

## Welcome Class of 2012

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We know that in the next decades this planet—our world—will go through many dramatic changes. So that just about the time that your class matures as adults and inherits the leadership of your societies, the situation may be dire for many human and other sentient beings. It already is. So it is likely that your generation will face crises that are more complex than any human beings have faced before. And none of us who are mature adults now knows what you will need to know then or what you will need to do.

If there is any hope to sustain communities of nurture and justice through such crises, the burden will fall on you. You do not desire this burden, I am sure; but it will become yours nonetheless.

Therefore what you must do in the next four years is gather resources for the time when you have nothing else. You must gather resources to become a certain kind of person: someone who is disciplined and daring—fluent and free. Your purpose now is to learn how to thrive as a human being in the face of confusion and loss, to love without reserve, to attend beauty with joy.

There are elements of a liberal arts education that will support you in this. And you tutorial professors, who are here today, will be your advisors in this. You will meet them tomorrow to begin your individual academic plan.

Since we are in a gymnasium, let's begin with athletics. Whether you are an elite athlete or not, push yourself to learn new physical skills. Test your endurance and capabilities, at whatever level they are now. Submit to training; practice when you are tired; compete when you lose heart.

We want you to give yourself opportunities of creative expression. So many of you come here already accomplished musicians, actors and artists. This is a community that will embrace and develop your talents in new ways if you let it. So make ephemeral worlds of theater together, as magically as you can. Turn your desires into dances. Learn harmony and composition—in our worst moments and our best we turn to music to feel the life resound in us. Practice the rudiments of your art every day, every day. It is only by practice that we become people who can be truly spontaneous. It is only the very well rehearsed who can improvise well.

We want you to pursue courses in quantitative reasoning. Learn to think carefully about variance and probability so that you are not vulnerable to charlatans. Learn to think clearly. Period. If you give your mind to demanding courses in mathematics and physics, they will repay you with intuitions of elegance and beauty.

Study literature and language—not only the great literature of this great nation, but also the literature of other nations where English has evolved. And study the language and literature of peoples that may be alien to you: French, Chinese, Latin, Russian, Greek, Arabic, German, or Spanish. Language enchants the world—learn to see the flash of metaphor that quickens one thing with another—it is not causation exactly—yet it changes everything. Learn to hear the meter of a sentence that was there before the author heard the words. Caught on a line of words or a phrase of music, your memory becomes indelible.

We want you to take inquiry-based courses in the natural sciences. Give yourself to methods that demand creative hypotheses, experimental design, and the test of disinterested replication. This combination of imagination and rigor has produced the

most powerful common knowledge in the world. It is not only useful knowledge; it will allow you draw close to the wonders of creation. There is a freshness of things that nourishes the present—when the past feels ruined and the future worries, there remains the beauty of the world. Learn to be absorbed by it.

Finally, take courses in history, economics and other disciplines that analyze human societies. We need you to become people capable of making wise and brave policies. But your needs are likely to be deeper than that.

You are not the first generation that must come of age during a traumatic time. And it may help you in the future to know that there were people before you who endured war, epidemic, slavery, disaster—and they left eloquent witnesses—of music, poetry, diplomacy, religious devotion, and romantic love. So be accountable to the past that has brought you—you, in particular—to this place, and to the future that unfolds from here.

These are the elements that will compose your liberal education. At Grinnell, we invite you to compose them in a distinctive context. And I would say that the core values of that context are these: a culture of diversity, an ethos of freedom, and a communion of life-long friends. This is a wonderful context, but it is also fraught with the vices that our virtues make possible.

To contribute to a culture of diversity, you cannot be merely tolerant and egalitarian in your views. A culture of diversity demands more difficult virtues: generosity, forbearance, and habits of kindness. You will have to become self-critical of your most ordinary tendencies, yet gentle enough to yourself that you don't become rigid. You will need to remain present in the face of someone else's anger or terror or disgust or grief. It is so difficult to keep moving towards each other in the face of these intensely aversive energies. It takes so much courage and love. But any robust intellectual endeavor at the beginning of the twenty-first century must draw energy and insight from the diversity of humankind. So courage and love are not optional; they must form the basis of our ability to teach and learn together.

Therefore make friendship a priority of your lives here. Do dumb things together that you hope your parents won't find out about: We are legally obliged not to tell. Be silly and serious together. Be naked to each other—preferably not in the libraries, please.

The friendships you make here will be rich and rare. You won't know how rare until later in your life. But it is these friendships that will sustain you when you go through trials that you think in every moment you cannot endure. And it is these friendships that will carry forward the idealism of your youth. So that when you are mature adults, faced with confusion and loss, you will have the strength to do what is good.

I want to conclude with a few words to your families and friends—

Many of you have not faced a day this bittersweet since you dropped off your children at kindergarten not so long ago. And in the meantime they have become so beautiful and so talented and so strange.

And you are worried that they are not ready; and you are worried that they do not know that. But you have lived long enough to know: One is never ready. Life unfolds in that mix of things we plan and things that befall us—always both wounding and wonderful.

I have been teaching at Grinnell for ten years. So perhaps I can reassure you: They will meet the next months just as we all do—guided by the compass of our memories, the nurture of friends and advisors, and hope of a future in which all our children thrive.

My colleague Elena Bernal said to me: Tell the families: You're not losing a child; you're gaining a College. Thank you for bringing these young people to us.

Now, to the class of 2012, on behalf of the Academic Dean's office, we welcome you: have fun, and don't forget to sleep.

