

**Commencement Address, University of Minnesota College of Liberal Arts,  
May 19, 2019**

**Hello and congratulations.** It's a real honor for me to be here; and it's intriguing, I think, that the university has invited a writer of satire, a person who has recently made a literary career out of skewering university life, to deliver your commencement address. But that appears to be the case, so let's begin.

**I write novels and short stories, and I teach creative writing here at the U.** A significant portion of my job is to encourage students to daydream – to make stuff up. Over the course of a semester, when I teach fiction-writing, I emphasize three things:

**First, originality.** I ask students to tell me what the typical way of tackling a writing assignment might be, and then I tell them they're not allowed to do that. I tell them they need to find a different way, to find a new path. Sometimes I drive this point home by tormenting students with writing exercises. For example:

- describe a body of water without using the letter E
- invent a word that doesn't exist, and then use it persuasively in a sentence

Years ago, in a restaurant, I opened a fortune cookie and found inside it a slip of paper that said, "Write your own story. Don't let others write it for you." That's been a sort of motto for me ever since.

**The second thing I emphasize when teaching the writing of fiction is that character matters more than plot.** Plot in a work of fiction is obviously important; it provides a scaffolding for the narrative. But it's character that gives a story its meaning, character that brings a plot to life. Let me give you an example. Hermione Granger; Albus Dumbledore; Severus Snape. J.K. Rowling was a master of plot in her seven novels; but it's her astonishing cast of characters that makes the books so memorable. We read the Harry Potter series not just to find out what happens – but to learn how her characters will interact with the things that happen to them. We want to know who they truly are, and we do so by seeing how they evolve when confronted with the unexpected.

**The third aspect I emphasize is revision.** I'm sure you all remember from your writing-intensive classes here at the U that *re-vision* means "the act of seeing again." When I write draft after draft after draft of a novel, I'm not tidying minor

errors (that part comes later); I'm trying to see more clearly. I'm looking for meaning and trying to find out what matters. My idea about what matters changes as I work, so revision is often a messy process – but in the classroom I stress its importance, encouraging students to look again, to reconsider, to be open to change. In part, revision means examining from different angles the stories we tell about our own lives and the lives of others, recognizing that every person we meet has his or her own plot and point of view.

So, there's a very brief creative writing curriculum for you: originality, character, revision.

**One thing we *don't* typically do in creative writing classes is assign quizzes or final exams.**

Personally, I've always felt a bit left out in that respect. My colleagues in the sciences and social sciences regularly experience the thrill of striding into a classroom and instilling fear in their students. I've always wanted to wield that sort of scholarly power, so I'm going to take this final moment before you get your diplomas to inflict a pop-quiz on the group of you now. Are you ready? We're going to start with a true-or-false section:

**1) True or false: You will remember everything you learned in your classes here at the U, with that knowledge leading directly to a life-long career.**

**Answer: False**

Let me give you some real-life illustrations here. I'm one of five siblings. Of the five of us,

- one majored in French and became an editor
- one majored in Music and became a speech therapist
- one majored in Philosophy and became a computer programmer
- one majored in Marketing and ran her own business in therapeutic massage

As for me: I majored in Spanish and Latin American studies and planned to be a journalist and translator. That didn't work out – I wrote too slowly – so I decided to teach high school Spanish. I applied for but didn't get the job. So I moved to Manhattan to try to break into publishing; the job I landed, when I got there, was – *wait for it* – an assistant editor on a gynecology magazine. I held that very interesting job for two years.

All of which is to say: I wandered. That Spanish and Latin American studies

major: I haven't regretted it for a moment. It didn't lead directly to a profession, but it encouraged me to dream, to write, to think broadly, and to keep my eyes and my options open. When I graduated from college in 1981, I had no idea where the next four decades would take me; but never did it occur to me that I would end up standing here one day, talking to you.

**2) Second question. True or false: Happiness and success will be distributed fairly among the members of this graduating class, the lives ahead of you being predictable and clear.**

I think we all know why that statement is false. In different ways and at different moments, you and the people surrounding you here today are going to flounder and flourish, to succeed and to struggle. A classmate in front or behind you may win the lottery, or fall ill, or both. Plot – the events that we experience during our lives – obviously matters; but it's *character* – the ways in which we interact with those life events – that almost always matters more.

**3) On to question #3. True or false: You will soon lose touch with the 'U,' your alma mater quickly becoming a distant memory.**

**Answer: False**

Let me tell you why that statement is false: because the development office is going to track you down. Those folks in development know that this place will forever be part of the fabric of your life. They know that the time you spent here, and the people you met here, will be something you continue to think about in years to come. And now that you are soon to become an alum, that fund-raising team is going to find you. You can't run and you can't hide; they will know where you are.

**Now I've got three multiple choice questions for you, and then our quiz will be finished. You know how this works: you can select one of the possible responses, or you can answer "all of the above." Okay, here we go.**

**1) Advice often given to students during commencement speeches – advice that is therefore not original, but is still very much worthwhile – includes:**

- a) this day marks a beginning, not an end
- b) out there in the world, it's important to find and follow what you love
- c) learn to see failures and disappointments as opportunities
- d) be kind; for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle

- e) recycle; floss; and don't forget to acknowledge the people who've helped you
- f) all of the above

**Answer: F – all of the above.** On to question number two.

**2) Proof that the time and money and effort you've put into the degree you're earning today will have been entirely worth it is:**

- a) that amazing job or internship you're about to get
- b) that amazing job or internship you *won't* get – and the fact that you have other options worth pursuing
- c) that cool new apartment you'll soon move into
- d) the old bedroom at home you'll soon move *back* to – that is, the room your mother turned into an arts and crafts paradise in which she has decided to sew all your old t-shirts into a quilt
- e) the letter in your in-box that will grant you admission and a scholarship for grad school
- f) the letter in your in-box that will grant you an evening shift at Target
- g) all of the above

**The answer is G – all of the above.** Some of you may have gotten that one wrong. The answer is G because that comfortable old bedroom at home, and the letter that denies you entry into grad school, may end up steering you toward an unexpected but very rewarding destination.

**Here's our last multiple-choice question. I could keep going, but I do want you to get your diplomas.**

**3) In future years, when people ask you what you remember most vividly about your experience here at the University of Minnesota/Twin Cities, you will want to tell them about:**

- a) that exam or essay you totally aced
- b) that amazing 2 am conversation with your friends in the dorm
- c) walking across the bridge from east to west bank when it was 30 below
- d) hanging out in Dinkytown on a Saturday night
- e) signing up for that class only because it fit into your schedule, but it turned out to change the direction of your life
- f) all of the above

You may have discerned a pattern here: the correct response is always **all of the above**, because when it comes to walking across this stage and into the future, there is never one single answer. Instead, there are endless different paths and possibilities, and most of you, in the years to come, will know failure as well as success, joy as well as sadness, boredom as well as surprise. My hope for you is that you'll daydream and you'll experiment; that you'll value originality and character and revision. And that when someone asks you about your education at the University of Minnesota and the possibilities it opened in front of you, you'll be able to answer

All of the above

All of the above

All of the above