

SOME INFINITE THING

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The first thing I'd like to say to my fellow graduates of Southern Utah University's class of 2011: we made it. We are about to graduate. If you are like me, you've been in school since you were barely out of diapers; if you are like me, you are excited to be here today because it means you can rest now. Congratulations.

So what do we do now? Well, me? I'm going to go out there and succeed. I'm going to find the perfect job and I'm going to make money. Big monkey-throwing barrels of money. And with that money I will build the biggest house with a floor-to-ceiling Beauty and the Beast library, a kitchen straight out of the food network, and, in the backyard? A two million gallon man-made river full of the most expensive (and delicious) fish that I can imagine. I will get married, and my spouse and I will adopt one child from every continent until our family portraits look like an episode of Captain Planet. I will raise them to be just as successful—no—*more* successful than I ever was. And as they build dream families and raise perfect homes of their own, I will get to work solving all the world's problems: cancer, poverty, hunger. I will draft a policy that makes it illegal for Republicans and Democrats to be mean

to each other. And then I'll run for president, make peace in the Middle East, save the whales, win the Superbowl, and become a daytime TV sensation. And when it's all over, and they launch my ashes into space, I will have left behind a generation of super-smart, super-athletic, super-diverse grandchildren who will fondly remember me, their Pop-pop, as they vow to continue the incredible trend of excellence which I started.

So that's my plan. That's what I'm going to do. Don't tell me it won't happen. Don't tell me how hard it will be or how much work it will take. Don't tell me about the applications or rejections or the endless phone calls. Don't tell me about the tedium, the checkout lines, the tax forms, the hours-long traffic or how I will feel sometimes that everyone, *everyone* around me must be stupid and selfish because they are in my way, and can't they see I have just worked eight hours at an endlessly frustrating job where no one realizes the fabulous extent of my talent? Can't they see that all I want is to watch formulaic police-procedural TV shows for a couple hours before going to bed early so I can wake up and do it all over again? This world is difficult. I wish I could stand up here and tell you all you will have absolutely nothing but love, happiness, and success but I can't. After we leave here, we will be entering—as so many have done before us—a world not yet perfect. And what can we possibly do about it? We can choose to be angry

and bored in our unfair lives. We can choose to simmer inside at how unjust and ignorant everything is. Those things are easy. The other choice, the harder choice, the educated choice, is to work toward understanding.

I want you to look around this room. Look to your right and to your left, to the rows in front of and behind you. There're people. Everywhere. Some of them you know; most of them you don't. But just imagine with me for a moment how each of these people, each of them has a name. How simple—a name. Think now about how each of these individuals has someone they love, someone for whom they would give their life. Think about how they each have something they're struggling with. Maybe they are sick or hurt or lonely. Think about how they all have ideas—brilliant ones—if only someone would listen. It's a lot to think about. Now try, just try, to imagine seven billion of these people—an earth full to the brim. It's not easy. But this is why we've gotten our degrees. This is why we've come to SUU. To expand our minds—and having done that, to expand our choices. I don't mean the choice of a six-figure paycheck versus a five-figure paycheck or of a job running a building instead of cleaning a building. I mean the choice between being bored and angry and useless and the choice of being aware. It's always said that college is a place for students to open their minds to other ways of thinking and living and, yes, that phrase is cute and overused, but it's true. We have come to college to learn how others experience the world—even more, to learn that others experience the world. Because of your education, you are better prepared to choose the more difficult mode of understanding and knowing the many ways in which other people are alive. Our education has afforded us the choice, when we get stuck in traffic, not to get angry but rather to open our minds and consider the others, the thousands of others, who are stuck in traffic too. This isn't a new idea. It's been explained by many, many people, but I think the author, David Foster Wallace, said it best: "The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day. That is real freedom." He says, "That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing." In choosing to gain an education, you have chosen to hold on to that infinite thing, and for that I congratulate you.

Some out there believe firmly that we are not up to the challenge—that the only thing this generation does is constantly check Facebook in hopes that someone will have noticed their certain particular awesomeness. That simply is not true. In my time here, I have met the most incredible, giving, and diligent people I have ever known. I believe, truly, that with your hard work you can do everything required of you—and what is required is a lot—but I'm not afraid, and I don't think you are either. So what do we do about those who would have us believe we are not up to the challenge? Well, as Don Draper says, "If you don't like what they're saying, change the conversation." So when we leave here, let's change the conversation. Let's get them talking, instead, about how we strive to serve our fellow being. Let's get them talking, instead, about how we struggle for a better world. Let's get them talking, instead, about the way we work every day for truth and compassion and hope. Let's get them talking. Thank you.