Valedictorian Speech
University of Southern California
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Liana Ching
Good morning everyone. My peers in the class of 2010 and I would like to welcome you all to our home here at the University of Southern California, and thank you for joining us in celebrating this momentous occasion. Many of us have marked this graduation on our calendars as being our final transition into adulthood. After today, we expect to be launched into the real world to fend for ourselves, and to make good on the promise of success we have shown in our time at USC.

When I woke up this morning, I asked myself, Am I grown up now? To which I answered, nope. But I’m about to put on a cap & gown, stand in front of 40,000 people, and pretend.

I pretend to be filled exclusively with excitement and resolve about my post-graduation plans without divulging the uncertainty and sometimes fear that accompanies them. I’ve perfected a near-automatic response to the question “What are you doing after college?” I say, I’m going to work for Intel’s Environmental Technology Development group for the summer, and then I’m starting my Master’s in Environmental Engineering at Stanford in the fall. I outline a deliberate course of action and convey an enduring sense of purpose by constructing my current interests into a long-term life plan. I also try to avoid the question, “where do you see yourself in ten years?”

Although I am tremendously eager to dive in to my next challenges, I really have no idea what to expect even in the next year and I’m far from committed to any long-term plan. By now, most of us have spent countless hours contemplating and securing our future arrangements. But what the world doesn’t know is that at the same time that we are reaching out, grasping for the stability and responsibility of adulthood, we are quietly undermined by the realization that our life experiences are still relatively narrow. While
at USC, we have had unparalleled opportunities to discover new world outlooks and to broaden our horizons. But I’ve found that the more knowledge that I access, the more I become aware of how very much I don’t know. And so, we have all fashioned life plans based on the assorted advice we have received from our mentors and advisors, from ranked lists, from others’ personal experiences, and of course, from google searches. And because we are enthusiastic people, these plans capture our excitement and interests as we are now – young burgeoning scholars eager to contribute to the world on a greater stage.

Today, the gates fly open and we begin running straight forward in the direction we are currently facing. But as we venture into the unknown, and encounter new experiences and unanticipated challenges, and we get a chance to compare our own personal experiences with everything we’ve been told about real life, our interests are bound to be diverted and our life plans will have to accommodate. Our plans are still a collection of best guesses about our timing, preferences, and priorities for future events. This is not a flaw in our plans, but rather a necessity, as we must cast aside these uncertainties in order to have a clear objective. We have learned that a clear objective is crucial, and not just for our own guidance. In many cases, we have to pretend that we know exactly what we want to do and that we are fully capable of doing it just to convince anyone to give us that first shot.

This is why, publicly, we will continue to pretend that our decisions are guided by informed understanding. But today, let’s drop the pretense.

Whether you’re off to your dream job or graduate school, or you’re taking a temporary job just to pay the bills, or you’re still searching for your next step, the years
after college may at times feel like wandering. Rather than fear this process, we should recognize it as an instrument to find ourselves. We will wander as we pursue careers that may or may not have to do with our majors, as we relocate to unfamiliar places, and as we strive to contribute to our professions and give back to our communities. We will try to make sense of greater forces at play in the world, not knowing how we fit in or what our full potential may be, but wanting others to see our merits and give us the opportunity to become players. Although we may not know exactly where we are going, we go with purpose, with the need to find real evidence and emotion we can use to shape our goals into concrete actions. After all, it is the journey that makes the end worthwhile. As we continue to explore, we need the space to make our best guesses, and the time to figure things out. We must be flexible and open to change as unforeseen obstacles and opportunities arise. Finally, we must find the strength be patient.

Today is not the day that we grow up. Nor is it the day that we must figure out our futures – far from it. Today is a day to celebrate the immeasurable richness of our undergraduate experience, and to be grateful to those around us who contributed to it. When we came to USC, we took our first leap into the unknown, trusting ourselves to find our way through. We will leave USC filled with new perspective, knowledge, ambition, and satisfaction that could not have been acquired without an openness to change. Aside from all the discrete bits of knowledge, college has taught us to embrace the unknown in order to learn and grow. We have discovered pieces of ourselves that cannot be compromised, which we will carry with us in all our journeys. And though we may wander, not all who wander are lost.