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"Word Hard and Be Nice to People."

The last time I spoke in front of this many people was at the Emmy Awards. I can't tell you what a relief it is to be standing up here now without being interrupted by a flashing sign telling me to "Wrap it up." President Higdon – you don't have one of those, do you? If I hear the "Homeland" theme song start up, I'm really in trouble.

President Higdon, Trustees and friends, proud parents, thank you for letting me share this moment with you. Most of all, congratulations to the Members of the great Class of 2013. Give yourselves a hand.

I'd like to thank Andrew Pessin, a philosophy professor here, for recommending me for this honor. I've known Andy since college, when he would share his brilliance with me deep into the night. Andy, I hope your students appreciate your insights into the nature of reality and the duality of the brain, because *I had no idea* what you were talking about. None. You were like the adults in a "Peanuts" cartoon. Wah wah wah wah wah.

I thought long and hard about what I wanted to talk about this morning. I had lots of false starts. Advice I wanted to offer, themes I wanted to develop. I wanted to tell you to follow your passion no matter what and everything will work out fine. But I'm not sure that's the best advice.

I wanted to tell you, "Don't be afraid to fail." But I'd have been a hypocrite. Me, I'm terrified of failure. I always have been. Failing sucks. If I'm completely honest – my drive to succeed has often been outweighed by my fear of failure. You don't have to be a shrink to know that's not the healthiest motivation. All I can offer is that when you do fail – and you will fail, again and again – try to learn from it and never let it stop you.

So instead I thought I'd tell you the story of how I came to be standing before you today. Since you're each about to start the next chapter of your own stories, I'm hoping you'll find some relevance in mine.

For someone who makes his living making things up, when it came to charting my own future, I suffered from a severe lack of imagination. As the son of second-generation Americans, I grew up believing I had two career choices; I could become a doctor or a lawyer. That my two brothers became doctors describes how powerful that narrative was in our house. I actually believed I'd wind up in medical school, until sometime during my senior year, when I realized I hadn't taken organic chemistry. But that was just one class. I figured I could make it up – until I realized I'd also neglected to take any of the other pre-med coursework. Which left me with one

option. Law school. But I sabotaged that in short order by oversleeping on the morning of my LSAT. Which, in my defense, was at the ungodly hour of 9 a.m.

Remember Wile E. Coyote in that Warner Brothers cartoon, after he's chased the Roadrunner and realizes for a brief, terrifying moment that he's run off the cliff? That's how I felt when I sat where you're now sitting. I didn't hear a word the commencement speaker was saying because I was asking myself: "What should I do with the rest of my life?"

I don't recommend the process of elimination as a career counseling strategy. But it was only after I'd torched what I believed were my only viable options that I finally acknowledged something I'd never admitted to anyone else – or even to myself. I wanted to be a writer. Specifically, I wanted to write for television.

Sure, I liked reading novels and going to the movies – but I LOVED watching television. From "Star Trek" to "All in the Family," from "Mary Tyler Moore" to the "Six Million Dollar Man," television made me laugh, it made me think, and it helped me access my emotions in a way that real life could not.

Short of becoming a starship captain myself, the prospect of telling stories on television was the most exciting thing I could imagine doing. The problem was, I had no idea how to begin. I'd never studied film, I'd never seen a script. I decided I needed an accomplice. A partner-in-crime. A Cheech to my Chong. Or, perhaps in terms you can actually understand, a Quagmire to my Peter Griffin.

(You'll forgive me, trustees and parents. That's shameless pandering. And, if anyone's counting, my third cartoon reference this morning.) In case you haven't figured it out by now, I'll only be referring to popular culture today. The only exception will be a brief cameo by Lord Byron – but I'll get to that in a minute.

So I enlisted my friend, Alex Gansa, who it turned out, had also slept through his LSAT. We had no plans for the future, and, as English majors, no marketable skills. I just saw fifty English majors in the audience turn sheet white. Keep listening, guys, it'll be okay. Over a few pitchers of beer, I pitched Alex an idea for what I was sure would make a great television mini-series. He agreed. He was in.

We got jobs that summer not far from here – as caretakers of a mansion that had once been the summer White House for William Howard Taft. Between tarring the roof and mowing the lawn, Alex and I wrote our script. Then, we packed up my Datsun B-210 and headed for Hollywood.

We knew no one in the show business. We had no money. But we were armed with a script we were certain would change our fortunes overnight. After all, what network executive wouldn't want to buy a script about… the great 19th century poet Lord Byron? All of them, it turned out. Incredibly, no one had the slightest interest in Lord Byron's dramatic departure from Augustan verse.

The truth is, Alex and I had no business sharing our script with anyone. Subject matter aside, it was awful. Deep down, we knew we hadn't done the hard work. So we spent the next year reading scripts, breaking down scenes, writing and re-writing until we had something we felt was worth sharing. Along the way, I waited tables, I sold sneakers in a mall and bandanas on the beach, and I tutored high school students for the SAT. The kids were impressed that I'd gotten into good colleges, and very worried that my job was selling bandanas on the beach.

Alex and I spent the next year trying to get people to read our script, knocking on every door we could – and by the time someone opened one for us, we were ready to walk through it. One of my students happened to be the daughter of a producer who was kind enough to read our script. He invited us to pitch stories for a new series he had created for ABC called "Spenser: For Hire." We'd made our first sale.

Since then, I've written and produced hundreds of hours of television. I've never once lost sight of what a privilege it is, getting to tell stories to millions of people every week. In our fractured, frenetic society, a compelling TV show can become a collective experience. A kind of massive campfire where people gather to hear a story that moves them and makes them think.

The terrible events of 9-11 made "24" relevant in a way none of us could have anticipated. After Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, Jack Bauer became a much more controversial figure. Some journalists went so far as to find a causal link between 24 and the promotion of torture as an acceptable means of interrogation. Suddenly, I wasn't just writing a television show; I was at the center of a national debate I'd never signed up for. Still, I was grateful to have been part of a dialogue that needed to happen. It made me reconsider the line between social responsibility and free speech. And it showed me the power of telling stories.

With "Homeland," I've been able to explore some of the big questions we've all been asking in the decade since 9-11. What's the real human cost of going to war? How far can we go to defend our values without losing them along the way? How much of our privacy are we willing to sacrifice to be secure? And can we ever be truly secure?

The fictional characters I create live in the same crazy, complicated world as the rest of us. How they navigate through the world is what makes them compelling. How you navigate your way through the world will make your story compelling.

God knows, you've got great source material. The widening gap between rich and poor. An economy that's losing ground to the growing economies of India and China. A warming planet that's causing our oceans to rise, the implications of which we're only beginning to understand. The list goes on. I mention these things not to freak you out – although I think I just freaked *myself* out – but because you'll be inheriting the world sooner than you think. And the sooner you understand its challenges, the better equipped you'll be to meet them head on.

You've all gotten off to a great start, though. I'm pretty blown away by the things some of you have already achieved as undergraduates. Liz de Lise won a grant to study nomadic street kid culture in Portland, Oregon, which became the basis of her senior honors thesis – turning the stories of those kids into songs. Meredith Byrne won a Davis Project for Peace grant to start a

community garden in an immigrant community in New York – and she'll be working at the UN next year. All of you have the intelligence, ambition and creativity to earn a degree from Connecticut College, and you'll all be leaving here with invaluable tools. The capacity for critical thinking that comes from having earned a first-rate liberal arts education. The ability to ask good questions, even when there may be no good answers. The understanding that along with your privilege comes the responsibility to give back to those who haven't had your advantages.

I've been talking about the power of telling stories. The most powerful one you'll ever get to tell is your own. It won't be about your achievements or awards or how much money you've made, it will be about how you touched people, and how you let them touch you. What story do you want to tell? What story do you want others to tell about you?

Whatever your next chapter may be, I hope you'll keep something in mind. Professor Pessin, I apologize for what may sound like fortune-cookie philosophy, but this seven-word sentence inspires me every day from a poster on the wall of my office.

"Work hard and be nice to people."

I am not the most talented writer in Hollywood. Not by a long shot. But I am among the most hard-working. Hard work is the midwife to success. Not that it guarantees success. It doesn't. Many people work hard and fail, but I have yet to meet a successful person who hasn't worked hard. So when you get lucky and someone opens a door for you, be ready to walk through it.

As to the second half of my philosophy, it may sound trite, but it constitutes the best advice I have. Being nice to people is like the trunk of a tree with many branches – humility, respect, compassion, empathy and love. I have tried spending as much time in that tree as I can.

Whether I'm creating a bipolar CIA agent or the world's most wanted terrorist, my job is to make them talk and behave like real people. To do that requires understanding their point of view, as different as it may be from my own. Listening to other people is the root of empathy. It's made me a better writer, but more importantly, it's made me a better person. It takes practice, and it takes patience. But I promise, your story will be better for it.

Thank you for listening to me this morning. And thank you for sparing me the indignity of a flashing sign, but it's time for me to wrap it up. Before I do, I want to leave you with a final thought. I think it was Montaigne who said this – or maybe it was Homer Simpson – "Donuts: is there anything they can't do?" Okay, that was Homer. But Montaigne said, it's the journey, not the arrival, that matters most. I hope you all find happiness in your journeys. Good luck.