

President Nucci, Faculty, Staff, proud parents, guests, and graduates. I want to thank you all, especially Dean Costigan, for the honor of being the commencement speaker at this year's graduation ceremonies. Before Dean Costigan called me into his office to inform me that I was chosen as the Honored Faculty member this year, I did not know that gratitude and abject horror could co-exist at the same **moment**. I am very thankful for the **honor**... and for the pounds I have shed over the past few months from the stress of writing this speech and the knee knocking, teeth chattering anticipation of standing before you this **afternoon**.

Today we celebrate our new graduates, who may also be experiencing a little stage fright at this moment. **Congratulations!** **Relax, rejoice, and relish** every moment of this day. You have worked hard and grown immensely during your journey to earn your degree. Each of you has your own stories that could be told

from this podium: Stories of hardship, setbacks, and persistence; stories about the support of your family and friends; stories about growth, success and triumph. But today, **all of** your stories share the same ending. Today **all of** you can say, "**I made it!!**"

Receiving this honor is one of my own "I made it" **moments**, and I want to take a minute to thank those who have **believed in me, supported me and inspired me**. I am blessed to know so many truly amazing people. First, I thank my parents. They are my biggest supporters. Their love and generosity is immeasurable.

I also want to thank my colleagues at The Art Institute of Philadelphia, especially those with whom I have forged relationships outside of the classroom. Your **generosity, friendship, and guidance...your dedication, knowledge and excellence**... pushed me to be my best. Thank you, Dr. Kali Meeks, my Director and mentor. Without you, I don't think I'd be

here today. I must also thank all of my teachers, those who inspired and those who were uninspired. Each helped me realize the type of teacher I wanted to be. And of course I'd like to thank my students, who have taught me a great deal more about humanity and pop culture than I ever thought possible.

After weeks of filling my wastepaper basket with crumpled attempts to put together the right words for my speech, I began to wonder if I had any wisdom or inspiration to offer. I asked myself, "Who am I to be giving a commencement speech?" I am not a celebrity. I'm not a well-known public speaker. What is there in my journey that might instruct you in yours?

The answers came to me one morning, as I stared out at the countryside from my front porch. I began to reflect on my **first** graduation day, as a college undergrad over 15 years ago. It was an especially proud and personal achievement for me, because

academically I had traveled a rocky road, littered with potholes, debris, detours, twists and turns, and traffic jams...sort of like my daily commute to Philly.

You **see**, I am a high school drop **out**. For me, high school was a dark experience, a place of burned bridges, dead-ends, and **failure**. To keep my sanity, I quit and somehow had the insight to at least earn my GED. After months of exorcising my demons and contemplating my future, I decided to enroll in a local community college in what would have been my senior year of high school. The success I finally achieved there, along with the praise and respect I received from some of my professors, changed my life. I discovered something positive within myself and I realized what I wanted to do -- pursue a career in the arts and teach.

From then on, it was all about the education and the creative journey. After a couple of years, I transferred to a university to earn my Bachelors, graduating with honors. Rather than wait, I went right to graduate school, earning a spot in a highly competitive Master's program. I was the youngest and least experienced in my class. My journey had led me away from the conventional path and forced me to forge my own. It took me from being a high school dropout who never took her SATs to earning my Masters and becoming a professor. At times it was a very scary road and I had a lot of obstacles to overcome in my personal life. I found, it is truly amazing what happens when one faces fear.

During those years, I worked hard and strived to do my best. With the successes there were still plenty of failures...**BUT**, with each failure came invaluable knowledge. I learned to persevere and to embrace change. I discovered how to transform my

failures into something positive. And, I realized that creativity isn't so much about what you make, it's more about the journey of making it. Most importantly, my family and I learned a lesson I hope you will remember on your journey: There is no singular route to travel to arrive at your dream; there are many ways to reach your destination. It's like traveling to a big city — you can get there by plane, by motor vehicle, on a bicycle, or on foot. Whatever means you **choose**, whatever route you **take**, you can reach the same destination.

After today, one of your major **goals** -- earning your **degree** -- is behind you. You have learned your own lessons from the challenges you have overcome to get here. For some of you, passing one of my classes might have been one of those hurdles. Now you face new challenges. You have choices to make and new goals to pursue. I would like to send you off into the world

with just a few words about the important things I have learned on my own journey:

It's vital that you stay relevant. No one wants to go the way of developed film, the public pay phone, or other things that are now obsolete. You are entering a highly competitive **arena** and nipping at your heels will always be a younger generation with fresh ideas and untapped imagination, so part of your thinking must remain young. Writer Pearl S. Buck once said, "You can tell your age by how much pain you feel when you come in contact with a new idea." Staying relevant really means recognizing your power and developing it. This means making choices that move you closer to your goals, while having the wisdom to recognize when a decision or opportunity might cause you to stray too far from the goal you are trying to reach.

Flex your mind and your imagination. If an idea has hit a snag, change direction, take a detour, or start again. Artist Andy Warhol once said, “They say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.” To create, you must have an open mind. You must be willing to embrace change and experiment with new ideas. The career fields you have chosen are constantly changing. You must change with them. My father wanted me to share a piece of advice that he received when he was in college...many years ago...but it is still relevant today. For the last four years, you have worked diligently to learn all the rules. The challenge ahead is to learn to cope with all of the exceptions and benefit from them. I would like to add something to this advice that especially pertains to life in the art world after college. There are no rules.

Make friends with failure. Writer Neil Gaiman said “Sometimes the best way to learn something is by doing it wrong and looking

at what you did.” You have already started forging a friendship with failure during your undergraduate work. Now is the time to welcome failure, so you need never fear it. Failure forces us to look at things differently, with a new perspective. It sets you free to explore and innovate. After all, the worst has already happened...you have failed. Now you only need to look for the positives and make that failure work for you.

Filmmaker John Waters, a fellow Baltimorean and my cult hero since childhood, once wrote about failure:

“ Rejection is hard, but to get acceptance you have to put up with a lot of rejection. If you really like something, don’t ever think, ‘*Can I do this?*’ If you think ‘*Can I?*,’ you won’t. You have to say, ‘*I’m gonna do this, and nobody’s gonna stop me!*’”

Please remember your beginnings and carry them with you.

Walt Disney used to say, “Too many people grow up. That’s the real trouble with the world; too many people grow up. They forget.” As a final homework assignment, to be completed about a month from today when the carefree days after graduation are coming to an end and real life has set in again, I would like you to watch Neil Gaimen’s commencement speech *Make Good Art*, which he delivered at the University of the Arts in 2012. He talks about the rewards of creating work for others, but he tempers that with a word of caution to remember to simply create to please you. Your journey started with a pure passion to create and the freedom to express the most integral parts of yourself. You will certainly use that passion to forge your career, but remember to allow time outside of work to reconnect with that youthful freedom to express what you love.

Push yourself beyond your limitations. When you entered college, there was no promise of graduation. It takes hard work to earn a degree. The degree itself is not a promise of a fulfilling and worthwhile career. Now that you have earned your degree, the hard work begins again, along with more hurdles and hardships to overcome along your way. Bruce Lee, who pushed martial arts beyond the limits, believed, “There are no limits. There are only plateaus, and you must not stay there, you must go beyond.” Don’t be afraid to test your capabilities. Try for more. You may just surprise yourself.

Looking back on my own achievements, sometimes I felt like **an** imposter, as if a body snatcher took over during those times when I had to close my eyes and plow through the fear to get to the next point along the journey. Succeeding often leaves us wondering how we did it. But then we remember the lessons we mastered along the way, which brings me back to where this speech began.

By facing fear, persevering despite obstacles, seeing failures as opportunities, remaining relevant, striving for excellence, and keeping an open mind and an active imagination, you will be surprised at how many times in life you will have the opportunity to say, "I did it! I made it!"

Again, I congratulate you all on your success and wish you the best in your future endeavors. Please join us and give yourselves a big hand. We are proud of you.