Mr. Azim Premji
Chairman, Wipro

Prof. V.S. Ramamurthy, Chairman, Board of Governors of IIT Delhi,
Members of the Board of Governors, Prof. Surendra Prasad, Director,
Members of the Senate, Faculty, Distinguished Guests, and most
important, students.

I am privileged to be with you here today and to share this significant moment of your
life. You are among a handful of the most talented people in the world to have graduated
from such a prestigious institution like the IIT, Delhi. I am happy to be here because I am
proud of your achievements. I hope at least some of the reflected glory rubs off me! I am
also happy because it is wonderful to be with young people. The funny thing about life is
that you realize the value of something only when it begins to leave you. As my hair
turned from black, to salt and pepper and finally salt without the pepper, I have begun to
realize the enthusiasm and excitement of youth. At the same time, I have begun to truly
appreciate some of the lessons I have learnt along the way. As you embark on your
careers, I would like to share them with you. I am hoping that you will find them as
useful as I have.

The world you are entering is in many ways very different now from what it was when I
began my career. It was late sixties and India still depended on other countries for
something as basic as food. Pictures of India were about the dismal conditions here. We
aroused sympathy, not admiration whenever we went overseas. Recently, someone told
me, that when visitors came to India then, they came to see what they could do for India.
Now, they come to see what India can do for them. As Tom Friedman said, he came to
India on a Columbus like journey of exploration. But there was a difference. Columbus
reported to the King and Queen on his return that the world was round and went down
history as a man who first made this discovery. Tom Friedman returned home and shared
his discovery with his wife and only in a whisper that the world is indeed flat.

The truth is that economically India is among the two large economies (above $700
billion), growing above 7%. Also, India is possibly the only country in the world where
those aged less than 25 years are more than half the population. Both these represent
tremendous opportunities. Yet there are fundamental challenges in the country including
education, basic infrastructure, water, health and hygiene which need to be addressed.
But then, challenges as much as opportunities, bring out the best from talent and youth.

As a hopeful Indian, I look at our country as one which is rich in ethnic and cultural
diversity and one that has an effective, secular democracy which will help us build an
enduring society.
Lesson # 1: Take charge

This was the first thought that came to me, when over four decades ago, I stepped into Wipro factory at Amalner. I was 21 and had spent the last few years in Stanford University Engineering School at California. Many people advised me to take up a nice, cushy job rather than face the challenges of running a hydrogenated oil business. Looking back, I am glad I decided to take charge instead. Essentially, leadership begins from within. It is a small voice that tells you where to go when you feel lost. If you believe in that voice, you believe in yourself. You can either amplify the voice to make it the purpose of your life or you can discount it and turn it off. Similarly, when you face a great challenge, you can run away from it, push it on to someone else or just plain roll up your sleeves and face it head on. I have always chosen to take charge. In the long run, I have found it the easiest option of all. Similarly, when it comes to choosing your careers, you have to take charge of your own destiny. I believe that at the end of the day, our destiny is too precious to leave the choice to someone else.

Lesson # 2: Earn your happiness

The second lesson I have learnt is that a Rupee earned is of far more value than five found. In our interviews, when people are asked to narrate their most memorable achievements, they usually recount those which needed maximum effort from their part. It is almost as if the pain they faced is now an integral part of their pleasure. In my own life, I have found that nothing gives as much satisfaction as earning our rewards. Infact, what is gifted or inherited follows the old rule of come easy, go easy. I guess we only know the value of what we have if we have struggled to earn it.

Lesson # 3: Nothing succeeds like failure

The third lesson I have learnt is no one bats a hundred every time. Life has many challenges. You win some and lose some. You must enjoy winning. But do not let it go to the head. The moment it does, you are already on your way to failure. And if you do encounter failure along the way, treat it as an equally natural phenomenon. Don’t beat yourself for it or any one else for that matter! Accept it, look at your own share in the problem, learn from it and move on. The important thing is, when you lose, do not lose the lesson.

Lesson # 4: Nothing fails like success

The fourth lesson I have learnt is the importance of humility. There is a thin line of difference between confidence and arrogance. Confident people are always open to learn. A recent survey of executives in Europe showed that the single most important quality needed for leadership success was the willingness to learn from any situation. Arrogance on the other hand stops learning. It comes with a feeling that one knows all that needs to be known and has done all that needs to be done. In a dynamic world, the rules of the game are always changing. Complacency can dull the senses and prevent us from knowing what is happening around us. That is the first step towards failure.
**Lesson # 5: There has to be a better way**

Partly as a corollary to what I have just said, we must remember that no matter how well we do something there has to be a better way! Excellence is not a destination but a journey. Continuous improvement happens when we believe it is possible and when we are willing to work for it. Sometimes, we reach a plateau in our climb for perfection. That is when we need to look sideways. Creativity and Innovation sometimes need inspiration from other disciplines. It is probably not a chance that Einstein’s interest in music was as much as his interest in Physics. Bertrand Russell was as much a mathematician as a philosopher. Excellence and creativity go hand in hand.

**Lesson # 6: Respond, not react**

There is a world of difference between the two and in terms of success and failure. The difference is that the mind comes in between responding and reacting. When we respond, we evaluate with a calm mind and do whatever is most appropriate. We are in control of our actions. When we react, we are still doing what the other person wants us to do. In youth, rebellion is a fashion. I remember myself being a rebel without a cause many times. But rebellion as a reaction is conformity to something else. Disagreement and bringing about change as a response has led to challenging the status quo and useful, sustainable social reforms.

**Lesson # 7: Remain physically active**

It is easy to take health for granted when you are young. But when you enter the 24 by 7 schedule of your work, it is important not to succumb to time pressure and sacrifice the time needed for physical fitness. I have found that exercise not only improves the quality of time but also reduces the time you need for sleep. The truth is that stress will only increase in a global world. You must have your own mechanism to deal with it. There is enough literature to support the finding that exercise effectively reduces stress. That is another benefit of remaining physically active.

**Lesson # 8: Never compromise on your core Values**

Mahatma Gandhiji often said that you must open the windows of your mind, but you must not be swept off your feet by the breeze. One must define what you stand for. This is not difficult. But Values lie, not in the words used to describe them, as much as in the simple acts. And that is the hard part. Like someone said, “I could not hear what you said because what you did was coming out far too loud”.

**Lesson # 9: Play to win**

Playing to win does not mean playing dirty. Playing to win brings out the best in us and in our teams. It brings out the desire to stretch, to achieve that which seems beyond our
grasp. It is about aiming for the maximum, a passion to do our best and having the hunger to be the best.

However, it is not about winning at any cost. It is not about winning every time. It is not about winning at the expense of others. It is about innovating all the time. It is a continuous endeavor to do better than last time. It is the Spirit of fortitude, the Spirit of never letting go- ever.

**Lesson # 10: Give back to Society**

I mentioned in the beginning that while India has made tremendous progress, we also have significant challenges. All of us have a collective social responsibility towards doing our bit to address them. Of all the challenges, the key to me is education. We have a paradoxical situation, where on the one hand we have jobs chasing scarce talent and on the other, rampant unemployment and poverty. The only way to bridge these two ends of the pole is by providing Quality education that is accessible by all.

At Azim Premji Foundation, we work towards universalisation of Primary Education. We are convinced that the only way to create a just and equitable society is by addressing it at the grass roots. Without education, it will not be possible to correct the past and prepare the society for the future. We also believe that no matter what, every child has a right to childhood.

I wish you all the best in your life and career. I hope you achieve success in whatever way you define success to be. -