

President Silver, Dean Roche, Distinguished Trustees, Faculty, Parents, Families, Friends, and Graduates of the Class of 2014.

So. Here you are. After four years of an education unique, remarkable, hard fought, hand crafted. And then off you go. Into a world dizzying in its uncertainties. I asked some of my students what they wanted to hear today. They said, don't lie to us. Don't make out that the world we are going out into is better than it is. Don't be so optimistic about our place in it.

And so it is uncertainty that I would like to talk to you about. Because if there is one thing I am certain about, it's uncertainty.

Back in 1980, when I was just a little older than you are now, I was invited to a luncheon where Meryl Streep was receiving an award. In the 5 years since graduating from Yale, she had worked nonstop in the theatre and been cast in Woody Allen's Manhattan, The Deer Hunter, for which she was nominated for an Academy Award, and starred in Kramer vs Kramer. She started her speech by saying that all during her time at school, when she complained about how hard it was, and how competitive it was, and how rough her professors were on her, those professors would always say to her "you think it's hard now, just you wait till you graduate and get out in the real world. You'll find out what hard

is.” “Well I have to tell you” Meryl said—“it wasn’t hard at all when I got out in the real world. It’s been really easy. Much easier than school ever was.” So, if you are perhaps the greatest actress, or writer, or historian, or painter or dancer or scientist of your generation—I am here to tell you do not have to worry about uncertainty. Everything will be much easier than it has been so far.

I know Bennington hasn’t been easy, and I know how hard you’ve worked. I know how you’ve had to make difficult choices about how to spend the treasure of your time and attention here. Which classes will claim the hours of your life. Which ways of seeing will you allow to shape your gaze, and how will the investigations you make here become the lights you will hang in the heart of your life. In other words—how has your time here given you a way to understand value. How have you constructed your idea of it, what is the secret algorithm by which you measure what matters and what does not.

They say that the central question of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s life—and full disclosure, I do not now and have never understood a single word of his philosophical thought and this has not stopped me from quoting him constantly for over 40 years—the essential question of Wittgenstein’s life was: where in the world is value to be found. Everyday you ask this question in the choices you make. I’ve seen you make intelligent

choices, taking classes that you knew would help light your way, I've seen you come together in collaborations, and make the work that was important to you. And I've seen the random, capricious nature of the class lottery choose your path for you. I've seen you rail against the lottery the way the Greeks railed against the gods. We want control of our lives. We hate uncertainty. And then I've seen how chance has changed your life and brought into it ways of being in the world that would never have happened if you'd stayed on the path whose configuration was already known to you.

Uncertainty. Is not always the enemy. It is a fact: there is no insight without surprise. Life often works the way a good joke does. I have seen the entire shape of a student's life transform by taking a random module because she needed a credit. You've all seen that happen, too. You know what I mean.

We live in a world that does not make sense. And that's where my profession, the theatre, and of course fiction and the movies come in, because we make worlds in those art forms that make sense--we get to see *why* things happen. We are given the human equations that allow us do the math. And though often things don't work out happily, in these pretend forms of life we call art, we prefer a bad something we understand over a happy something we *do not* every time. In real life

there is precious little sense, meaning, or justice. Hard work is not always rewarded. Genius is not necessarily recognized. Like the oil spilled in the Deepwater Horizon disaster, mediocrity rises to the surface and floats until it's killed all the pelicans and seagulls and then it percolates down to the ocean bed and suffocates everything that lives on its way. Passion and purpose are no guarantee of anything—except the joy that comes from their practice. We watch people make their way in the world by connection, charm, and chance. Some are blessed. Some are cursed. Some are Meryl Streep. But the happiest people, by in large, that I've seen? The luckiest ones? Are the ones in the middle. With enough luck to do work that matters to them. With people that they love and admire. Surrounded by friends and family they adore.

They say you make your own luck. And you do, because you make your way of understanding it. So don't ever get lost in the "if only" and the injustice of things life throws your way. We don't know how the fates have woven our tapestry. We can't live in the "what ifs" of our lives. That's what the theatre, and fiction, and movies are for.

Luck will not come to all of you equally. But those who get more than their share—it's your responsibility to share it with those who do not. With those whose luck is bad.

When I was 10, I went to summer camp in the Rockies—somehow my small town Midwestern Jewish parents had found a western riding camp so waspy that even the horses were high Episcopalian—Cheley Colorado Camps. We went out walking the first week and walked up a small mountain. We came down a different way—down a field of sharp, unstable rock, a first rate chaotic field of loose death. Or at least sprained ankles. Every other rock tipped the second you stepped on it. It was clear to me that there was absolutely no way I would get down alive. The other campers, most of them third generation Cheley girls, took off down that rock field at full speed. Like a flock of sparrows they were gone, dancing down the mountain, laughing and singing. The counselor turned to me, and generously took 10 seconds to impart the secret of getting down a half mile of loose, lethal rock before *she* took off. She said “Don’t ever put your weight on the stone you’re actually stepping on. Put it on the rock you’re just *about* to step on, and you’ll be fine.” And with that, she was gone.

This was definitely a lesson in uncertainty. I was completely uncertain about the motives my parents had for sending me to a place where I would surely die, surrounded by nascent gin and tonic drinkers. But I learned an important lesson. Just because there is no solid ground beneath your feet doesn’t mean you can’t move safely across it.

And here is the weird thing. The same lesson applies if you find yourself in the opposite of a rock field--a swamp. If you don't take your second step *before* the first one is complete, if you wait to hit firm bottom before you take your next step, the marsh or quicksand will suck your foot down, and while you're pulling the first foot out the second foot will become hopelessly mired. You'll be stuck.

You must always be headed to the place you are meant to be. You must always be headed home, whatever the values are that home is for you. You must make your own place to stand.

A Rabbi once told me that Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews valued two very different kinds of knowledge. The Sephardim, who lived in Spain, had enjoyed a period known as the Golden Age, because Jews, for the first time in hundreds of years, could own property and be almost fully franchised citizens. The Sephardim, because of their good luck during this Golden Age, believed in knowing and remembering. Knowledge was something they could possess, that they could count on. But the Ashkenazi, the Eastern European Jews, who could own nothing but the shirts on their backs, who lived from pogrom to pogrom, in a world of enforced uncertainty—who had lives a lot like a lot of people in the rest of the world do today--the Ashkenazi elevated discovery and understanding. They had to find value in what they couldn't see,

couldn't keep, couldn't count on. They lived for centuries without a place to stand. But they continued to live full lives, to believe in their values, to care for each other, create a culture, and from their ranks came some of the greatest minds of the 20th century. They made their own ground, over and over again.

So. How will you do, in this uncertain world? You're in luck. I have a mascot, made of uncertainty, to share with you.

(TAKE OUT PROP. It's a large outline drawing of the Duck Rabbit, no detail really, do that the folks in the back can see it.)

The Duck Rabbit. This way he's a duck, this way he's a rabbit. This is his eye, and these are his ears as a rabbit, his bill as a duck. This is a poorly rendered version of one of Ludwig Wittgenstein's illustrations in, remember, a book that I do not understand. The Duck Rabbit has been my constant companion since I was your age. If I were a character on Game of Thrones, this would be the sigil of my house, I would have duck rabbits embroidered on all my bath towels and fine Westeros linen.

The Duck Rabbit you see, is forever and always two things at once. He is in a state of marvelous, simple uncertainty. The duck rabbit never resolves for more than a split instant into one thing. Because once a thing is only one thing, it loses the ability to transform. Once you see an

idea as a fact with no ambiguity, or what matters and what doesn't as a solid thing—once you let go of discovery and understanding and stop questioning what it means to know something—you create a world that that is harder to transform. That can't be moved and changed when it needs to be. You have stopped moving, on that hillside of loose glacial till.

The world out there is not newly uncertain. It has been rock fields alternating with quicksand for all of recorded time. The ground you make with your choices, with your commitment to your idea of value is the only solid ground there has ever been, and it is yours to stake your claim on. To build the house of your life, the solid ground of a life spent in the service of what matters, with generosity of heart. That's the ground you have been learning how to build here. That is the ground I have seen you create already. I've seen it in your commitment to your own work, your drive to make something that mattered, to understand the world in new and significant ways, I have seen your dedication to each other, as you have given and given of your time and energies to help others find their path. I have seen students engaged in radical generosity here in a way that I have never seen in any other institution where I have taught.

Eric Santner says that “God is the name of the pressure to be alive to be world.” Most of us don’t like pressure. Pressure is not something you typically bestow as a blessing or a gift. And yet? That pressure is what I wish for you. The pressure to be your better self, to discover more, and feel more, and care more, and give more, because if you do, you will live a life you have *chosen*. You will find the courage to stand up to all the things that don’t make sense. You will have built a house on solid ground to withstand life’s uncertainties. That’s what I wish for you. That, and just enough luck. Not too much. Not too little. Just enough. Thank you.