Thank you so much for inviting me here to speak with you today. It is an honor.

I’d like to begin with a question: “What are you going to do with an English Major?”

I figured I would ask this question up front, because it is a question that you are probably not being asked enough. I’m guessing that your friends in the business school do not ask you this question everyday, and I’m guessing that your Aunt Mary does not ask you this question at Thanksgiving dinner. I’m guessing that your phone conversations with your parents or grandparents do not feature this question, and I’m guessing that there is not a tiny voice in the back of your own mind, a voice that you try to turn down during those sleepless, worrying, future-concerned nights, that asks you this question.

What are you going to do with an English Major?

Of course, because you are an English major, you will by now have done some on-the-fly analysis and realized that I am being ironic. We all know that, “What are you going to do with an English major” is the only question that has ever been asked of any English major, ever. “What are you going to do with that?” people ask, the word “that,” being intoned in a manner typically reserved for something unsightly, amorphous, perhaps noxious, as though the unseemly business of studying literature would be better off were it simply to be tossed aside.
And it is precisely this question that I have been invited here today to address. I would like to ask you to consider that this is a fairly ridiculous question. If you are sitting in this room, then I imagine that you, like me, might find discussing the value of the English major to be something akin to discussing the value of oxygen, or the value of water, or the value of food. I do not mean this in the pretentious manner in which it might sound. I mean it as a simple truth of my existence. I am a writer who teaches writing, and so my entire understanding of the world in which I live has been shaped by the English major, by literature, by stories.

The writer Joan Didion once wrote, “I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.” To read books, to write stories, is to yearn to understand ourselves and to understand others. By studying literature, we are connecting ourselves to a lengthy and broad tradition of people who wanted to know what they were looking at, what they saw and what it meant, what they wanted, and what they feared. But, again, because you are sitting in this room, you already know that.

And for some of you, that grand stuff doesn’t matter right now. Some of you will be graduating soon, and your future may be uncertain, and you may be terrified at this prospect, and so some of you may be considering the value of the English major not as a high-minded theoretical concept at all, but rather as a real-world problem to be solved. You have put in all of this work. You have earned membership into this honors society. You have done everything right. You will be awarded a degree, with honors. And now, finally, where is it going to get you? What is the payoff?
If you are a senior, then you have exactly one week and one day of classes left in your college career. After those six days are up, you will spend a few weeks turning in final papers, taking final exams, and then on a Sunday morning not long from now, you will walk across a stage, you will be awarded a degree, and, like that, you will be let loose into a world where markets and money and power and greed are not simply concepts that exist in texts, but rather are real-world questions to which you will be expected to have a real-world answer. They are questions that will move from the theoretical to the actual, because we live in a world that will, for a lifetime, constantly suggest to you that the things that actually matter are things like markets and money and power and greed, a world that will constantly suggest to you that you ought to be driven by our own vanities and insecurities, your own desires and fears, a world that will constantly suggest to you that everything can be reduced to a binary—that there is winning and there is losing, that there is good and there is bad, that there is black and there is white, and that this is all there is.

So, what are you going to do with an English Major?

I would like to suggest to you that the choice you made to become an English Major is an act of bravery, an act of courage, because it is a life-affirming choice, it is the answer to the world that will constantly suggest to you that you ought to be driven by your own basest motivations. Whether you knew it or not, whether you did so consciously or not, when you chose your English major, you chose to spend a lifetime considering the question of what it is to be human, what it is to be alive, what it is to live with compassion and empathy and awareness and understanding. I would like to suggest that you have made yourself fully-equipped to know that you are not alone, that life is
difficult but that people do overcome, that the interesting things in life happen when we are faced with difficult times and difficult choices, and we are forced to react. And, finally, I would like to suggest that when you are finally unmoored, when you enter that world of markets and money and power and greed, your English major will be of more real-world value to you than a supposedly “practical” degree focused exclusively on the amassing of material wealth, because the work that you all have done here will be the thing that keeps you afloat. It will be the thing that keeps you alive. It will be the thing that will keep you human.

It will keep you human because your English Major has already forced you to shift your focus outside of yourself. It has forced you to be other-directed. It has asked you to challenge your unconscious beliefs, reinforced to you day after day, that yours is the only experience that matters. Because the act of reading a book is an act of empathy. To read is to force yourself to consider the world from somebody else’s perspective. It is to enter the interior world of another human being, to try to understand their experience, however far removed from your own. It is to realize that you are not alone, that somebody, at one time or another, has felt precisely the way that you do now. To be an English major is to commune with a humanity not bound by geography or gender or sexuality or time. Despite what is so often said, the act of reading a book is not an act of escaping the world, but rather of going further into it.

But again, the fact that you are sitting here today, and the work that you have done as scholars and intellectuals who have earned membership into this honors society, tells me that I am not saying anything that you do not already know.
So I will simply suggest to you that, when we talk about the value of an English major, we are talking not just about the human value inherent in the studying of literature, but also that your English major has actual, real-world value. Because when you do enter the world of markets and money and power and greed, you will enter a world that does not relent, a world that constantly bombards you with input. The writer David Foster Wallace once said, “I received 500,000 discrete bits of information today, of which maybe 25 are important. My job is to make sense of it.”

You have taken this brave and courageous act to try to make sense of it. To try to make sense of the world around you, and so I’d like to suggest to you today that when you do walk across that stage—whether that is in one month, or one year, or three years, and when you enter that world of markets and money and power and greed—when you walk across that stage, you will be armed and equipped to deal with questions that will be so dire, so important, so essential to answer, that this question—What are you going to do with an English major?—will seem like one of the most ridiculous things that a person could ask.