

Commencement speeches are difficult to write, even at a moment when the country doesn't seem to be going through a civic nervous breakdown. After all, none of you are here to hear me. Everyone in this audience is here for the sake of a few words, the name of someone they love, or their own name, a great signifier in the continuum of life. It's almost the only thing I remember from my own commencement, even though the legendary anthropologist Margaret Mead was the commencement speaker. I remember these words: Anna Marie Quindlen, and the look on my father's face.

So I know from experience that it's tempting, on this particular day, to think to yourself: done. The papers have been written, the tests taken, the grades tabulated. Your diploma proves it, an imprimatur on hard work and a deep dive into some discipline.

Today you are finished, right?

No.

If you are somehow done today, with learning, with study, with reading, with growing, with self-examination, then you will have done an enormous disservice to this place and, more important, to yourself. Oh, I understand the temptation, the thirst for a checklist to give shape to the present and the future. College. Done. Job. Done. House, spouse, children. Done. Done. Done.

But that's not how it really works. The job may not last, or not satisfy. The person with whom you share your life will be different, year 25, than year five, I can tell you as someone who has been married for four decades. If you think your children are going to stay the same, toddler to teen—boy, do I have news for you.

For those of you going into health sciences, think of how the landscape has changed from 50 years ago, when hip replacements were rare and hospice care was nonexistent. If you worked in sports in decades past, your focus might have been purely on men and boys; you won't make that mistake.

And in arts and sciences someone might once have asked what you planned to do with an English major—actually, may have still done so, even all these years after I graduated as one—when not long ago I read that the CEO of one of America's tech companies prefers English majors because they have writing and communications skills that are invaluable.

There are, after all, in this audience this morning people who grew up with the understanding that a telephone had a cord and that it lived permanently on the kitchen wall. My point in mentioning that is not to enshrine the good old days, which weren't so good for lots of people. The point is that the world is changing ever faster, and we need to change with it. That's often couched as a challenge, when in fact it's a gift. The part of us that is weak and needy and fearful seeks what we call closure, unshakeable ground beneath our feet. We slavishly seek to lock down our lives, because we are afraid. Caution is nothing but fear dressed up

as common sense. Coloring books have come back into vogue for adults because there is nothing quite so soothing as coloring inside the lines. The road less traveled? Popular poem, unpopular life choice. The well-trod road is so much safer.

But I tell you absolutely that the most terrifying changes I made in my life, and the ones that others saw as most foolhardy, are the ones that brought greatest rewards.

Because of some strange little voice within myself I zigged where I was expected to zag. I traded more good jobs than most people had ever had for new roles I thought were even scarier, and chancier, and potentially more satisfying. I took the ultimate flying leap and had three children in five years while my career was at its peak. I left the op ed page of the New York Times to become a full-time novelist. Someone said that my decision showed that women are afraid of success.

But I wasn't afraid of success. I was afraid of living a life that seems more like a resume than an adventure story, a life full of boxes checked and dreams deferred, until they had evaporated entirely with the call of custom.

You don't want to have that sort of life, so you can't let fear rule you, for your own sake and for the sake of this nation. Fear is what has poisoned our culture, our community, and our character. The very worst things done in this country are done out of fear. Homophobia, sexism, racism, religious bigotry, xenophobia, the embrace of despots and demagogues: they all arise out of fear.

Our political leaders don't actually lead when they are afraid of being thrown out of office. Our corporations resist real innovation because they are afraid of taking a chance.

In my former business, the news business, which I was proud and continue to be proud to call home, fear is the greatest of enemies. It accounts for censorship, obfuscation, the lowest common denominator when sharp, fearless coverage is more important than ever before. Without fear or favor the news business must provide readers, listeners and viewers with searching stories even if those are stories the powerful do not want you to hear or believe and do not want us to publish or disseminate, even if they are stories that offend, enrage and distress the very readers we are bound to inform.

To want to feel sure, finished, done, set in stone, is not only borne of fear, it's an illusion. Change is the only constant, and the check list should be honored mostly in the breach.

What are the public names you recall, sitting there, of those people who did exactly what was considered the right thing, who followed the template, who met societal expectations? You cannot come up with one of them because the people we know, the people we admire, the people whose names we carve into the

cornices of buildings and see on the covers of books, are deviants, in the best sense of that word.

Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, Jane Austen, Frank Lloyd Wright, Enrico Fermi, Lin Manuel Miranda, Marie Curie, Pablo Picasso, Toni Morrison—they all threw out the checklist and snapped their fingers at business as usual.

Now, as a mother I know that your family members may love the certainty of that checklist, of getting things settled. They may think that's the first step in having you to do better than they did. But maybe all of you will redefine what doing better means.

If you are people who see race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identification, as attributes, not stereotypes, you will have done better than my generation did.

If those of you who are male recognize in every way that those of us who are female are capable, equal, and human, and live that in the way you behave, you will have done better than my generation did.

And, on a more personal level, if you as a group ditch what has somehow become the 80-hour-work week and returns us to a sane investment in our professional lives, you will have done better than my generation did.

We have worked hard to pass on to our children a better world. But we sometimes made a grave error in thinking that doing better is mathematical when it is really spiritual.

Maybe I'm preaching to the converted when I say this at a Springfield commencement. After all, this is a place that from the very beginning has emphasized, not a course of study, but a way of living, not a curriculum but a whole person. Data tells us that, know it or not, it was also a place that forced you to major in happiness. When he was first beginning his career as a social psychologist, Peter Salovey, now the president of Yale, did experiments on altruism. And this is what he found: that when people feel happy, they're more likely to give generously to others. And conversely, that when people give to others, they feel happier. He called this effect "Feel good/do good" and "do good/feel good."

In other words, his research found that it's not square footage or big bonuses or yoga or pharmaceuticals that will save us as a society and as individuals. At a time when depression and disaffection seem to be ruling principles, science tells us that if we do unto others we will feel better about ourselves and the world around us.

Do unto others has been a ruling principle here, where students are required to perform many many hours of community service. But, please, above all, don't consider yourselves done with that as you leave here. I hope that you all go out

into the world and do well. But if you do not do good, doing well is not good enough. Instead of saying, I did community service in college, I hope you will someday be able to say instead, I started doing community service in college and I have been doing it ever since.

Perhaps my favorite quote, and the one I evoke most often, is from great writer Henry James: "Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind, and the third is to be kind."

If you do that you will have done better than my generation, because we have today a world with too much of the kindness leached out of it, that is too often mean-spirited, that seems to have lost track of the most valuable verses from the New Testament, the ones about loving your neighbor and giving a cloak to the person who has none. Our obligation to our fellows is never finished, and the people who deny or forget that may graduate but will have learned nothing.

And so I hope you leave here today with the understanding that your diploma represents, not a period at the end of a sentence or even an exclamation point, although, lord, I know it feels like that. It represents a question mark. Will I be a good citizen of the world? Will I make it better just by showing up? Will I become the person I want to be? The classroom is everywhere, and it's forever. There are no papers, and no exams, except the one you give yourself every day by searching your own heart. In that biggest of all tests, I wish you straight As.