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Thank you President Hanbury, for the kind words and for that recognition of our nation’s veterans. Thank you faculty and guests, particularly those of you who have come a long distance. And thank you, especially, graduates.

It’s a privilege to address you at this critical juncture in your lives, here inside this sacred temple of professional hockey and flying rats. I’m particularly honored to stand on this stage, following in the footsteps of two of our nation’s greatest intellectuals: Katy Perry and Jay-Z.

Thank you also for the honorary degree, which means a great deal to me. But I’ll be honest: It means even more to my mother. She’s been waiting her entire life to say these words: “Have you met my son the doctor?”

But this day is about you, the graduates of the health professions schools. Over the last few years, you’ve accumulated a staggering amount of knowledge—and ingested a staggering amount of caffeine. Exam all-nighters pushed your bodies to the limit. Textbook purchases pushed your credit cards to the limit. You’ve learned about pharmacology and histology, kinesiology and, of course, anatomy.

You survived cardio-physiology with Dr. Merevetz and ocular disease with Dr. Reed.

You can describe erythromycin’s mechanism of action. You can sketch out the exact path of the Trigeminal nerve. You can describe interactions between the Trapezius and Levator Scapulae.

Did I pronounce that right? Yes, I looked it up on Wikipedia.

As I was writing this speech, I couldn’t help but think of my own commencement day. And an image popped into my head—everybody in their bright red gowns, so anxious about the future and so excited about what it might hold, hugging, crying, dancing, singing….

Then it hit me. It wasn’t my commencement I was remembering. It was the season finale of “Glee.”

Truth is, my commencement was more than twenty years ago and a lot has changed. The president was George Bush—the first one. Pluto was still a planet. Madonna was still young. And the Miami Dolphins were still a good football team.

I don’t remember the ceremony, or the speaker, or even thinking the speaker was a big deal. If you’re thinking the same thing, don’t worry. I’m not offended. Graduation speakers are like mixed seasonal vegetables. When you go to a restaurant, you expect them on your plate. But they’re not the reason you went there and they’re not what you remember about the meal.

So as I stand before you today, like some forgettable but hopefully tasty mix of broccoli, snow peas, and summer squash, I will try to be quick. But I do want to send a message—and I hope you’ll forgive me if it’s not the kind of message you were expecting.

The publisher of Vital Speeches of the Day believes that it is indeed vital to the welfare of the nation that important, constructive addresses by recognized leaders in both the public and private sectors be permanently recorded and disseminated—both to ensure that readers gain a sound knowledge of public questions and to provide models of excellence in contemporary oratory. These speeches represent the best thoughts of the best minds on current national and international issues in the fields of economics, politics, education, sociology, government, criminology, finance, business, taxation, health, law, labor, and more.

It is the policy of the publisher to cover both sides of public questions. Furthermore, because Vital Speeches of the Day was founded on the belief that it is only in the unedited and unexpurgated speech that the view of the speaker is truly communicated to the reader, all speeches are printed in full. When it is necessary to condense a speech for reasons of unusual length or the use of extraneous matter, it is so stated. Speeches featured in Vital Speeches of the Day are selected solely on the merit of the speech and the speaker, and do not reflect the personal views or pre-established relationships of the publisher.

Subscribers are urged to call the editor’s attention to any speeches that have impressed them as outstanding so that copies may be secured for review.

Due to a formatting error in our July issue, Vital Speeches inadvertently repeated the first paragraph of journalist Alejandro Junco’s May 14 speech, “Burning the Fog,” delivered at the Journalist Memorial ceremony in Washington, D.C. We regret the error.
Comencement speeches are typically full of hope and good cheer—about congratulating you on the work you’ve done and the world of opportunity you are about to enter. You’ve earned that kind of send-off and, if you were almost any other crowd, at any other school, at any other time, I’d happily give it to you.

But you’re not any other crowd at any other school at any other time: You are new members of the health professions at a moment when our health care system is near collapse. You will be on the front lines of one of our society’s greatest challenges—finding some way to reorganize that system into something that takes better care of us, and does so at a price we can afford.

Yes, graduate school was hard. What comes next may be even harder.

It’s a bit unfair to ask this of you, because merely by selecting these fields—and enduring the academic gauntlet you’ve just completed—you’ve accepted for yourselves enormous responsibility.

In some respects, health is a great equalizer. Injury and illness affects everybody. At this moment of ultimate insecurity, people will look to you for help. And you will be able to provide it, in ways that no generation before you has.

It’s a little staggering to consider how far health care has come in what is, in the grand scheme of things, a very short time. In the 19th Century, healers treated infection by bleeding the patients. It didn’t kill the germs. It did leave the patients a few quarts short in the tank.

A favorite treatment for gastrointestinal disease was a tonic called Calomel. It didn’t so much make you better as make you dead. That’s because the active ingredient was mercury.

Towards the end of the 19th century, doctors seized on a new miracle drug that, they swore, could cure morphine addiction. The drug was called cocaine. Yeah, that didn’t work out so well either.

Today, we diagnose gastrointestinal disease with scopes and scans—and treat it with procedures and drugs—that the caregivers of the 19th Century could scarcely imagine. We have devices that allow doctors to operate deep inside the body, via incisions just a centimeter long. We have medicines that can turn HIV, not so long ago a certain death sentence, into a livable, chronic condition.

Tomorrow will bring still more advances—and I don’t simply mean new drugs and devices. You’ve trained as health professionals, but you’ll probably spend a great deal of your time as data engineers—absorbing and manipulating real-time information about your patients and whole communities. Someday soon, a smart phone or tablet as essential to your jobs as a stethoscope or a torsion balance was to your predecessors.

Right now, on some university campus, the next Mark Zuckerberg isn’t inventing the next Facebook. He’s inventing the next great health care app. And, to answer the question that just popped into your head, no—I don’t who he is or if he can give you a job.

But progress can’t simply mean figuring out how we provide care. It also has to mean providing care to the people who need it. Progress on this front has been much more halting.

As health care left the dark ages of the 19th Century, it didn’t simply become more effective. It also became more expensive. Our efforts to deal with that challenge produced a hodge-podge of private insurance and public programs such as Medicare. Although that system worked for a time, it has faltered. The human toll is all around us, in stories like the ones I’ve encountered over the years.

As newly minted health professionals, you know that we can treat cancer—in the best of cases, to save lives and, in the worst of cases, to make those lives a little more comfortable. So how do you explain what happened to a man named Gary Rotzler, a father of three from New York, who lost health insurance when he lost his engineering job—and then, two years later, lost his wife to a cancer that went undiagnosed and ended up declaring bankruptcy?

You know that adult-onset diabetes is eminently treatable disease—and that routine eye exams are part of the standard regimen. So how do you explain what happened to Tony Montenegro, a security guard in California, who never had that exam because he had no way to pay for it—and who ended up almost totally blind, disabled for life?

You know that children born with cerebral palsy face extraordinary challenges—but that, with the right kind of physical therapy, they can walk and be happy, productive members of society. So how do you explain what happened to Elizabeth Hilsabeck, a housewife in an affluent Texas suburb, whose efforts to get her baby boy’s treatments ran into a brick wall of bureaucratic denials, depleting her savings and eventually destroying her marriage?

One of the most illuminating experiences I’ve ever had as a reporter was about ten years ago, during a tour of a clinic serving the uninsured of Los Angeles. Staff members were proud of their work but, on this day, they were particularly eager to show off their dental clinic. Like a lot of people, I hadn’t put dental care in the same mental category as pediatrics or emergency room care. But I quickly learned that I was wrong.

Dental care has also come a very long way in the last hundred years. It’s also become a lot more expensive. When parents can’t pay for it, their kids miss out on prevention and they don’t get treatment for decay. The cavities they get hurt. And they hurt a lot. They can’t concentrate in school and, in the worst cases, they can’t get to school at all. These kids—five, seven, nine years old—already had it tough. Because they couldn’t get to a dentist—something a lot of us take for granted—they now have it even tougher.

Addressing this problem has been a national preoccupation for nearly a century. Two years ago, elected officials in Washington passed a new law designed, among other things, to improve access to health care.
The verdict is still out, literally, with a Supreme Court ruling expected next month. And the public remains deeply divided. Some people like the law. Some people don’t like the law. Some people think the law is actually about broccoli.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you that I’m among those who like the law—which is to say, I don’t think it involves broccoli. But I also know, understand, and respect people who think otherwise. This is an issue about which serious thinkers can have honest disagreements.

But there is something on which nearly all of us who follow health policy agree: The problem with American health care isn’t simply that too few people have insurance. It’s also that the system as a whole costs too much, making it more difficult for all of us to afford—as individuals and as a society.

You’ve heard that before, I know, so let me be clear about what I mean. There is no iron law of economics that says we can’t spend more than a tenth, or a fifth, or even a third of our income on health care. And, in some respects, we get quite a lot for what we spend.

David Cutler, an economist at Harvard, famously calculated how much people value extra years of life—and used that calculation to show that some of our most expensive interventions are more than worthwhile. Yes, health care is a lot more expensive than it was in the 1950s. But, as another economist—Jonathan Gruber of MIT—likes to ask, if you could have 1950s quality at 1950s prices, would you make the trade? Very few of us would.

Still, it’s one thing to say we’re getting something for what we spend. It’s another thing entirely to say we’re getting enough for what we spend. That case is much harder to make, particularly if you look overseas. No other nation on the planet comes close spending what we do. And while there are some things we do as well if not better than any other country, there are plenty of things we do worse.

We throw a ton of money down the drain on administrative waste and profiteering. A sane health care system would reduce both. In addition, international comparisons suggest that the prices we pay for many services, including some you guys will be providing, are higher than necessary. A sane health care system would do something about that too.

But we also spend a ton of money on care that is unnecessary, duplicative, or downright harmful. And you don’t have to go abroad to see this phenomenon. You can look here in this country, right in our own backyard. Some of the best research on this topic comes from John Wennberg of Dartmouth University. One of Wennberg’s first studies looked at nearby towns in Vermont, alike except for one thing: In one town, 7 percent of kids got tonsillectomies. In the other, 70 percent did. And the 70 percent kids were no healthier.

Later Wennberg and his team compared Medicare spending in Miami and Minneapolis. The cost here in South Florida was twice as high. The outcomes did not appear to be twice as good. In fact, they appeared to be basically the same.

A few years ago the federal government audited hospitals and found institutions all over the country doing back-to-back CT scans, which doesn’t reveal much extra information but does expose patients to potentially dangerous levels of radiation.

Does that mean we should change something about the way we pay for medical care? Is our system full of the wrong incentives, encouraging overtreatment in some places and under-treatment in others? Probably. But those changes won’t be enough, because it’s not simply a matter of changing incentives. It’s a matter of changing the way people think. And that’s where you come in.

A generation ago, it was enough to learn what you could do to help people. Now, you have to think about what you should do. Will an invasive or painful test actually sharpen a diagnosis? Will a new drug actually work better than an old one? Will this therapy actually lead to a better quality of life?

Health care is inherently personal and intimate. Every person has the right control his or her care, according to his or her own values. But very few of us can make these decisions without guidance and information—and we’ll be asking you to provide it.

So you’ll have to be prepared. And that’s not going to be easy. I know you’ve just completed years of grueling study, but your learning can’t stop today. You need to keep up with what works and what doesn’t—and in those many cases when care will work sometimes and not work other times, you need to learn why.

The best caregivers have always done this. My father is a doctor—he practices right down the road here, in Plantation. I still remember him bringing home videos of new surgical techniques and watching them before dinner. Yeah, it was a real appetite-killer.

But those data tools I mentioned earlier will make learning easier and harder for you than it has been for him—easier, because you’ll have so much more information at your fingertips; harder, because you’ll be expected to be much more current than health professionals are now.

You also must be prepared to see health care in a way that we haven’t before—not as a series of episodic interventions when somebody is sick, but as an ongoing, constant effort to keep people from getting sick in the first place. It’s not your responsibility to make sure people stay healthy. It can’t be. But it is your responsibility to help them understand the importance of maintaining health and, when they ask, helping them to achieve it.

I feel a bit sheepish giving you orders like this. After all, I don’t have a graduate degree in health like you do. But you’ll hear the same thing from people who are bona
I just wanted to highlight a few things. I'm worried really about how much fuzzy thinking going on world. Fuzzy thinking—people just not thinking straight.

I tried to think hard about what's behind it and I reflect on time with my sister. My sister is younger than I—I am four years older, so I'm like a whole school older—I'm graduating high school, she's entering high school, I'm graduating college, she's entering college. And so one time I said, “Lynn, where do you want to go to lunch today?” and she said “What are my choices?” It was odd because I didn't realize until that moment that she was not yet capable of simply coming up with a fresh idea. Why? Because she'd spent her whole life taking multiple-choice tests. So I ask a question, she wants choices in front of her to pick from. This would continue the whole night! And then I tested this with other people. People want choices. Then I realized maybe it's hard to just think originally and come up with a fresh thought that the person who's offering the question hadn't thought up yet. Because I think somehow in our society we are hell-bent on the answer—the right answer—because when it's the right answer it's the right answer and
when it’s the wrong answer it’s not the right answer.

Consider the following example. Imagine you have a spelling bee—this is contrived, but it makes the point. You have a Spelling bee and you have to spell the word cat. Okay. So one student spells it “C-A-T.” Person got it right. The next person spells it “K-A-T.” That’s wrong, you got that wrong. Third person spells it “X-Q-W.” Do you realize that is marked equally as wrong as the K-A-T when you can argue that K-A-T is a better spelling for cat than C-A-T? Dictionaries know this because that’s how they spell it phonetically.

So we’ve built a system for ourselves where there is an answer and everything else is not the answer even when some answers are better than others. So our brains are absent the wiring to come up with an original thought, or a thought not previously considered, or a thought between the ideas that are already laid on the table. What we’re not valuing is knowledge as process rather than knowledge as an answer.

In another example, a little contrived but it brings the point home even a little more strongly, if you’re an employer and two candidates come looking for a job. You’re interviewing the two candidates and you say ‘For part of this interview I just want to ask you what is the height of the spire on this building that we’re in?’ And the candidate says ‘I was an architect, I majored in architecture for a while and I memorized the heights of all the buildings on campus. I know the height of that spire is 150 feet. In fact, 155 feet tall.’ It turns out that’s the right answer, and the person came up with it in seconds.

That person goes away and the next candidate comes in. ‘Do you know the height of the spire no this building?’ The candidate says ‘No, but I’ll be right back.’ The person runs outside, measures the length of the shadow of that spire on the ground, measures the length of her own shadow, ratios the height to the shadows, comes up with a number, runs back inside. ‘It’s about 150 feet.’

Who are you going to hire? I’m hiring the person who figured it out, even though it took that person longer, even though the answer is not as precise. I’m hiring that person because that person knows how to use the mind in a way not previously engaged.

Realize that when you know HOW to think it empowers you far beyond those who know only WHAT to think. In fact, I should tweet that. It’s a tweetable thought. (pauses to pull out cell phone and send tweet). Sorry about that, every now and then I feel compelled to textify.

So many people can’t wait until school ends, can’t wait until the summer holidays. What are you in a hurry to do? To stop learning? This is the only time in your life where your job was to learn. That was your job, that’s all people expected of you. Now you’re being cast forth and I’m hoping I’m expecting that you’re not saying to yourself I am done learning. Because if that is how you think and feel, you will slide back to the cave because everyone else who keeps learning will pass you by and that’s where you end up even if you didn’t think you were headed there.

So this act of learning tells me that as you exit this institution, this newly-sanctioned University, just-in-time by the way for in astrophysics we’re working on the multiverse rather than the universe, so in a few years it might be the multiverse, so get ready for that one. Think of your graduation, think of this moment as the beginning of learning and not the end of learning. If anyone gives you a choice, say don’t even give me a choice, let me think up an answer all by myself.

It’s been said that there’s no greater pain to the human mind than the prospect of a new idea, because old ideas bring comfort. Well, I want every single one of you to lead a painful, uncomfortable life. And in that pain and discomfort, you’ll make discoveries that can transform this world and all the way that desperately needs. Thank you all for your time and attention.
Dunedin, Florida, I used to sometimes dream of what it was like to go back in time and wished for one of those fancy time machines to see what the world was like when dinosaurs were stomping around or when there were mastodons actually here in Florida or camels, or giant tortoises not that long ago.

Actually, in 1955, I listened to Archie Carr, the celebrated turtle man, among other things, describe to me about how Florida has changed over recent times, relatively recent, over the last 100,000 years or so, when ice ages have come and ice ages have gone, but where we now sit high and dry once was covered with water. Sea level is not really level and it isn't where it always used to be. But, there's another whole Florida out there, 100 miles or more, off the West coast, a lesser distance off the East coast, things that we now know that our predecessors couldn't know.

Jackson Browne has written a song recently, and a line in there says “If I could be anywhere in time, it would be now.” It would be now. It would be great to go back and see what it was like before, or race ahead and see what it is like in another 10-50-100-1,000 years in the future, but this is the moment, perhaps, the best time in all of history, all of human history, all of earth’s history for you to be launching on whatever you’re going to do next.

Just imagine two centuries ago. Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin were both three years old two centuries ago. They were born on the same day, the 12th of February, 1809. You know what they could not know. You are armed with knowledge because you came along now. You have a perspective of earth that they couldn’t see, they couldn’t know because we didn’t have that view of earth from space. They might have perceived what Copernicus, what Galileo could not before them, the earth is round and that we sit in the middle of the stars, and that we’re all basically made of stardust, that we have this amazing perspective that in all human history, we’re better armed than any who have gone before us with knowledge about those big questions. Who are we, where did we come from, and where are we going?

This is the moment when the decisions that you make, that will be made in the next ten years, your time, will resound forward and make a magnified difference in the next 10,000 years because not only do you know more, owing to when you have been born and being here, of course, at Eckerd College, than any who have preceded you in time.

But, this may be the last chance that people will have a chance to make a difference, to secure an enduring future for us, to shape the way the world works in ways that will hold the planet steady, give us a chance to build on the knowledge that has been accumulated by all preceding humans and given to you in the vast dose of four years of learning.

Think about where we have come from. Humankind goes back, in terms of our roots on this planet that goes back four and a half billion years, it depends on how you count. Have humans been around for five million years, two million years, one million years? Well for sure, humans have been around over the past 50,000, 100,000, perhaps much longer than that. But looking over just the last 100,000 years, when people who had brains like yours but didn't have the knowledge that you now have and could not know what you now know; experienced changes in the climate up and down, up an down; ice ages came, ice ages went; humankind kept on. But only in the last 10,000 years have we prospered, have we gotten above being a very minor player on the world’s stage.

It wasn’t until 1800 that there were finally one billion humans. When I came along, there were two billion. By 1980, when Eckerd College had graduated its 20th class, there were four billion, and here you are, the 49th class, there are seven billion of us.

It looks as though we are really successful, and we are, but we shouldn’t take our success for granted because during this last 10,000 years, the planet, owing nothing to human actions, has been held rather steady. But in the last 100 years, and especially in the half century, changes have taken place greater than during all preceding human history, and I mean, not just in terms of the ups and downs of climate change, but rather in terms of what’s happened to the fabric of life, itself, to the state of the world, the state of nature, and, for better or worse, we can take credit or blame for that.

I have some friends, astronauts if you will, who dream of going to Mars. I mean, I’d like that, too, see how the red planet is, but to get there will take some doing and we’ll have to take our life-support system with us. The people who want to go to Mars and set up housekeeping there are thinking about what it would take to terraform Mars and make the red planet more like the blue one. Here’s the thing, though. On our watch, in the past century, and now in the 21st, we’re actually doing a pretty good job of Mars-a-forming earth.

The atmosphere of Mars today is mostly carbon dioxide. We’re adding more carbon dioxide to our atmosphere than during all preceding human history. We need some, of course, because carbon dioxide drives photosynthesis and that means oxygen in the atmosphere. It means that plants grow and fix food. We need enough carbon dioxide, just enough, to keep the planet steady. We need a lot of things to hold the planet steady, but this is the first time in all of history that we’re getting our arms, our mind around what it takes to have an enduring place for humankind within the systems that sustain us.

So here we are. This is your backyard; it’s my backyard; it’s where I spent years as a kid and still come back because I love the Gulf of Mexico, I love the ocean. People over the ages have loved and still love the ocean; they are attracted to the sea, attracted to water, and why
not; no water, no life; no blue, no green; no ocean, no us.

Although we don't think about it that way most of the time, we are all sea creatures because with every breath we take, every drop of water we drink, we are connected to the sea. It's where most of the oxygen comes from, little creatures in the sea generating oxygen, grabbing carbon. Most of the water on earth, 97%, is ocean, but it's only now, only now, during your time, that we are really gaining significant access, both to the skies above and to the depths below.

So enjoy it. Take it on. Jump in the ocean, go get wet. See the world from the inside out. Take advantage of the opportunities that Galileo didn't have, that Abraham Lincoln didn't have, Charles Darwin didn't have, Archie Carr didn't have to be able to live underwater. Stay there for a week or two. Sleep with the fish for heaven sakes. Swim with them. Get to know your fellow creatures.

I've had the joy of doing this using a number of techniques, technologies that have come along in my time, in your time. They are there for you to grasp and run with. Use it as a basis for commencing what your net steps will be.

Imagine walking on the ocean floor a thousand feet down where it's dark all the time. You have a chance with new submersibles that are there for you to use, are there for you to design and build to create, to use the gifts that you have, your good brains, being around at this point in history when, for the first time, we know the magnitude of our ignorance about the planet as a whole, about what we have to do to stay alive in this little speck in the universe.

Only about five percent of the ocean has been seen at all, let alone explored, so if you think there's nothing left to do, that all the frontiers have been covered, well think again. Every door that has been opened, it opens another ten or 100, or 1,000 doors, and you're here, perched at this special point in time, all of us are, but you, in particular, you are commencing the next stage with cool tools like this, little subs. This one is called the Deep Sea, operating out of Costa Rica. You can buy a ticket and go down 500 meters, 1,500 feet beneath the sea, and look at the fish. You are in the aquarium. The fish are looking in at you.

Most people have not yet had a chance to do this, just as early in the 20th century, most people had not been up in the sky in an airplane. But I dare say, I'm in an audience now of people who have viewed earth from high in the sky at some point in their life, probably many times. But, how many of you have been to 1,000 feet beneath the ocean? And if not, why not? It's there to be done. Go for it. Go see the fish swimming in something other than lemon slices and butter. You might be amazed to find that fish have faces, personality, that every fish is different from every other one and so is every jellyfish, every crab, every oyster, every clam.

The diversity of life on earth is not limited just to individual species, it's individuals, like all of you. There are no two of you alike, either, no two parrot fish with freckles on their noses exactly like this. It's one of the big miracles of life, how different everything is, how everything connects. Maybe just as important is how everything does tie together, that the genetic material that makes up a Moray eel shares a lot in common with what makes up every one of you, every bacterium, every tree, every fern, every little piece of plankton out in the ocean, the chemistry of life that holds us all together.

You know, all things considered, it's a great time to be a human being on the earth, certainly a great time to be a graduate of Eckerd College. It's, all things considered, not such a great time to be a turtle.

From the time when Archie Carr was born in 1909, early in the 20th century to now, a little more than a century later, we've lost maybe 95% of the sea turtles. I mean, the good news is there are still some out there chomping on sponges, eating jellies, grazing on sea grasses, but they're also faced with daunting challenges that no sea turtle in several hundred million years of history has had to face, like the avalanche of plastic on the beaches of the world.

Now, I, too, come from the pre-plastic azoic just like turtles, who, like humans, tend to live a fairly-long time. We, if we're lucky, might live to be a century; so might sea turtles; so might a lot of creatures that we share space with on earth, certainly many plants like trees, but also many fish, many mammals. Some whales are known to live as much as two centuries; bow-head whales in the Arctic have been known to live at least that long. But turtles, and whales, and many other creatures are having a hard time these days.

Consider sharks. They've been around 300 million years, and when I first started diving, I was warned to be careful of sharks. There are man eaters out there, but now the problem is there are man eating sharks out there. We don't have to worry about them eating us as much as they have to worry about us consuming them.

On our watch, your watch, sharks in the sea, dominant species in the ocean for millions, hundreds of millions of years, have been drawn down to about ten percent of what they were when I was a child.

During that first year that Eckerd graduated a class, 1960, that's when the pressure was amped up for sharks, shark fin soup, shark stake, sharks in tournaments to see who can kill the most of them.

This is a moment in time when it's really not a great time to be a shark or tuna fish. Tuna fish, that nobody really used to eat, but now they are pricey creatures. The last one sold of a tuna fish, a blue-fin tuna, in the Tokyo fish market in December of this year, the highest price that I know about for a single fish was $746,000 for one fish. Because we now see their numbers diminishing and as their numbers diminish, the price goes up. So, it's not a great time to be a tuna, or a turtle, or even a whale,
even though it’s better now than it was in the middle of the 20th century or certainly the middle of the 19th, or 18th, or even the 17th century because it took that long, until the middle of the 20th century, for us humans to realize that either there would be whales in the future, or there would not be whales, depending on what we do or what we do not do.

We managed to draw them down to close to extinction on many fronts, many species, and their numbers look promising. Most of them are showing encouraging signs of recovery now that, for the most part, we have stopped killing them outright, although it is true that in some nations in the world, Iceland, Norway, and Japan, whales are still taken and sold as commodities. For the most part, we’ve come to see other values. Yes, they probably taste good, but at the same time, there are other things that we can do with whales, with fish, with turtles that now we know.

Now we have seen what we can do to the ocean in the negative way. About half of the coral reefs that were around when I was a child that I used to explore in the Florida Keys and out at Pulley Ridge, 100 miles offshore from the coast right here, they have really taken a hit on our watch. Half are either gone or they’re in a state of great decline.

Good news, we still have some coral reefs out there. Your job, your challenge, your opportunity is to look ahead and say, OK, they’re not all gone yet; there is still a chance to do something, not just for the big conspicuous things, but what about the little guys, the Cocalith phorids, the small creatures, the plankton that generates most of the oxygen, does the heavy lifting about grabbing carbon out of the atmosphere, what are we going to do about them now that we know. Now that we know how good fish taste and also know the destructive actions that are taking place to obtain those wild creatures from the sea, we can change our ways. We can alter the way we treat wildlife in the sea just as we have wildlife on the land. We can look with respect of what it has taken to have the gift of knowledge.

Go dive in and realize how lucky you are to be a human, somewhere high in the sky. Go get in touch with nature. Go find a way in your lifetime to make it shrinking. If you haven’t yet made a trip to the far North or the far South, find a way in your lifetime to make it happen. Go visit the poles. Go visit the deep sea. Go somewhere high in the sky. Go get in touch with nature. Go dive in and realize how lucky you are to be a human, to have the gift of knowledge.

There are creatures on the planet who are at least as old as humans. Here is one, an albatross I met in January of this year halfway across the Pacific, Midway Island. She is admiring her most recent egg. She was born hatched, if you will, the year I graduated from Clearwater High School, 1952. Clearwater had clear water in 1952. She is admiring her most recent egg. She was born halfway across the Pacific, Midway Island. She is admir –

We need to look at the world with care, and you, certainly, in the last two years have seen what happens if we’re somewhat careless and allow things to happen to our life-support system, the ocean, that puts not just the ocean, and turtles, and marshes, and birds at risk, it puts us at risk, puts polar bears at risk, because when you think about the consequences of burning those fossil fuels and warming the planet, yes, there have been great stages in the past, but nothing quite like what we are now experiencing. Bad news for polar bears, not a great time to be one. Maybe it’s not a great time to be an investor in Florida real estate, although I have a home in the Red Zone, that area within six meters of sea level rise which will happen. Honestly, sooner or later, it will happen.

We used to think, when I was a kid, oh yeah, ice ages come, ice ages go, and 10,000 years in the future, Florida will be much smaller than it is today because the sea level has been rising since the height of the last ice age.

But you are armed with knowledge. You know what we couldn’t know 50 years ago that the pace is picking up, and we also have the power to take actions that can stabilize, slow the trends, maintain an enduring place for us within the natural systems that sustain us.

Not a good time to be a penguin. Their world is shrinking. If you haven’t yet made a trip to the far North or the far South, find a way in your lifetime to make it happen. Go visit the poles. Go visit the deep sea. Go somewhere high in the sky. Go get in touch with nature. Go dive in and realize how lucky you are to be a human, to have the gift of knowledge.

I wonder about this albatross. Her name is Wisdom. She has to travel thousands of miles to get food to feed her chicks. She has seen changes that I have seen in my lifetime, but she doesn’t know why the world has changed and even if she knew, wouldn’t know what to do about it. You do know why the world is changing, and you do know what to do about it.

This is a great time to be a human being, to fix the problems of those who have both given us the gifts of knowing from the past and also the problems that we have inherited because we didn’t know the problems that plastics could cause in the ocean. We didn’t know that what we put in the air would make any difference. We didn’t know that we could take too many fish, or whales, or seals, or anything else out of the ocean, but now we know. Now you know, and that’s the greatest gift of all. That’s what this college has given you, the gift of knowledge.
You might not care, even if you know, but you can't care if you don't know. A predecessor didn't know that we could so alter the nature of nature that it could put our future at risk, but here's the good news. Those of you who know and care are out there making a difference, like these kids, like you, taking your time to go turn things around, retrieving stuff, junk that we've put into the ocean, and disposing of it properly.

There's still hope for turtles. We still have five percent of them out there on the land and in the sea, variations on the theme of turtledom.

There is still hope for whales, still hope for wale sharks. Now, instead of just killing sharks, either as the imagined enemy or something to eat or turned into products of various sorts, people are now enjoying getting in the water and admiring sharks. I'm one of them. If you haven't done it, go for it. The Gulf of Mexico still has sharks, lots of them. In fact, this image was taken 100 miles offshore from Fourchon right at the height of the spill of 2010. There were more than 100 whale sharks gathered eating the eggs of little tunas.

Reasons for hope, these kids in Hong Kong last summer celebrating sharks, taking the pledge that they will take care of sharks; they won't kill them, they won't eat shark fin soup.

Kids wearing T-shirts celebrating plankton, knowing this is where most of the oxygen comes from.

I celebrate this creature even though they are all gone, at least the cousin of this creature is gone. This is a monk seal from the Hawaiian Islands. There are still about 1,000 of them remaining on the planet. There are still fewer than that remaining in the Mediterranean Sea, all relatives of three species, called the monk seal, related. But the Gulf of Mexico once had these creatures.

Can you imagine seals swimming on the beach out here, or Miami Beach, or as far north as Galveston? 1952, the year I graduated high school, was when the last one was seen.

Columbus saw plenty of them. Ponce de Leon saw plenty of them. Now, they're gone. So, we've lost a chance with these little animals that we could have had, had we known 100- years, 50 years, or 50 years even, we needed to do something that we now have the power to achieve, that you have the power to do going forward.

We can't go back. We can't restore what has been lost. But, we can make things better than they are now that we know. You can hold the world in your hands on your desktop, your laptop. You can Google-earth. You can dive into the ocean in ways that no one who preceded this time could do it. You, literally, hold the world in your hands. This is the time, and I can't wait to see what you're going to do next.

Thank you.

You're Not Special

EVERYONE IS

Commencement Address by DAVID McCULLOUGH JR., Teacher, Wellesley High School
Delivered at Wellesley High School, Wellesley, Mass., June 1, 2012

Dr. Wong, Dr. Keough, Mrs. Novogroski, Ms. Curran, members of the board of education, family and friends of the graduates, ladies and gentlemen of the Wellesley High School class of 2012, for the privilege of speaking to you this afternoon, I am honored and grateful. Thank you.

So here we are … commencement … life's great forward-looking ceremony. And don't say, “What about weddings?” Weddings are one-sided and insufficiently effective. Weddings are bride-centric pageantry. Other than conceding to a list of unreasonable demands, the groom just stands there. No stately, hey-everybody-look-at-me procession. No being given away. No identity-changing pronouncement. And can you imagine a television show dedicated to watching guys try on tuxedos? Their fathers sitting there misty-eyed with joy and disbelief, their brothers lurking in the corner muttering with envy. Left to men, weddings would be, after limits-testing procrastination, spontaneous, almost inadvertent … during half-time … on the way to the refrigerator. And then there's the frequency of failure: statistics tell us half of you will get divorced. A winning percentage like that'll get you last place in the American League East. The Baltimore Orioles do better than weddings.

But this ceremony … commencement … a commencement works every time. From this day forward … truly … in sickness and in health, through financial fiascos, through midlife crises and passably attractive sales reps at trade shows in Cincinnati, (parents get that) through diminishing tolerance for annoyingness, through every difference, irreconcilable and otherwise, you will stay forever graduated from high school, you and your diploma as one, 'til death do you part.

No, commencement is life's great ceremonial beginning, with its own attendant and highly appropriate symbolism. Fitting, for example, for this auspicious rite of passage, is where we find ourselves this afternoon, the venue. Normally, I avoid clichés like the plague,
wouldn’t touch them with a ten-foot pole, but here we are on a literal level playing field. That matters. That says something. And your ceremonial costume … shapeless, uniform, one-size-fits-all. Whether male or female, tall or short, scholar or slacker, spray-tanned prom queen or intergalactic X-Box assassin, each of you is dressed, you’ll notice, exactly the same. And your diploma … but for your name, exactly the same.

All of this is as it should be, because none of you is special. You’re not special. You are not exceptional.

Contrary to what your U9 soccer trophy suggests, your glowing 7th grade report card, despite every assurance of a certain corpulent purple dinosaur, that nice Mister Rogers and your batty Aunt Sylvia, no matter how often your maternal caped crusader has swooped in to save you … you’re nothing special.

Yes, you’ve been pampered, cosseted, doted upon, helmed, bubble-wrapped. Yes, capable adults with other things to do have held you, kissed you, fed you, wiped your mouth, wiped your bottom, trained you, taught you, tutored you, coached you, listened to you, counseled you, encouraged you, consoled you and encouraged you again. You’ve been nudged, cajoled, wheedled and implored. You’ve been fawned over and called sweetie pie. Yes, you have. And, certainly, we’ve been to your games, your plays, your recitals, your science fairs. Absolutely, smiles ignite when you walk into a room, and hundreds gasp with delight at your every tweet. Why, maybe you’ve even had your picture in the Townsman. And now you’ve conquered high school… and, indisputably, here we all have gathered for you, the pride and joy of this fine community, the first to emerge from that magnificent new building …

But do not get the idea you’re anything special. Because you’re not.

The empirical evidence is everywhere, numbers even an English teacher can’t ignore. Newton, Natick, Nee … I am allowed to say Needham, yes? … that has to be two thousand high school graduates right there, give or take, and that’s just the neighborhood N’s. Across the country no fewer than 3.2 million seniors are graduating about from high school, and no fewer than 3.2 million seniors are graduating about from that magnificent new building …

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specious glitter of materialism, the narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction. Be worthy of your advantages.

And read … read all the time … read as a matter of principle, as a matter of self-respect. Read as a nourishing staple of life. Develop and protect a moral sensibility and demonstrate the character to apply it. Dream big. Work hard. Think for yourself. Love everything you love, everyone you love, with all your might. And do so, please, with a sense of urgency, for every tick of the clock subtracts from fewer and fewer; and as surely as there are commencements there are cessations, and you’ll be in no condition to enjoy the ceremony attendant to that eventuality no matter how delightful the afternoon.

The fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life, is an achievement, not something that will fall into your lap because you’re a nice person or mommy ordered it from the caterer. You’ll note the founding fathers took pains to secure your inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—quite an active verb, “pursuit”—which leaves, I should think, little time for lying around watching parrots roller skate on Youtube.

The first President Roosevelt, the old rough rider, advocated the strenuous life. Mr. Thoreau wanted to drive life into a corner, to live deep and suck out all the marrow. The poet Mary Oliver tells us to row, row into the swirl and roil. Locally, someone … I—I forget who … from time to time encourages young scholars to carpe the heck out of the diem. The point is the same: get busy, have at it.

Don’t wait for inspiration or passion to find you. Get up, get out, explore, find it yourself, and grab hold with both hands. Now, before you dash off and get your YOLO tattoo, ah let me point out the illogic of that trendy little expression—because you can and should live not merely once, but every day of your life.

Rather than You Only Live Once, it should be You Live Only Once … but because YLOO doesn’t have the same ring, we shrug and decide it doesn’t matter.

None of this day-seizing, though, this YLOOing, should be interpreted as license for self-indulgence. Like accolades ought to be, the fulfilled life is a consequence, ah a gratifying byproduct. It’s what happens when you’re thinking about more important things.

Climb the mountain not to plant your flag, but to embrace the challenge, enjoy the air and behold the view. Climb it so you can see the world, not so the world can see you. Go to Paris to be in Paris, not to cross it off your list and congratulate yourself for being worldly. Exercise free will and creative, independent thought not for the satisfactions they will bring you, but for the good they will do others, the rest of the 6.8 billion—and those who will follow them. And then you too will discover the great and curious truth of the human experience is that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself. The sweetest joys of life, then, come only with the recognition that you’re not special.

Because everyone is.

Congratulations. Good luck. Make for yourselves, please, for your sake and for ours, extraordinary lives.◆

Make Good Art

DO THE STUFF THAT ONLY YOU CAN DO

Commencement Address by NEIL GAIMAN, Writer
Delivered at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, Pa., May 17, 2012

I never really expected to find myself giving advice to people graduating from an establishment of higher education. I never graduated from any such establishment. I never even started at one. I escaped from school as soon as I could, when the prospect of four more years of enforced learning before I’d become the writer I wanted to be was stifling.

I got out into the world, I wrote, and I became a better writer the more I wrote, and I wrote some more, and nobody ever seemed to mind that I was making it up as I went along, they just read what I wrote and they paid for it, or they didn’t, and often they commissioned me to write something else for them.

Which has left me with a healthy respect and fondness for higher education that those of my friends and family, who attended Universities, were cured of long ago.

Looking back, I’ve had a remarkable ride. I’m not sure I can call it a career, because a career implies that I had some kind of career plan, and I never did. The nearest thing I had was a list I made when I was 15 of everything I wanted to do: to write an adult novel, a children’s book, a comic, a movie, record an audiobook, write an episode of Doctor Who… and so on. I didn’t have a career. I just did the next thing on the list.

So I thought I’d tell you everything I wish I’d known starting out, and a few things that, looking back on it, I suppose that I did know. And that I would also give you the best piece of advice I’d ever got, which I completely failed to follow.

First of all: When you start out on a career in the arts you have no idea what you are doing.

This is great. People who know what they are doing
know the rules, and know what is possible and impossible. You do not. And you should not. The rules on what is possible and impossible in the arts were made by people who had not tested the bounds of the possible by going beyond them. And you can.

If you don't know it's impossible it's easier to do. And because nobody's done it before, they haven't made up rules to stop anyone doing that again, yet.

**Secondly**, if you have an idea of what you want to make, what you were put here to do, then just go and do that.

And that's much harder than it sounds and, sometimes in the end, so much easier than you might imagine. Because normally, there are things you have to do before you can get to the place you want to be. I wanted to write comics and novels and stories and films, so I became a journalist, because journalists are allowed to ask questions, and to simply go and find out how the world works, and besides, to do those things I needed to write and to write well, and I was being paid to learn how to write economically, crisply, sometimes under adverse conditions, and on time.

Sometimes the way to do what you hope to do will be clear cut, and sometimes it will be almost impossible to decide whether or not you are doing the correct thing, because you'll have to balance your goals and hopes with feeding yourself, paying debts, finding work, settling for what you can get.

Something that worked for me was imagining that where I wanted to be—an author, primarily of fiction, making good books, making good comics and supporting myself through my words—was a mountain. A distant mountain. My goal.

And I knew that as long as I kept walking towards the mountain I would be all right. And when I truly was not sure what to do, I could stop, and think about whether it was taking me towards or away from the mountain. I said no to editorial jobs on magazines, proper jobs that would have paid proper money because I knew that, attractive though they were, for me they would have been walking away from the mountain. And if those job offers had come along earlier I might have taken them, because they still would have been closer to the mountain than I was at the time.

I learned to write by writing. I tended to do anything as long as it felt like an adventure, and to stop when it felt like work, which meant that life did not feel like work.

**Thirdly**, when you start off, you have to deal with the problems of failure. You need to be thickskinned, to learn that not every project will survive. A freelance life, a life in the arts, is sometimes like putting messages in bottles, on a desert island, and hoping that someone will find one of your bottles and open it and read it, and put something in a bottle that will wash its way back to you: appreciation, or a commission, or money, or love. And you have to accept that you may put out a hundred things for every bottle that winds up coming back.

The problems of failure are problems of discouragement, of hopelessness, of hunger. You want everything to happen and you want it now, and things go wrong. My first book—a piece of journalism I had done for the money, and which had already bought me an electric typewriter from the advance—should have been a bestseller. It should have paid me a lot of money. If the publisher hadn't gone into involuntary liquidation between the first print run selling out and the second printing, and before any royalties could be paid, it would have done.

And I shrugged, and I still had my electric typewriter and enough money to pay the rent for a couple of months, and I decided that I would do my best in future not to write books just for the money. If you didn't get the money, then you didn't have anything. If I did work I was proud of, and I didn't get the money, at least I'd have the work.

Every now and again, I forget that rule, and whenever I do, the universe kicks me hard and reminds me. I don't know that it's an issue for anybody but me, but it's true that nothing I did where the only reason for doing it was the money was ever worth it, except as bitter experience.

The first problem of any kind of even limited success is the unshakable conviction that you are getting away with something, and that any moment now they will discover you. It's Imposter Syndrome, something my wife Amanda christened the Fraud Police.

In my case, I was convinced that there would be a knock on the door, and a man with a clipboard (I don't know why he carried a clipboard, in my head, but he did) would be there, to tell me it was all over, and they had caught up with me, and now I would have to go and get a real job, one that didn't consist of making things up and writing them down, and reading books I wanted to read. And then I would go away quietly and get the kind of job where you don't have to make things up any more.

The problems of success are hard.

The problems of success can be harder, because nobody warns you about them.

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The problems of success. They're real, and with luck you'll experience them. The point where you stop saying yes to everything, because now the bottles you threw in the ocean are all coming back, and have to learn to say no.

I watched my peers, and my friends, and the ones who were older than me and watch how miserable some of them were: I'd listen to them telling me that they couldn't envisage a world where they did what they had always wanted to do any more, because now they had to earn a certain amount every month just to keep where they were. They couldn't go and do the things that mattered, and that they had really wanted to do; and that seemed
as a big a tragedy as any problem of failure.

And after that, the biggest problem of success is that the world conspires to stop you doing the thing that you do, because you are successful. There was a day when I looked up and realised that I had become someone who professionally replied to email, and who wrote as a hobby. I started answering fewer emails, and was relieved to find I was writing much more.

**Fourthly**, I hope you’ll make mistakes. If you’re making mistakes, it means you’re out there doing something. And the mistakes in themselves can be useful. I once misspelled Caroline, in a letter, transposing the A and the O, and I thought, “Coraline looks like a real name…”

And remember that whatever discipline you are in, whether you are a musician or a photographer, a fine artist or a cartoonist, a writer, a dancer, a designer, whatever you do you have one thing that’s unique. You have the ability to make art.

And for me, and for so many of the people I have known, that’s been a lifesaver. The ultimate lifesaver. It gets you through good times and it gets you through the other ones.

Life is sometimes hard. Things go wrong, in life and in love and in business and in friendship and in health and in all the other ways that life can go wrong. And when things get tough, this is what you should do.

Make good art.

I’m serious. Husband runs off with a politician? Make good art. Leg crushed and then eaten by mutated boa constrictor? Make good art. IRS on your trail? Make good art. Cat exploded? Make good art. Somebody on the Internet thinks what you do is stupid or evil or it’s all been done before? Make good art. Probably things will work out somehow, and eventually time will take the sting away, but that doesn’t matter. Do what only you do best. Make good art.

Make it on the good days too.

And **Fifthly**, while you are at it, make your art. Do the stuff that only you can do.

The urge, starting out, is to copy. And that’s not a bad thing. Most of us only find our own voices after we’ve sounded like a lot of other people. But the one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision. So write and draw and build and play and dance and live as only you can.

The moment that you feel that, just possibly, you’re walking down the street naked, exposing too much of your heart and your mind and what exists on the inside, showing too much of yourself. That’s the moment you may be starting to get it right.

The things I’ve done that worked the best were the things I was the least certain about, the stories where I was sure they would either work, or more likely be the kinds of embarrassing failures people would gather together and talk about until the end of time. They always had that in common: looking back at them, people explain why they were inevitable successes. While I was doing them, I had no idea.

I still don’t. And where would be the fun in making something you knew was going to work?

And sometimes the things I did really didn’t work. There are stories of mine that have never been reprinted. Some of them never even left the house. But I learned as much from them as I did from the things that worked.

**Sixthly**, I will pass on some secret freelancer knowledge. Secret knowledge is always good. And it is useful for anyone who ever plans to create art for other people, to enter a freelance world of any kind. I learned it in comics, but it applies to other fields too. And it’s this:

People get hired because, somehow, they get hired. In my case I did something which these days would be easy to check, and would get me into trouble, and when I started out, in those pre-internet days, seemed like a sensible career strategy: when I was asked by editors who I’d worked for, I lied. I listed a handful of magazines that sounded likely, and I sounded confident, and I got jobs. I then made it a point of honour to have written something for each of the magazines I’d listed to get that first job, so that I hadn’t actually lied, I’d just been chronologically challenged… You get work however you get work.

People keep working, in a freelance world, and more and more of today’s world is freelance, because their work is good, and because they are easy to get along with, and because they deliver the work on time. And you don’t even need all three. Two out of three is fine. People will tolerate how unpleasant you are if your work is good and you deliver it on time. They’ll forgive the lateness of the work if it’s good, and if they like you. And you don’t have to be as good as the others if you’re on time and it’s always a pleasure to hear from you.

When I agreed to give this address, I started trying to think what the best advice I’d been given over the years was.

And it came from Stephen King twenty years ago, at the height of the success of Sandman. I was writing a comic that people loved and were taking seriously. King had liked Sandman and my novel with Terry Pratchett, Good Omens, and he saw the madness, the long signing lines, all that, and his advice was this:

“This is really great. You should enjoy it.”

And I didn’t. Best advice I got that I ignored. Instead I worried about it. I worried about the next deadline, the next idea, the next story. There wasn’t a moment for the next fourteen or fifteen years that I wasn’t writing something in my head, or wondering about it. And I didn’t stop and look around and go, this is really fun. I wish I’d enjoyed it more. It’s been an amazing ride. But there were parts of the ride I missed, because I was too worried about things going wrong, about what came next, to enjoy the bit I was on.

That was the hardest lesson for me, I think: to let go
and enjoy the ride, because the ride takes you to some remarkable and unexpected places.

And here, on this platform, today, is one of those places. (I am enjoying myself immensely.)

To all today's graduates: I wish you luck. Luck is useful. Often you will discover that the harder you work, and the more wisely you work, the luckier you get. But there is luck, and it helps.

We're in a transitional world right now, if you're in any kind of artistic field, because the nature of distribution is changing, the models by which creators got their work out into the world, and got to keep a roof over their heads and buy sandwiches while they did that, are all changing. I've talked to people at the top of the food chain in publishing, in bookselling, in all those areas, and nobody knows what the landscape will look like two years from now, let alone a decade away. The distribution channels that people had built over the last century or so are in flux for print, for visual artists, for musicians, for creative people of all kinds.

Which is, on the one hand, intimidating, and on the other, immensely liberating. The rules, the assumptions, the now-we're-supposed-to's of how you get your work seen, and what you do then, are breaking down. The gatekeepers are leaving their gates. You can be as creative as you need to be to get your work seen. YouTube and the web (and whatever comes after YouTube and the web) can give you more people watching than television ever did. The old rules are crumbling and nobody knows what the new rules are.

So make up your own rules.

Someone asked me recently how to do something she thought was going to be difficult, in this case recording an audio book, and I suggested she pretend that she was someone who could do it. Not pretend to do it, but pretend she was someone who could. She put up a notice to this effect on the studio wall, and she said it helped.

So be wise, because the world needs more wisdom, and if you cannot be wise, pretend to be someone who is wise, and then just behave like they would.

And now go, and make interesting mistakes, make amazing mistakes, make glorious and fantastic mistakes. Break rules. Leave the world more interesting for your being here. Make good art.

Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

ABOVE EVERYTHING ELSE, LOVE. JUST LOVE.

Commencement Address by RAYMOND BARFIELD, Pediatric Oncologist
Delivered at Messiah College, Grantham, Pa., May 12, 2012

Thank you, President Phipps, members of the faculty, proud parents and grandparents, restless siblings, devoted friends and anyone else who snuck in: congratulations to all of you. But especially, congratulations to the Class of 2012. Thanks be to God that Graduation day has finally arrived.

I would never have guessed 25 years ago, when I was a janitor at Wolf Trap Farm Park right outside DC, that I would be standing in front of you today. A few weeks ago I was in Oxford, England, and I was staying in CS Lewis' old home, the Kilns. I was working on this talk in the very room in which he died. One evening while I was eating dinner with a few visiting guests in Lewis' dining room, we were introducing ourselves and the woman sitting across from me said, 'Hi, my name is Jessica and I'm a student at Messiah college.' I've discovered that Messiah students are everywhere.

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Later that evening I asked myself, 'How is it that my life has come to a place where I'm staying in CS Lewis' house and writing a commencement speech for the class of 2012 graduating from one of the finest and most unique colleges in the country?' If my own path has taught me anything well we plan, life has a way of making us grow by disrupting our plans. And this can be frightening, it can feel like failure, it can break our hearts. But you can't begin to guess where experiences of fear, failure or heartbreak will take you next. In fact, as I sat in CS Lewis' bedroom thinking about how I got here, I realized that I'm standing before you because my girlfriend broke up with me in 1986: more about that in a moment.

I think I'm probably the main thing standing between you and your diploma, so I'm only going to talk long enough to remind you of one true thing that has mattered in my life: you've heard it many times before, but listen one more time—perfect love casts out fear.

We all experience fear. I guarantee you that your parents have experienced fear multiple times during your time at Messiah—starting the moment they drove away from unloading your stuff at the dormitory and saw their kid waving in the rear-view mirror, to the day you announced plans to go to Uganda to participate in intercultural ministry, or to go to Oxford University to study philosophy and economics. And every student at this ceremony is about to overcome fear for something worthwhile, because I know every one of you is afraid
you’re going to trip as you walk across the stage to get your well-earned diploma.

We live in a culture of fear: fears about high unemployment, fears about financial instability, fears about terrorism, fears about war. We hear about fear through television, radio, newspapers and airport loudspeakers.

But there is another message that comes from a place far more reliable than today’s headlines, reminding us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God. Not death, not life, not angels, not demons. Not 9/11, not recession, not a breakup with a girlfriend or boyfriend. Nothing. Because of that, even when we’re afraid, we can risk living courageously, joyfully. And when we overcome challenges we can rightly celebrate our victories—such as winning the baseball conference championship for the second year in a row.

I have learned the most about living in the face of fear from my favorite teachers—the children with cancer I care for. This past Monday I had to tell a strong, courageous, life-loving 19 year old young man that I cannot cure his cancer—if it’s okay with you I’m dedicating this talk to him. His name is Skyler. After some tears and some hugs, and believe or not some laughter, he said, “Give me a couple of days and I’ll tell you what I need.”

As I speak to you here he’s planning how to most fully live the life that is left to him—and I have no doubt that he will live it fully.

That kid knows God’s love. He makes me want to eat up the life and love I meet in every precious day, and let go of every whining, fretful worry I hold onto, because he reminds me that even in this moment, I am experiencing gifts from God—breathing, seeing, being with you during your celebration. He reminds me to be grateful today for the gifts of praying, creating, and diving into the joy of every sunrise, every sunset, every glance at the faces of the people I adore. That young man is one of my many teachers and he makes me want to live life fully, not bound by fear and frustration.

I love the kids I care for. But if I had not overcome my fear of the demands of medical school I would never have met these kids. If I had not declined my safe spot in graduate school at Columbia University to wander around Europe for a year with no job and little money, I would never have met the surgeon in Germany who inspired me to go to medical school. And I would never have met these kids. If I had not declined my safe spot in graduate school at Columbia University to wander around Europe for a year with no job and little money, I would never have met these kids.

As you go after your dream, there will almost certainly be unexpected detours. En route this day I have been a fry cook, a dishwasher, an apple packer, and a waiter. And as I mentioned my first job after college was as a janitor—so if you haven’t landed your dream job as of today, don’t worry, you’re in good company. I actually enjoyed most of those jobs because of the people I met. But there are times when our jobs can feel tedious and insignificant. In those times remember this: Christians measure success differently than the world does, because it’s not just the big game-changing decisions that shape a life—it’s the small, daily responses to everything that comes our way, including heartbreak, tedium, failure and frustration.

Here is one of my personal small frustrations at work: slow drivers in the parking garage when I’m late for a meeting. My wife will tell you I drive too fast—way too fast. I suppose everyone is entitled to their opinion. But I learned an important lesson about my petty frustration from a beautiful young woman with cystic fibrosis. Tiffany has had two lung transplants. One day I made the mistake of mentioning the slow garage drivers to Tiffany and, not being one to pull punches, she got up in my face and said, ‘When I was told that I was rejecting my first lung transplant I was so numb with terror and grief that I could hardly find my way through the hospital. Do you know anything about what the person driving in front of you has to face that day? Maybe that’s as fast as they can go in their grief.’

She was right. STOP it. Slow down. Love. You have no idea what another person might be facing in their life.

Love the frantic grocery store clerk who can’t find the price of your vegetables while irritated, exhausted people stare at her from the long checkout line. Love the elderly person in front of you who is slowly trying to get the day’s tasks done despite the heavy sorrow of losing a spouse. Love the young mother with three kids who can’t seem to stop fussing at them—maybe she is doing everything alone. Just love them. Love can transform even the most mundane day, love can transform you, love can overcome fear and frustration. There’s no better way into the richness of a truly successful life measured by something besides the number that shows up at the bottom of our tax forms.

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No one using the world’s standard for success is likely to say that ending up on a cross, naked in front your friends and family and strangers counts as a successful life. It’s easy enough to see why even the frightened disciples who scattered on Good Friday thought the same thing. But we know that Friday was not the end of the story—we know that the meaning of the Lord’s suffering broke through on Sunday when the terror of death was met with the victory of his resurrection. When things seem hopeless and scary, remember that. Never, never, never forget in the darkness what you have seen in the light.

Now, I was completely surprised when I was asked to give this commencement speech to you. When I was working as a janitor at that outdoor theater, I would never have guessed that 25 years later I would be standing in front of you. Twenty five years from now you may be giving this talk to the graduating class of 2037. What do you hope you’ll be able to say if that happens? Here’s my hope for you: I hope you can say that even when you were afraid, you were willing to risk a lot to follow the true dream that God placed in your heart. I hope you are able to tell them that you had the courage to think ‘big’, but that as a Christian you came to understand in a deeper way what ‘big’ means: not necessarily getting a big check, or having a big office, or doing a big job—but rather, living a life of faithfulness measured more by the way you love than by the car you drive. And I hope you are able to say that you have learned to forgive others, and that you have learned to forgive yourself—you’ll need that.

As a frequently scared southern boy trying to live life in a way that honors my young patients who are trying to live their short lives in the face of terror, I can tell you by way of conclusion—and yes, I am almost done—that if fear guides your decisions you might miss some of the most important and valuable experiences in your life. I am a living example right now of facing fear for the sake of something that matters, and here is why. Being with you today is one of the greatest honors of my life. But let me tell you one of my own personal fears: I have horrible stage fright. I’m here because I overcame my fear and took a risk for you. So do something for me: overcome yours. And above everything else, love. Love. Just love.

Class of 2012, congratulations, and may God bless you in abundant, surprising, and sometimes scary ways.

Thank you. ◆
they would be responsible when they left the safe space of the classroom, the quad, or the dorm. Racism, sexism, violence against others….the students became more and more frustrated by the way neighbors were treating neighbors. And they began to ask me: “Dr. R, what do we do?” Well, to be honest, I was stumped. I mean, I’m an English professor. I deal with words: “What do we say?” “What do we write?” These were questions I could answer, but, “what do we do?” frankly, I didn’t know.

Now, those of you who know me well, know that I take teaching very seriously. I lie awake at night wondering how best to present challenging material, thinking of creative projects with which to torment….I mean engage my students. And, this question: “What do we do?” This question weighed heavily on my mind; this question was keeping me awake night after night, after night.

And then it came time for me to teach the fierce, lyrical, heart-stopping poetry of Audre Lorde. While I was preparing for class, I came upon a line I had read before and more or less dismissed, but this time, it arrested me; she wrote:

“Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.”

This statement about the power of language to do, to make change, to rearrange our relationship with the very universe, illuminated a path for me.

I began thinking about a time when I was a graduate student working on my dissertation. I was one of the few married grad students and had very recently given birth to my first child, Dylan. And I was really, really struggling. I felt like I was torn into two people, the graduate-student-future-professor and the mommy. The truth is I could see no way to integrate these pieces. So, I consulted my mentor, professor, and friend Susan Lanser, who is one of the most brilliant, well-known feminist scholars in the field and a wonderful mother and grandmother. I was whining: “There doesn’t seem to be any space to be both a mother and a professor.” “The academy is not a friendly place for families and I don’t see it changing anytime soon.” And then I said: “What should I do?”

Well, Sue looked at me and said: “Put an alternative discourse into circulation … Put an alternative discourse into circulation.”

“Put an alternative discourse into circulation?” I thought, “What kind of advice is that?”

Don’t get me wrong, I knew what Sue was talking about, that she was referring to the notion that language, stories, discourse in all forms has the power to make and change the reality in which we live. I had read the theorists J.L. Austin and Michel Foucault; I understood the claim that we can literally “do things with words”; and theoretically, I even believed it. But when it came to changing the state of academia, come on, how much of a difference could it really make? And so, I smiled politely, thanked Sue for her help and moved on with my life.

Five years later, as I prepared to teach Audre Lorde’s poetry to my class, this advice came to my mind. And suddenly, I understood exactly what Sue meant. And so, when I went into class the next day to face the question that had been haunting me, I told the students the story I just told you; I told them to “put an alternative discourse into circulation.” And you know, they took me seriously. They had learned of the power of discourse from the very writers we were studying; they knew how Frederick Douglass helped to end slavery with his narrative; how Martin Luther King Jr. gained civil rights through his speeches; how Ida B. Wells publicized racial violence through her journalism, and my students decided to follow these examples. They organized a gathering on the quad as a unified community rally against racism; they read poems and told their stories; and I believe they changed their world. On that day, I learned what “putting an alternative discourse into circulation” really means. I learned how to “do things with words.”

Over the next few years when my students would ask: “but what should we do?” I would tell them: “Put an alternative discourse into circulation.” And to my surprise they also took me seriously, changing the world with words, writing editorials to the newspaper, starting an organization to discuss women’s issues on campus. They even began campaigning to bring a women’s center to our campus.

Ultimately, though, despite all the evidence my students had provided me, I think I still doubted the power of discourse, because several years later when Teddi Hermes and Mary Auker approached me, telling me they wanted to continue the campaign for a women’s center on campus, I told them not to get their hopes up. “I will help you, but don’t get your hopes up.” But, they did get their hopes up. And taking seriously the power of discourse to make change, they wrote proposals, made petitions, and talked to anyone who would listen. They gathered others—Andrew Texter, Lisa Adamu, Rachel Beazley, Christa Levko, Marquis Bey, Erin Rider—others who also believed in the power of discourse, and using nothing but words, they created a Women’s Services and Gender Resource Center on the Lebanon Valley College campus.

Now, I don’t want you to think that using your words to make change is easy. Each student to whom I refer today was afraid to speak out, uncomfortable at the prospect of initiating a difficult or controversial dialogue; even I was afraid. But, then, I was reminded of President Stephen MacDonald’s inauguration speech. On that auspicious day, he spoke to us about the importance of discomfort in the learning process, he told us that the move “out of comfortable, settled places…and…into zones that don’t feel quite right, where [we] are not en-
tirely comfortable, where [we] have to renegotiate and reorient ourselves, where [we] must recalibrate [our] intellectual and social and moral gyroscopes,” that this is where real learning happens. I believe that by putting alternative discourses into circulation, by facing the discomfort that comes with the consequences of “using their words,” I believe our students have fulfilled President MacDonald’s vision.

These students are an inspiration to me, now especially, as I find myself distressed over the ways in which neighbors are treating neighbors, when I find myself asking: “What do I do?” Daily I am faced with a world saturated in discourse from innumerable sources. How can my voice possibly be heard over the din? And then I think of my students and how they actually do make change with their words.

The class of 1870 was certainly not facing a world as complicated as the world you are facing today. But, perhaps they were thinking as you may be thinking now: “But, what can I do?”; “How do I affect this big, complicated world in which I live”; “how do I make a mark when it seems impossible to do so”; “how can I create a world in which people truly treat one another as ‘neighbors’?” And I believe if I were speaking to them, I would offer the same advice I offer to you: Never underestimate the power of words, use your words to make change, circulate a discourse of kindness and acceptance, and your world will be an accepting and kind place to live.

“Put an alternative discourse into circulation.” ♦

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**Our Team Needs You**

**OUR TEAM OFFERS YOU CHALLENGE AND STRUGGLE ... AND A GOOD NIGHT’S SLEEP**

Commencement Address by GEOFFREY CANADA, President and CEO, Harlem Children’s Zone

Delivered at University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa., May 14, 2012

President Gutmann; Provost Price, Board of Trustees fellow honorees; and today’s graduates:

I’m honored and grateful for the invitation today.

I want to address my talk to the class of 2012. I want to acknowledge that this is a great moment for you, and it could be a great moment for our country. It is a great moment for you because you are graduating from Penn, one of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the country, having demonstrated by your hard work and perseverance, the mastery of a chosen field of study, qualifying you for a baccalaureate or graduate degree. It could be a great moment for our country if you decide to continue your pursuit of truth and enlightenment for the betterment of our society and not solely for the betterment of yourselves. For you are graduating at a time when our country is desperate for highly educated women and men who will fight to see through the veils of pure self-interest and half-truths, to search for what is truly moral and just.

You have spent your years here preparing and being prepared for the next set of challenges you will face. Indeed it is time to get into the game. What game? The game of life. A most serious game where the stakes are high. There are important choices to be made, and some people who choose wrong or make the wrong decisions, pay penalties that cripple their chances to succeed and reach their full potential. Some from the very moment of birth have the odds stacked so high against them that they are for all intents and purposes out of the game before they ever get in. But not you. You have met the challenges, overcome the obstacles, played the right hand, and now you are prepared to enter the game.

While you have been preparing here in Philadelphia, our country continues to grapple unsuccessfully with some very complex issues. And these complex issues hang over our heads today like a giant leaden weight, suspended by poor logic, faulty reasoning, and a degraded sense of ethics and morality. And I fear this leaden weight will in short order come crushing down on us, crushing all who can’t get out of the way.

What are these complex issues? One is poverty. As our country has achieved the status of the only remaining superpower on the face of the earth; as we are the richest country by far; we have accelerating rates of poverty in America which shames us as a nation. Today there are almost 45 million Americans on food stamps. There are 46 million Americans living in poverty and, even more frightening, there are there are over 20 million people living in extreme poverty. And poverty is not some benign condition that simply means you live a little worse off. Poverty is a killer. Researchers at the University of Michigan reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association that people who earn $10,000 per year or less die prematurely at three times the rate of those who earn more.

Another big issue we face is violence. America is a violent nation. We lead the western world in killing one another. None of our cherished institutions are sacrosanct. Today you hear of killings taking place in middle class schools, and even colleges and universities. But the brunt of the violence happens in our poorest inner-cities. A
black man in America is six times more likely to be killed than a white. We have more black men and boys killed in America today than all the lynchings that happened in the South during slavery.

There is also the issue I work on every day, education. The only way we can have real equality in America is if we have equal access to quality education. A poor education guarantees that you will be trapped in a life of poverty. And what a trap. The poor fill our jails and prisons. They stumble into our emergency rooms, wheezing, limping, with blood leaking from holes never intended by God or nature. They sit in waiting rooms hoping for a sympathetic ear, which can stave off homelessness, for another month, another week, another night. They stand on lines for food, or clothes, or whatever is being given away for free. Those who are poor in this country have the weight of poverty, violence, and lack of education hanging over their heads, straining to break free and crush them, maybe kill them. And when this weight crashes down, you will not be under it. You have been guaranteed, by the virtue of your education, safe passage. That is not to say that life will be easy, it won’t. Or you won’t have to struggle, you will. It is simply to acknowledge the obvious: those of you sitting here represent some of the best and brightest that our country has to offer. You have proven that you have what it takes to make it. My question to you is, do you care about those who won’t make it without real help?

You have been at Penn preparing to enter the big game of life and I have a most wondrous proposition for you. Come join our team. We’re losing. Yes, that’s right, we’re losing. There was a time when our team was winning. In the early seventies when I was at Bowdoin College, we were engaged in a “War on Poverty.” We fought for civil rights. The women’s liberation movement was the right thing to be involved with. The gay and lesbian rights movement was just beginning. We cared about the “other”: the scorned, the repressed, and the victimized. We were taught regardless if you were rich or poor, black or white, straight or gay, we owed it to our community, indeed our country, to strive to improve the life chances for all Americans “In order to form a more perfect union.”

Today, America is at a scary inflection point. Fear for the self is everywhere. We find it hard to care for the homeless when our mortgages are underwater. Seniors fear they can’t afford to retire, the middle class worry about going on food stamps. The poor have no job security, and too often no job. We divide ourselves by being part of the one percent, or the ninety-nine percent. The poor feel under attack, the middle class feel under attack, even the wealthy feel under attack.

Our team, the team that rallies us around the common good, that emphasizes self sacrifice and altruism, is losing. Their team, the team that says “every man for himself,” that makes us turn our back on the poor, feel no empathy, that feeds off of our vulnerabilities, our insecurities, our personal demons and prejudices, is winning. Their team is winning, our team is losing, and yet I offer you a wondrous opportunity, to join the losing team.

Now wait a minute, don’t all rush up here at once to sign up. I know this opportunity sounds too good to be true. Yes, you can join the losing team, but not quite yet. You might need more seasoning. You see, it’s not easy to be on the losing team, you have to be careful. If you are not properly prepared, you will become a loser. We don’t want losers. We want winners who aren’t afraid to play on the losing team. I dare say that your preparation here is a good beginning, but you need more experience. It’s tougher than you think out here. There is evil out here. I’m not talking about some mystical, theoretical, hypothetical construct. I’m talking about the real thing: pain and suffering, despair and death.

So our team needs you. The other team offers you money, power, luxury cars, vacation homes and stock options. Our team offers you challenge and struggle, a rich intellectual life, honesty as a guiding beacon and a good night’s sleep. Well to be honest their team offers a good night’s sleep also, but I just wanted to put it on our side. We seemed a little light on benefits.

But do you know why I offer you this opportunity to play on the losing side? Because in the end we are going to win. Because we are right. There is no way that our great democracy will continue to be a beacon to the free world if the rich hate the poor and the poor hate the rich. If our middle class becomes a thing that your children will read about in their history books because it no longer exists, our country will decline. If we continue to have neighborhoods that the affluent are dying to get into, and the poor live in neighborhoods where they are just dying, we will have lost the promise of America. So you see, I know an enlightened, educated group of men and women would not tolerate their country drifting towards this calamity. So in the end we will win.

I invite you to get in some practice and some seasoning, then come join our team. And please hurry because some of us have been in the game too long and we are weary. And yes, I must admit, even I get a little tired sometimes. After 30 years I've seen real progress in Harlem. We have over 700 of our students in college, and we are sending more than 350 high school seniors off to college this year. But in our own high school, Promise Academy, three of our students were shot. Thank God none of them were killed and they are all on their way to college, but still, why should any child in our country have to dodge bullets to get an education?

Yes, even I get weary. I have shed too many tears at too many funerals over the years. As my career winds down, I often look in the mirror and say “Why are my children so vulnerable? What more could I have done?” And in my most private times I must admit, once or twice I felt a
little sorry for myself, but it passed. You know why? Because of you. I believe in you. In the end I believe when you see the truth, you will know it and act on it. You are a wiser, a better generation.

Let me share something with you. I have this fantasy that plays out in my head. It's based on something that occasionally happened when I was a young boy in the South Bronx. I loved playing basketball and I was fearless. I just wasn't very good. However, I would convince my team that we could win no matter how talented the opponents were. And we would travel all over the South Bronx challenging other teams, invariably losing. But I had a brother named John, who was a great basketball player. John was just a year older than me but his skills in basketball put him in a class by himself. At 13 he was so good that he always played with the adults. Every now and then I would be playing and sweating under the sun on some blacktop court in some strange neighborhood in the South Bronx, my team would be losing, and lo and behold, I would see a most glorious sight; this tall, thin figure loping towards the court, coming from a game somewhere else where the competition was stiffer. And my heart would soar. And I would yell “Time out! Time out!”

This was always a tricky thing to do in a pickup game in the South Bronx. We didn’t have many rules and no one ever called time out. When questioned why I wanted a time out, I would answer, “I want to make a substitution.” This was unheard of, and there would always be arguing back and forth. What usually convinced the other team to allow the substitution was their finding out that I wanted to put my brother in. After seeing the way I played they figured, “Sure let his brother play; who cares.” And there would be jokes at my expense, and smirks and smiles. And John would come in, take over the game, and the smiles would disappear, and we would win.

My brother died in 1972 at the age of 21 during my sophomore year at Bowdoin College. There have been many times in my life that I have fought for the right cause, but a losing cause, and I have seen the smirks, and heard the snickers, and oh how I wished I could look up and see that tall, thin, frame walking to my rescue.

So I have been at this since 1975 and I’ve given as well as I’ve taken. But I can’t help but notice that the accumulated pain that I’ve experienced in this work has taken its toll on me. I’m not the man I was 20 years ago. I don’t know how long I can last on the front lines, but I know I won’t give up. I don’t feel sorry for myself, with my team, we’ve made real progress. But I’m a realist. One day, my time will have passed. I’ll go down fighting with my team because that is what we have decided to do.

But here’s my fantasy: One day, not too long from now, my team and I will be doing battle with the forces of darkness. They will be trying to reverse our progress, hurt our children, and destroy their souls. And it will suddenly hit me that I can do no more. The forces arrayed against us are too powerful, too mighty, defeat is at hand. I will not be afraid. I won’t bow my head. I’ll look my team right in the eye and say “If this be the last time, let’s go down fighting!” And suddenly from behind me, I will hear a mighty roar. I’ll turn around and see a most glorious sight; an army of better prepared, smarter, more powerful young warriors. They swarm past me headlong into the battle. The enemies of truth, of fairness, of liberty and equality, are overmatched and begin to retreat. And I grab several of those young warriors and I ask “Who are you? Where did you come from?” And they say, “Don’t you remember us, we are from Penn, Class of 2012.” And as I move to the back to let the next generation do what I could not, I realize that all is not lost. We will win. God bless the Penn graduating Class of 2012, and Godspeed. ♦
I had entered what was to become a dramatically expanding, vibrant, growing, emerging sector—business information. I did what I loved—journalism and business. And while doing what I loved, unbeknownst to me, I stumbled onto a formula even though it wasn’t at all as such on planned. I worked hard. I had hit a ceiling. I put a tape together and sent it to CNBC.

CNBC hired me as an on-air reporter in 1993. Now, I could not only write and produce my reports, but could present them as well. I then set up a meeting with my boss at CNN, Lou Dobbs, to tell him I was leaving. He replied: “Maria, you are making the biggest mistake of your career.” I understood what he was trying to convey to me. To him, CNN was the best place for me, but I had to follow my heart. I had to have the courage to leave and know that, if it didn’t work out, I would just get up, brush off my shoes and try again. Courage is critical in life.

I had been at CNBC one year when I became the first person to report live from the floor of the NYSE. It wasn’t all that easy in those years because there was a debate going on: Should the media be allowed on the floor in the first place? A woman and a reporter, no less, bringing cameras down to the floor in such a boys’ club? I persevered. I had a right to know how things worked. Today, I feel especially proud to be with CNBC—now, almost 20 years—having had a front row seat at some of the biggest events in business history. They included the individual investor explosion, globalization, the Internet age, a boom-and-bust in technology and banking; a boom-and-bust in housing, and the sovereign debt crisis in Europe. I spend my days interviewing the leading individuals on the front lines of these stories—heads of state, asset managers overseeing billions and trillions of dollars and CEOs across the world.

My journey, as I look back now, had a very specific formula even though it wasn’t at all as such on planned. That memorable NYU graduation day. I worked hard. I had the courage to believe in myself; and, most importantly, I did what I loved—journalism and business. And while doing what I loved, unbeknownst to me, I stumbled onto a vibrant, growing, emerging sector—business information. I had entered what was to become a dramatically expanding and changing industry.

I challenge you, the Class of 2012, to do what you love, to take money out of equation and simply follow your heart. You will be happy you did because that is where you are most likely to find your success and where you will also find happiness. The money and power, if that is what you want, will follow.

Today, everything appears to be changing again. Back then, I didn’t realize I was entering an industry that was in its infancy and about to take off. Business information exploded in all forms over the last two decades, from the empowerment of the individual investor to new media, blogs and websites. It is an information flow that is unstoppable.

And, these days, there is a new and different vibrancy at work. There is surely disruption, but disruptors are good—they force change. There is excitement in so many industries and there is a special kind of growth. Find that growth. Don’t worry about the naysayers telling you how bad things are in the economy. Take the lead and do what you love. Find the vibrancy and look for your role in it.

There is tremendous opportunity right now as a result of technology and population growth—notably, outside of the U.S. There is genuine opportunity in healthcare, as one example. We are living longer thanks to technology and biotech that have made major advances in diagnosis and treatment. That vibrancy in technology is enabling so much in so many industries. Population growth around the emerging world means significant new growth for finance and consumer goods as well as mining for raw materials. There are five billion mobile phones on the planet, only one billion of which are smartphones. Mobility is affording huge opportunities across business and industries.

There are, in fact, new businesses starting up every day. It has never been easier to launch your own company. Is it a bubble? Maybe; maybe not. Entrepreneurship is alive everywhere and people are innovating. Startup activity is surging from Silicon Valley to Brooklyn. New York right now is being re-wired to accommodate advances in science, engineering and healthcare. As we sit here, new, advanced radiology machines are being built, enabling us to see so much more and understand so much more about our bodies and our brains. As we sit here, doctors are even performing surgery with robotic technology. In short, technology, population growth and booming developing markets are creating extraordinary opportunities across industry and across the world.

Remember, too, that the U.S. does not own innovation. As we speak, the Russians are creating the Skolkovo Project, trying to become the next Silicon Valley. The Chinese are producing solar panels. We need to keep innovating all the time. Of course, there are also concerns—a weak job market, a sovereign debt crisis in Europe, a global slowdown from years past.

But also remember who you are and where you are...
Do Not Demand Final Answers

TO LIVE IS TO ACCEPT DOUBTS, UNCERTAINTIES, MYSTERIES, JUST AS THE POETS HAVE DONE FOR CENTURIES

Commencement Address by PHILIP LEVINE, U.S. Poet Laureate
Delivered at Bard College at Simon’s Rock, Great Barrington, Mass., May 18, 2012

Thank you for that incredibly generous and occasionally accurate introduction. Let me—I did hear a description of Simon’s Rock that reminded me of me; that it grew slowly and it got somewhere finally. What could I, as a poet, possibly say that would be of use to you today as you become college graduates? I, too, graduated college; in fact, more than once, and although I did not attend any of my graduations, the degrees have been of use to me. That is probably because I went into teaching where such documents are valued; so highly valued that athletic coaches systematically lie about possessing them. No, the degrees did not make me a better teacher; they got me a job as a college instructor and gradually I wormed my way up to the heights of a full professorship. I’ve been told in my younger days that lacking a doctorate, a degree I did not pursue, I would always be a second-class citizen in academia; a temp, an adjunct.

That proved to be untrue. Of course, the advice on the essential need of the doctorate came from men who already had their degrees. There’s a lot of useless advice out there, even in academia. Be careful who you listen to. Be doubly careful today.

If all of you wanted to be poets, I could give you a great deal of useful advice. The first thing I would probably tell you will be to think about that again. Would I ever seriously recommend it? Absolutely. Today, we live in a nation that is suffering from too much recklessness on the national and international levels. We are spending our wealth in the lives of our young and military and imperial exercises, and adventurers that have neither clear purpose nor conclusion, while at the same time, we caution our young to play it close to the vest. We advise them to carefully build their résumés, to master the arts of networking, and investing for their retirements 50

coming from. You have been working these past years perfecting your craft. Let’s not forget the unemployment rate for MBAs is much lower than the national average. You have what it takes and you will find your passion and fulfill your dreams.

I have tried to offer a few of my favorite words of wisdom. Work hard. There are no short cuts. Love what you do. Do not seek a job because you think you will get rich at it. Take money out of the equation. Do the right thing always. Do not just try to do the right thing, always do the right thing. No matter where you go—around the world or whatever industry it is—only one thing is sure to follow you everywhere and that is your reputation. Protect it at all costs!

Yes, taking a stand and doing the right thing often requires courage. Sometimes you have to move away from the pack to stand up for what you believe. That will require valor. Make sure you are ready when a dilemma arises. Make the commitment today to always do the right thing—to stand up for truth and be ready to act decisively and honorably when a conflict must be resolved. My final words of wisdom are: Believe in yourself.

A few years ago, I thought I had seen it all, having had this front row seat to so much that was happening in business globally. But then I received a call that led to one of the most exciting days of my life. It was the New York Yankees calling. They wanted me to throw out the first pitch in the last game of the season. I, of course, immediately said yes. What an honor!

Then I hung up and said to myself: “What did I just do?” I don’t even know how to play baseball. I don’t know the first thing about a pitch! Never mind throwing it 60 feet to get it over the plate! And with 60,000 fans in the stadium! There was no way I was going to allow myself to be booed in my hometown.” Undaunted, I set about practicing for a whole a month. Almost every evening and every weekend; I perfected my pitch.

On the day of the game, right before they called me to the mound, I turned to my trainer and said: “Dan, what am I doing? I can’t do this. I am not a baseball player!” He turned to me and looked me right in the eye and said: “Maria, we have been working on this. You have been doing it. Now, go do what you are supposed to do.” He added: “Maria, when you are out on that mound, remember one thing—you are exactly where you are supposed to be.”

So, I say to the Class of 2012, when you walk into that job interview, when you walk into that first job, when you decide where your heart is and to do what you love, have confidence in what you have accomplished at NYU. You have done the work; you have logged the hours and completed the study. And you are here today. Remember, you, too, are exactly where you are supposed to be.

Class of 2012, I wish you courage. I wish you creativity I wish you strength. Go change the world anew and innovate. Do what you love and have confidence in yourself. You are exactly where you are supposed to be. Congratulations! ♦
years in the future, but we do almost nothing to guarantee that there will be a future. We have become terrible stewards of the Earth and of ourselves and of each other.

I have a little tale, I believe, will prove useful, even though it is on the subject of becoming a poet and accepting risk. The first time I taught Creative Writing, I had no idea what I was doing. I was 30 years old; old enough to know better. This was at Fresno State College in the fall of 1958—before your parents met. The first shock I got was from my students; they took me seriously. Perhaps had I been a Brown or Princeton or Columbia, all schools where I later taught, they would have been more demanding. Fresno State was and, I'm certain, still is a second-rate school. The secret truth of second-rate colleges is that they harbor a great many brilliant students, who because of a lack of funds, a lack of sophistication, and decent guidance, are not at first-rate colleges. Second-rate or not, I had in that first Creative Writing class an enormously talented writer. His name was Lawson Inada. He was pre-med and preparing for entrance into medical school at the University of California. How he found his way into my Creative Writing class, I've no idea; but once there, poetry had overwhelmed and seduced him. He was in his senior year, an A student, but before he graduated that coming June, he informed his parents he was not going to medical school. He had been accepted by the Graduate Writing Program at the University of Iowa, the most esteemed program in the land; and he was determined to become a poet. I believe he only partly understood his decision, for he was in a grip of a powerful need or love or addiction. He'd been inspired by reading the letters of the poet John Keats, a book I recommended to his class; the single most important book I ever read on what it means to be a poet and what it means to be human. There followed confusion and distress in the Inada household. Lawson's father was a dentist; his uncles, graduates of the UC Medical School. The Inadas had known serious deprivation and loss in America, the land of their birth. In the winter of '41, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor and our entry into World War II, his parents and their one child had been ordered from their house, processed—whatever that meant—and then literally railroaded to be interned until 1945 in what can only be called a concentration camp on the salt lakes of Utah. For better or worse, this became the locale of Lawson's early childhood, the years from four to eight. I learned much of this history from Lawson's writing and thus, I should not have been surprised when Lawson's mother phoned and urged me to dissuade Lawson from making so reckless a decision. I was not prepared for Mrs. Inada's request, perhaps because no one before me in my family had gone to college, and merely by graduating I had become a screaming success. Even though I knew the facts of the Inada's internment, I felt I could not, in good faith, urge Lawson not to become a poet. I believed in his talent. I explained to Mrs. Inada it was not my role to persuade my students not to follow the same course I'd follow. Yes, I'd written a letter of recommendation to the Iowa workshop; that I felt was my duty as his teacher. Lawson, I explained, was in my eyes an adult. Indeed, he was only nine years younger than I and once he made his choice, I felt I should do my best to help him. Mrs. Inada made it clear she was deeply disappointed by my refusal. The narrative does not end there. Time transforms it into a very different lesson. Fourteen years passed, Lawson had by this time published widely in literary journals. His poetry collection before the war became the first book of poems published by a Japanese American. With his Master of Fine Arts degree in hand, Lawson had become a college teacher and then a university professor. One afternoon, I received another phone call from Mrs. Inada. Her tone was very different. She informed me that both she and her husband, Dr. Inada, were pleased with their son's progress; and then she uttered a very surprising phrase, one I later realized possessed the kind of magic for her. She said without the least hint of irony, “We have come to realize that poetry is an old and honored profession.” What I've written is true; not verifiably true like a scientific truth, but true to my memory of very distant events. Let us together treat Lawson's stories and allegory for graduation day. One clear lesson it contains is “out of evil can come good.” “Evil?” you might ask. Yes. Surely the incarceration of innocent people is the evil. Moreover, Lawson was able to take the experience of the camps and transform them into poetry. He made them part of American history and part of American literature. A second lesson might be even more crucial; words have enormous power. Merely by changing their vocabulary, Dr. and Mrs. Inada were able to transform the image of their son from a self-indulgent child with no regard for his family's traditions, into an honored professional. Lawson, the poet, had through his command of language, transformed the shameful narrative of his family's internment into something useful and even beautiful. Through the alchemy of poetry, it revised both the history of his people and his country.

There is a third lesson here, one even more universal and profound. One we all learn if we live long enough, whether or not we graduate from college—we are all in the dark. We live in the same world as Oedipus the king and Lady Macbeth and have little, if any, understanding of the consequences of our behavior, our actions, our daily choices, or the usefulness and the principles by which we live; that is if we have any principles.

My motive in presenting the tale of this singular poet may not be clear. Lawson Inada was, in my eyes, become a hero, albeit a quiet one who never draws attention to his presence, his career, his right. When he was exactly where you are now, in his early 20s, about to receive his
bachelor’s degree, he made totally on his own a daring decision. You might think, “Sure, those were innocent times. The world we, the college graduates of today, enter is far more challenging and dangerous.” That is an illusion fostered by Hollywood period films, the music of Bing Crosby and reruns of The Ed Sullivan Show.

In the spring of 1959 when Lawson graduated, Fidel Castro had just come to power; the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet; and in Nebraska State Prison, Charlie Starkweather died in the electric chair for the spree killing of 11 people; 21 elementary school students were killed when a US Air Force fighter slammed into an elementary school; and President Eisenhower warned of the consequences of placing nuclear missiles in Turkey—but placed them we did; an action that led directly to the Cuban missile crisis, the most dangerous moment in world history.

The innocence of any decade is pure mythology, largely fostered to help sell retro styles of everything from women’s shoes and sunglasses to fountain pens and motorcycles. Make no mistake, I am not urging you to follow a career in poetry or ballet, or glass-blowing, unless you are driven to do so by inner forces you may only partly comprehend; or to behave heroically, though it might be gratifying to live in a country in which the young were heroic. On the other hand, it might be insufferable to have your sons and daughters lecturing you over the breakfast table on the need to live at all times a moral life, and to take up arms against the villains of the hour. It would certainly ruin breakfast.

I am suggesting that this moment—exactly this moment, would be the right time to consider the wisdom of bowing to inner forces you only partly comprehend, to accept what John Keats called the holiness of the heart’s affections. We have, in our dourest moments, labeled this world “a veil of tears,” and at times it surely is exactly that for many of us. But, to return to my astonishing life teacher, 24-year-old John Keats, it is also “the vale of soul-making;” I take that expression from a letter he wrote to his brother in America. In Keats’ view, we enter the world as potentials and it is through the agency of this world, exactly this world of pain, loss, and failure that our potential is schooled and we become complete persons’ souls. Nothing is more obvious on this day in late May of my 85th year and your graduation, that you and I have been schooled. How good your education here has been, I don’t know; but I do know that by arriving at this moment, you have learned a great deal that will prove useful, even essential, for what awaits you. You began a process four or more years ago that you’ve brought to completion. Accept that with pride; not the vain pride that condemns egotists to Dante’s lowest circle of hell, but the pride of being singular and human, the pride that William Blake calls “the glory of God.” Accept what this graduation day brings and what tomorrow takes away. Accept the holiness of the heart’s affections. To quote still another poet, “Do not hesitate to take the road less traveled.” And remember that what may look like recklessness may—in fact, as we see in the allegory of the life of Lawson, may actually be wisdom. Do not demand final answers to the same questions that befuddled your parents and mine. Even for college graduates, to live is to accept doubts, uncertainties, mysteries, just as the poets have done for centuries. The ability to live fully in this manner, Keats called “negative capability.” Emily Dickinson called it “patience.” Whitman called it “electrical.” Blake called it “sacred.” What would I call it? Here, language fails me or I fail language, so I’ll go to another poet, “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.” You are all productions of time. You are lions as well. May the blessings of poetry—let those blessings and the schooling that is soul-making, continue without end on this brimming landscape. Let this graduation day complete itself. Accept it all, taste its ripeness as fully as you can, and then let this day die into the starry darkness of the waiting night, so a new day can be born. Thank you.