greater than mine on the journey to your graduation and may face even greater obstacles in the future. No matter what, we still have choices, and in those choices, we can find our fire.

Now, the strangest thing happened to me as I was graduating from Rutgers and focused on finding gainful employment. It turned out the mathematics I was
studying for my coursework in biomedical engineering, with those principles used to measure a patient’s pulse and blood pressure, was highly applicable to the technology that went into developing spacecraft and reconnaissance satellites. Who knew? And Booz Allen Hamilton was in the process of securing its first contract to design these space systems in 1982! So I received a job offer as an entry-level consultant, straight out of college. Thirty years later, I’m still here.

When I first entered the world of consulting, I was confident in my intellectual capabilities—perhaps a bit arrogant, but I felt I had the brains for it. Of course, there were plenty of smart people all around me, as there are here today. What I didn’t know was whether I would ever be able to find the passion I felt toward medicine, to know that my heart—that fire in my heart—was in this new career path.

If there was one key to finding a new home at Booz Allen, it was the incredibly diverse practice areas in which I was able to take part and eventually lead. From national security, defense, and homeland security to health care, financial services, and energy, every new chapter was and continues to be exciting to this day. I just needed to be willing to look at my life from a different perspective—not as the doctor I had always assumed I would become—and to re-imagine my life and the differences I could make in the lives of so many. It might not be in the performance of some new surgical technique or life-saving medical procedure, but perhaps it could be just as rewarding in being able to help re-shape or change the course of a critical approach to cybersecurity or transportation safety. By allowing myself to re-imagine the possibilities, I was able to spark a new fire in my heart.

Please take note of this: These fires can be ignited; they don’t have to be already burning!

As my consulting profession at Booz Allen progressed, I made a smart career
move by enrolling in UMUC’s graduate program. Specifically, I was a member of the first Executive Program for the Master of Science in technology management. It was great.

I was newly married to my wife, Maggie, extremely busy with my consulting work, and now in an intense 13-month executive master’s program that met every Friday afternoon and evening and all day Saturday! And the kicker was that when we got out of class at 9 p.m. Friday night, some of my teachers (who shall remain nameless—they may be in this room) would actually give us homework due the next morning! It certainly made for an exciting first year of marriage!

Of course, as soon as I completed my last class on December 4, 1992, I was able to relax. At least until my first son was born eight days later. One of my teachers—Dr. John Aje, who remains a good friend today—always notes my incredible planning ability.

UMUC has remained an important part of my life ever since. And Dr. Aje was instrumental in my continued engagement with the university. I love the fact that UMUC focuses on adult education, which addresses the clear need for an educated and technologically savvy workforce.

Some of you may not be aware of this, but several years ago UMUC even launched a remote program in Iraq during the height of our military presence, ensuring that our troops overseas would have the opportunity to further their academic education while serving our country. Nearly 5,000 troops took classes at UMUC during its three-year presence in Iraq, and nearly 11,000 troops have taken advantage of similar UMUC course opportunities in Afghanistan to date. This is one truly amazing institution!

I am particularly proud of the groundbreaking progress UMUC has made in cybersecurity education—creating the first online undergraduate and graduate
degree programs in that area. UMUC is now a world leader in this important field. My company has a special partnership with UMUC to provide this training to our workforce. The shortage of cybersecurity professionals continues to be a problem in every sector of the economy, and UMUC is a critical component of the solution.

Cybersecurity is challenging the best minds of our generation, and solving it needs the other spark I mentioned—imagination. I’d like to return to the topic of imagining and re-imagining the way we look at things. Think about Steve Jobs, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Jefferson—all had incredible imaginations. They demonstrated an ability to see problems differently, more holistically, perhaps, but certainly through a different lens.

I often try to test my sons and their ability to imagine. One day, I was cleaning out the garage and found an old manual typewriter. I think many of you may have heard of that historical wonder—the typewriter. I asked my youngest son, Chris, if he knew what it was. He thought about it, examined it, and declared “Wow, dad, that’s really cool! I’ve never seen anything quite like it before. What a great invention.” At this point, I got ready for the usual teenage mockery of one’s dad, but then he asked, “Can I get one?” I looked at him, and he was sincere. So I said, “Seriously, you want one?” And he said, “Yeah, none of my friends has a keyboard with a built-in printer!”

When I was growing up, I loved trying to fix things. I still do. Ironically, I’ve come to be known in some circles as Mr. Fix-it. It’s probably what makes me good at what I do. I like to fix things, be it a computer, my Harley Davidson, or something easier... like national security. At home, we have this 56-inch plasma HDTV in our basement. One day it just stopped working. A blank screen. My older son, MJ, remarked that we needed a new TV. I took it apart. He looked at me and said, “Dad, nobody fixes their own TV anymore—in fact, nobody fixes TVs anymore!”

Our generation was about how to fix things and keep them going. But sometimes, the only way to truly fix something is to re-imagine it.
As you graduate from UMUC today, you are at a point of re-imagining your future. In my position as a senior partner at Booz Allen, I interview a lot of job candidates. By the time they get to me, they’ve clearly demonstrated their considerable brain power. They have the smarts. What I look for in a candidate is passion, the fire in the heart and spark in their imagination that will make them outstanding leaders who will energize people and get them to follow.

Great leaders have another quality as well. They are humble enough to recognize they can’t do it alone. Booz Allen’s Chairman and CEO, Dr. Ralph Shrader, himself a passionate leader, recently gave a talk on leadership and the debt of excellence. He said, “Excellence takes time, and it takes others. Nothing important or exceptional happens in an instant, nor does it happen by a lone individual.” He went on to say, “Whatever we may accomplish in our lives, we owe a debt of excellence to past efforts— triumphs as well as failures—that enabled us to leave a strengthened heritage for our successors, to pay it forward.”

I had a personal experience about paying it forward that I’d like to share with you. It taught me that even the simplest of acts or gestures of the heart can be contagious and have important consequences well into the future. I received the following e-mail a few months ago from a young man whose path I crossed over six years ago. It read:

Dear Mr. Gerencser, I hope all is well. I was going through some old files this morning and I came across your business card. I couldn’t believe I still had it, but when I found it I remembered just who you were. I met you one time in Peru—you were traveling with your son, and I was in my early twenties. I had no money left and did not realize I had to pay to get out of the country. My aunt, with whom I was traveling, had already boarded her plane, and they would not accept my credit card. Out of the kindness of
your heart, you offered me a $100 bill and said that you trusted that I would reimburse you upon my arrival back home. From my experience there are not too many people with your character and heart left in the world today. I'll continue to pay it forward on my end. Thanks again, and be well.

We never know when that next opportunity will present itself to show our heart and make a difference. But when it does, you need to have both the heart and brains to seize the moment.

Several months ago I submitted my retirement papers, after 30 years with Booz Allen. I was extremely proud of the work I had accomplished during my career. Our chairman of the board, Dr. Shrader, suggested something else. He sat down with me and said, "I have this job I'd like you to consider, but only if your heart is in it." He knew me all too well—that I had to be passionate about the opportunity for it to work for me and the firm.

I decided to set aside my retirement plans in order to lead the re-emergence of Booz Allen's commercial consulting business. The fire in my heart was burning yet again.

A relatively obscure American author, T. Alan Armstrong, had an interesting perspective on this. He said,

If there is no passion in your life, then have you really lived? Find your passion, whatever it may be. Become it, and let it become you, and you will find great things happen for you, to you, and because of you.

Passion can be self-created—start that fire in your heart! Pursue work—and life-beyond-work—that stokes those flames within. And remember to always remain open to the possibility of re-imagining a new and different path. If you can do that,
the spark of your imagination will surely **ignite the fire in your heart**!

Congratulations and best of luck to each and every one of you. Keep those fires burning bright—the one in your head and the one in your heart. I hope our paths will cross again soon.

*Domo arigato!*