Valeria Koutmina

Good afternoon!

It is a great honor to be speaking today on behalf of the class of 2011. I would like to thank all of our guides who are here to share in the celebration of the first day of the “rest of our lives.” I would also like to take a moment to thank and remember those who are not among us today, but whose hopes, inspiration, and path have informed our own (moment of silence).

In his work The Politics of Experience psychologist R.D. Laing wrote: “What we think is less than what we know, what we know is less than what we love, what we love is so much less than what there is. And to that precise extent, we are so much less than what we are.”

Fellow graduates, we have yet much to learn about the world and ourselves in it. More and more, we are discovering that there are no absolutes, and navigating a nebulous, changing terrain. I would like to tell you—do not fear the question, and do not shy away from questioning the world or your own position. This is the spirit of curiosity, of creativity. As we enter the world, continue to define for yourself, and define yourself against the ineffable. As artists, we have here been given the tools to bear witness to change, translate symbol to meaning, and give form to feeling.
Increasingly, historically, the role of the artist has become that of not simply the depicter, but the interpreter of the world. Continue to bear this in mind as you create. The creative impulse is a constructive, rather than a destructive one.

Many have said that beauty will save the world. We should not take this for granted. As artists (“creators of beautiful objects” according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary), we owe it to ourselves to question the meaning and impact of the beauty we create. That which is “beautiful” traditionally implies virtue or truth. That which is “true” can be no other way. Thus, beauty has value, and meaning. Trust your own truth, take your own path toward meaning.

The definition of the word “art” has a shadow—“artifice, trickery, illusion”. Though beauty does not equal perfection, if you create that which is false, not only will you be betraying your calling as an artist (the seeker and seer), you will be making bad art. It will not be meaningful, nor will it be beautiful in the full sense of the word.

Art holds a mirror to the world, and in so doing raises questions, carrying forth the quest for something greater than the isolated idea or individual vision, as art demands a creator and a witness. Beauty, then, by walking hand in hand with truth, is a vivifying force, for of it meaning, form, and communication are born. The laws of the universe dictate no action is without consequence. Our ideas matter more than we at this point may realize.
We are all of us works in progress. I hope you become who you are, and are nothing less. I hope you find, as Dr. Laing puts it, “what there is”, and love it enough to share it with the world. We have often been told that knowledge is power. I believe that power without goodness is dangerous. The easy, convenient answer is no answer at all—that is myopia. May you choose consciousness, awareness, and truth. May you dwell in the ecstasy of the question aptly asked.

Congratulations!