

OSU Summer Commencement Address

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In a few moments you will cross the stage to graduate from one of this nation’s great public universities. You accomplished this through talent, hard work and dedication. This honor now becomes yours forever—and I offer heartfelt congratulations to you, to your friends and families who—in innumerable ways—supported you along your way toward this achievement.

To “commence” is an act of beginning –

With ritual, ceremony, procession and music, with speeches and handshakes, this 2013 summer commencement marks a midpoint, or for some, an end of your student days.

For this occasion, we have donned black robes and medieval caps to dress like 13th century priests or monks . . . so you commence your relations to the contemporary world dressed in heraldry recalling the first university, formed in Bologna in the 11th century. Why? Not because we wish to appear medieval.

But because these robes announce we value the 1000-year history of inquiry and learning that each of you, in your breath of time here, elected to take up at this university.

It was my grandmother, Lois Bennett, who explained to me during a Sunday brunch at the OSU faculty club when I was no taller than the tops of the dining tables—that “a university is a place which offers people TIME to think” and thinking is preparation for living – not just for making a living.

While (thinking about thinking) and preparing to speak to you today, I spent a lot of time staring at a blank piece of paper – (you all still use paper right?)

Its white emptiness filled me with as much anxiety as many of you may have felt during your final exam, thesis or dissertation defense.

A blank page is full of possibility, but our inclination is to view it as absence rather than as presence-- empty of words instead of full of space. it can feel terrifying, like being naked in public.

So, I did what none of us is supposed to admit to—I trolled Wikipedia. Searching there for words for this day--full of hope, and full of future . . . and there I found a litany of titles – Hope in the Dark, Radical Hope; The Future—a Final Word, Hope a Philosophical Inquiry, Future Shock

On You Tube I watched speeches; of every manner . . . And listened to poignant words offering testimony to what it is that language can do.

But the words needed for THIS commencement could not to be found on my bookshelf or on You Tube. Instead, I needed to search my own experience.

Trusting your experience requires work.

In this world of specialization and professionalism, it is often easier to hand over your own voice to that of the “experts” – in this case – to the bards, prophets, and poets –to the masters of rhetoric. We can learn a lot from their wisdom and practice of argument, but sometimes this too readily replaces thinking for oneself.

So, I found myself back where I had started - staring into a blank page. That page was not so large as the 32 ½ inch square piece of paper that artist Tom Friedman spent 1000 hours staring into between 1992-97, and which now is hanging in the Museum of Modern Art.

When you were born, your parents may have naively believed you were a blank page waiting to be filled by the world. But quickly, you made it abundantly clear that, though language and walking lay somewhat down the road – you were already complex; already present with wills and aptitudes already your own – with your own sensitivities and sensibilities in place for whatever might lie ahead.

Research suggests we learn more in the first year of life than in all of our following years (so, you might askwhy have we been in school all this time?)

You absorbed your first learning without sitting in a classroom, or listening to a lecture, and without Google. You learned by BEING IN THE WORLD.

Still, however, the teachers and curriculum you encountered through your years here at The Ohio State University have to do with another, different kind of education. They have helped you discover, cultivate, and amplify that blank piece of paper you each still, luckily, remain. For what this university understands is what the Irish poet William Butler Yeats famously said—Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.

Everyone who has ever built a fire knows that there is moisture in wood – and so, the velocity and direction of the wind, the angle of the match, the age of the wood are each contingencies to be accounted for . . . everything is in the HOW.

Just now the world needs a lot of ingenious How's.

Finding elegant and simple solutions to complex problems depends upon

-HOW you perceive possibilities.

-HOW you follow through on what you can imagine.

-HOW you each use the full page of your experience.

You have spent years at this university honing the points of your compasses. As you now set out to follow the direction of your ambitions

Your route may be circuitous.

You will face a lot of questions.

You will face doubt.

But if you pay attention to your own experience, then all those things you don't know that you know will become clear to you. For it is the quality of attention you give over to something that determines what, eventually, it becomes.

My path to these words was also circuitous.

I don't arrive in words – or at art – by knowing where I am going. By default, I work from what I know to what I don't know. And like I did, you too may set out for New York, but find yourself in Ohio. You may stick your hands in the garden dirt and discover your work is diplomacy. Your love of economics might solve an energy crisis.

Today is just one dot along your way.

It is a threshold between firsts and lasts.

It may be your last day as an undergraduate or a graduate student, but it is your commencement toward everything else.

An important thing about thresholds is that they are also open doors. They open to the future and the unknown, yet they also open to the past.

Both views—when looked at from far away—hold darkness.

To paraphrase the author and my friend, Rebecca Solnit,

This darkness holds within it a lot of importance.

It holds the unforeseen, the edge of mystery.

No matter your efforts – this darkness is what you cannot know . . .

Moving close to this darkness may keep your life away from answers, but will also keep you ALIVE in the middle of your questions.

After all, Edison did not invent the light bulb by trying to create a better candle.

Making is a powerful thing.

I learned this while watching my grandmother take a line of yarn and loop it up and around a needle, then pull it through another loop, and another loop, and then loop after loop – to make – in time – a sweater, which not only made me feel beautiful, but also kept me warm.

By looping and pulling her yarn round two needles, my grandmother drew into existence something new to the world. There, pressed against her body and following the incremental movement of yarn through her hands, I learned how, through the work of making, something may come from what earlier seemed nothing.

This singular possibility of transformation should keep us hopeful- but in the midst of a culture that insists on calculation—on what can be measured, quantified and named, how will you cultivate the unforeseen?

How many times over the past 4 or 6 or 8 years were you asked What are you going to do with your degree?

This may be difficult to answer.

**Life seems to require we not get lost,
yet . . .**

HOW to lose oneself?

HOW to hand oneself over?

HOW to choose risk and the unknown,

to collaborate with chance,

to trust in possibilities with no guaranteed results?

Once, when I was high-school aged and at summer camp, I was given the choice to go on a directional hike with one camp leader or, with a different camp leader, to hike non – directionally (namely, to hike to “nowhere.”)

I didn’t realize then, that this was as much a philosophical question as a practical choice. One hike would hurry us along a path over to “there.” On the other we would wander the side paths, follow wherever our attentions might lead, perhaps never arriving “there,” yet taking the chance, or opening the possibility, of finding something wholly unexpected and wondrous along our way.

All of you have been on both of these paths.

One of them is a little easier to legitimize than the other because you can always point ahead and say – see over there? – that is where I am going.

Such sureness can be useful – it gives you a handle to hold onto when you feel uncertain. It can help those around you feel a little less nervous while you figure out where you are really going. “Over there” can be an interesting place, but often, upon arriving there, you discover it is not what, from the distance, you imagined it to be.

The other path sets you on a less assured course – at every turn – you may have to ask, Am I headed somewhere, or nowhere? What should I listen for? What do I need pay attention to? Is this the path to follow? Or is it a wayward distraction? Making such distinctions is the art of attending to the path you are already headed down (or up).

It’s like fishing, it’s like art . . . you cast out your bit of bait
– in the former it may be a worm or a fly
– in the latter you break the surface of the water with a hunch, an intuition, or a question . . .

But you throw out *something* in hope of catching something waiting—below the surface—to be found.

You cannot know for certain what it is, or if it's in the place where you are. Yet, in casting about you set up the possibility of finding "it."

You cannot, of course, *make* a fish bite.

The place, the moment, is full of contingencies. It is out of your control. Likewise, you cannot make an idea come to you.

First, you just cast your bait. Then you must wait awhile (like my making of this speech).

Through waiting you learn how to inhabit not knowing

But while waiting you need to keep yourself busy.

How you keep yourself busy becomes your process.

And soon, your process becomes your practice.

And then your practice becomes your attention.

Which can be drawn to anywhere.

Socrates said that true wisdom consists in knowing that you know nothing.

Knowing that you know nothing is necessary to being open to a creative (a created) life. By knowing you know nothing, you open your mind.

**And from an open mind may spring an open heart,
to occupy the center of your open mind.**

From *that* place, from *there*, from *that* opening you can choose to become a maker--not only a consumer--of meanings or of meaningfulness. To become a maker of meaning(fullness) is, in fact, your only true choice.

Otherwise, all meaning will be made for you.

Do not assume that what surrounds you is the way things are “supposed to be.” Stay alive to conditions where the happy accident might find you.

You might go, for example, to the library shelf to find a book (you do still read books, don't you?) But as you reach your

hand out to pull the book from its high shelf –something draws your hand astray – consciously or not – to the red spine – or the green spine – a few neighboring books away. And *that* is the book you remove from its shelf.

Then, you open that book and your eye alights upon a word, a sentence, or a picture that, at the moment, is calling your attention to the very thing you need. But before then you did not, or could not have known, you needed it. This is a gift. If you are open to receiving it, you will recognize it.

By listening through your bodies (through your hearts) as well as to your minds, you can inhabit the unknowing where you might find what you need. Such listening might seem to be an interior process, but its consequence is social.

The Greek philosopher Plato, who was Socrates' prized student, (would there be commencement speeches without the Greeks?) claimed that when two people, or two groups, are in dialogue together, truth is present between them, but is owned by neither side.

From this understanding that truth is made present not from monologue but through dialogue—the Greeks created their

entire civilization; one that required cultivation of an art of listening as well as of the art of speaking. To make such dialogue audible, they carved giant ears into the sides of mountains where they gathered to listen to each other and to strangers. There, inside the theatre, the Greeks crossed a threshold to open the door to democracy.

It takes a lot of courage to listen – to not always be the one speaking. To act as a citizen of the world you might begin with your classmates, then continue with your next door neighbor, but you begin, always, by extending your hand across a fence toward someone, or something, you do not yet know . . .

This initial act may seem small....but it is the necessary act toward change.

Change is hard work – *You* are its agents. What evolves from your small, initial acts is the future. Embrace it. Allow yourself to be lost, to become at home in the unknown. Keep the company of the blank page. It may be hard to decipher, but what is good to know is hard to learn.

That blank page may be empty of words, but it is full of the space of possibility

Who knows – maybe someday it may even hang in the Museum of Modern Art. But for now, what the world needs is all of your attention.

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY Graduates of 2013, THIS is *your* day.

CONGRATULATIONS