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Oberlin College Commencement Speaker
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Thank you so much for having me, and for presenting me with this honorary degree. It's not necessarily better than the one I earned by going to classes and putting myself into debt, but I'm trying to collect a stack of them before I die, so really appreciate it.

Like most of you, I am incredibly grateful for the education I received. A good public school followed by college. I went to three in all, looking for the right fit. The first two were OK, I guess but midway through my sophomore year I got heavy into drugs and dropped out. Everyone said that was it—I'd made an irreparable mistake at age 20 and could never correct it. But I did. The place that I eventually graduated from, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has its qualities, but is nowhere near Oberlin when it comes to academics. It might be different now, but in 1984, if you could draw Snoopy on a cocktail napkin you were in. I received my Bachelor of Arts degree in 1987, when I was 30.

Our commencement speaker was a conceptual artist named Vitto Acconci. He'd done a lot but was best known for constructing a wooden ramp in a New York gallery. Then he hid beneath it and masturbated for several weeks without stopping.

"Well you could do that!" my mother said when I explained to her who he was. "I mean, isn't that the goal? Doing what you love and getting paid for it!"

I don't think she understood a word of the man's commencement address. I'm not sure I did either. In preparing for today, I asked myself what he might have said that would have had an effect on my future.

I figured my post college life would be pretty much like the one I'd been leading for the past decade: work some little job I didn't have to put much thought into, then come home and do my own stuff. It was the life that most of my friends led, and half my family.

My sister Gretchen went to RISD for painting. Then there was Amy at Second City. And boy did our father give us grief about it. "Art or comedy is all well and good, but you need to find something to fall back on," he'd say.

I hear this from parents all the time when I meet them at book signings. "Our daughter is an aspiring writer and we told her that's fine, but she needs to find something to fall back on."

"So, she's a terrible writer?" I ask.

"Well, no."

“Is she lazy? Has she shown no improvement since she started?”

“Of course not,” the parents will say. “She’s wonderful. Writing is all she cares about.”

“Then why does she need to fall back?” I ask. “Are you saying you have no faith in her before she’s even had a chance to prove herself?”

It’s an unfair question on my part, as it makes the parents sound unsupportive. What they mean is that they don’t want their child to be broke and to suffer rejection. But there are plenty of worse things. At twenty-two, you are built for poverty and rejection. And you know why? Because you’re good looking. You might not realize it this morning, but thirty years from now you’ll pull out pictures of yourself taken on this day and think, ‘Why did nobody tell me I was so attractive?’ You maybe can’t see it now because you’re comparing yourself to the person next to you, or two rows up. But you are stunning.

And let me tell you something else: when you’re on your deathbed, or at least, say, 61, the time you’ll look back on most fondly will not be the day you bought your first Picasso painting at Sotheby’s, the little still life done in 1921—Oh, am I alone in this?—but the years after you graduated, when you were first living as an adult and everything seemed so possible. Maybe nothing worked out the way you planned, but you still thought it would, were convinced that it would. You were most likely broke and living in some crummy apartment. But it was YOUR apartment, and you were good looking. I guess I’m saying that these next few years could be the best of your lives. Just don’t blow it.

But how? You’re thinking I was going to tell you not to rush into anything. “Don’t become an adult quite yet. Take a wild chance and whatever you do, don’t move back to your home town. Especially don’t move back in with your parents.”

But who am I to say that to a twenty-two-year-old owing \$120,000? I’m not sure your generation has the luxury of drifting across the globe, trying this for a while, and then that. How do you find yourself when before you’ve even started, you’ve found yourself in debt?

So there goes that advice.

Here, though, are a few things I can tell you:

One. When it comes to scented candles you really need to watch it. There are basically only two brands worth having Trudon or Dyptyque. ‘I can’t afford that!’ you’re probably thinking, not with this \$120,000 debt for my degree in dance history. To this I say, “Fine. You’ll just have to go without scented candles until you can afford Dyptique or Trudon, or until someone gives them to you.”

Two. Choose one thing to be terribly, terribly offended by, this as opposed to the dozens

or possibly hundreds that many of you are currently juggling.

Three. Stand up for what you believe in, as long as I believe in the same thing. Those of you who'd like to ban assault rifles, I am behind you 100 percent. Take the front lines, give it your all, and don't back down until you win. Do not, however petition to have a Balthus painting removed from the Met because you can see the subject's underpants. The goal is to have less in common with the Taliban, not more.

Four. Be yourself. Unless yourself is an asshole. How will I know if I'm an asshole? you're probably wondering. Well, pay attention. Do people avoid you? Every time you park the car or do your laundry do you wind up engaged in some sort of conflict?

An example: Not to pat myself on the back, but I've been doing some work the past few years with a group called Love, Hope, Strength. What they do is get people to donate bone marrow, and what I like is that they allow me to tell outrageous lies about them. "If you sign up," I promise audiences at my readings, "you will get to have sex with the most attractive member of the cancer patient's family—young or old, they can not by law refuse you."

People don't donate their bone marrow in the theater, of course. Rather someone swabs the inside of their cheek, and they fill out a quick form. It's rare to find a match, but it does happen. The cut off age is 50, so I tell the audience that. Then I announce that whoever registers with Love, Hope, Strength can come right to the front of the book signing line. This is how you get your donors. That said, if I have, say, 2,000 people in the theater, 50 might take the bait. That doesn't sound like much, but it's actually a good number, and if you're going to 40 cities it adds up.

So I'm in Napa, California, and this woman, maybe around sixty-five, claims that I'm being ageist, and that if I don't let her cut to the front of the book signing line she's going to take the producer of the show to court and sue for discrimination. Now, this is a fairly small theater. I have 20 people who've signed up to donate bone marrow. I'd told the audience it doesn't hurt at all, that they can, in fact, undergo the extraction while they're having sex with the cancer patient's family member of their choice. This is the biggest lie of all, as it is, in fact, an excruciating procedure. Here are 20 people willing to endure a great deal of pain, not to benefit someone they know, but to possibly save the life of a complete stranger. And this woman says that unless I let her come to the front of the line, she'll sue. She's taking her selfish desire to get home as quickly as possible and masking it as a fight against injustice.

Now that's an asshole, the person you never want to be. I wrote in her book, "You are a horrible human being." And of course, she laughed, thinking I was kidding. That's the drawback to writing humor. People always think you're kidding. "No, I mean it," I told her. "You're awful."

She laughed harder.

Five. Always have a few jokes up your sleeve. They come in handy at casual get-togethers and probably don't hurt at job interviews either, depending on what position you're applying for. Here's one my friend Ronnie recently told me that's timely, quick, and easy to remember:

It's night, and a cop stops a car a couple of priests are riding in. "I'm looking for two child molesters," he tells them.

The priests think for a moment. "We'll do it," they say.

Six: This last bit of advice is something very few of you are going to take, which is unfortunate as it's just as important as what I told you about scented candles. And it's this: write thank you letters. On a practical level it's just common sense. People like doing things for people who are grateful. Say your grandmother gives you \$100 as a graduation gift. If she has, say, eight grandkids who are or will be in the position that you're in now, I guarantee that yours will be the only thank you note—not an e-mail or text or Facebook message but actual letter with a stamp on it—that she receives. And she will treasure it. Then, a few months down the line you write again, telling her you just spent the last of the money she sent. "I was at the Goodwill, buying a dress I can wear for my job interview tomorrow," you could say. "The skid marks will hopefully come out after the first wash, and as for the underarm stains, I guess we'll see. But as I was paying for it, I thought of how kind you've always been to me, and of how lucky I am to have you in my life."

Chances are 80 percent she'll send you more money. Not because you asked for it, but because you're grateful. I've talked to employers who say that the applicants who send a thank you letter after an interview go right to the top of the pile. When I go on a book tour I write to everyone who interviews me, to every store and driver. You know who else does that? Nobody.

It's not because they're not grateful, they are, most likely. Rather they just think, Oh people will understand. And they will, of course. Your grandmother's gotten used to sending you gifts and never hearing anything back. Well, she thinks, as you lay around, texting someone in the next room about something you've just seen on TV, he's busy.

But here's the thing. She's busy too. Yet she takes the time to send you stuff. I'm not trying to be a guilt monger. I'm trying to help you. And who am I? A fairly successful person, one with a Picasso painting and ten books under his belt, who will go home at the end of this day and write the president of Oberlin to thank her for this degree I do not deserve but am so incredibly grateful for.