Good evening. I’m thrilled that so many of you could join us tonight, and delighted that, in a year that has been like no other, we can still find a way to convene and celebrate the achievements of our graduates, who have worked so hard and accomplished so much.

We’ve all learned a lot of computer skills quickly this term, but I hope you’ll be patient if we run into a couple of glitches tonight. It’s been a homegrown operation. Among the many people who deserve special thanks are Kim Harrison, John O’Brien, Patrick Scioscia, AJ Kelton, Jessica Brandt, Rashida Batte-Bowden, Cindy Meneghin, Christo Apostolou, Randi Rosh-Solenthaler, and Debbie Reynoso. Without their help, we never could have so quickly assembled tonight’s program, after the unforeseen and unique challenges that we faced this semester. Thank you.

To the Class of 2020: Tonight I want to tell you about a 19th-century knife-maker named Karl Elsener from the town of Schwyz, Switzerland. In 1891, Elsener was enjoying a moderately successful career as a manufacturer of knives and surgical tools when his small company won a big contract. The military wanted a pocket-sized blade for soldiers that was capable of opening canned food, disassembling rifles, boring holes in hard surfaces, and cleaning soldiers’ teeth. The result of course was the first Swiss Army Knife, a tool perfectly designed for the infantryman who needed to travel light and to be prepared for any number of obstacles on the front lines. The product was, need I say, a huge success; future versions were loaded up with more and more blades, tools, and gadgets. Today you can get one with a barometer, a hacksaw, a pharmaceutical spatula, a wirecutter and a USB port. The Victorinox company is worth over 300 million dollars and produces over 100,000 knives a day.

But this is the English department, where we care about language. That means that for us, even more remarkable than the success of the Swiss Army Knife as a *product* is its success as a *metaphor*. A Swiss Army knife now refers to any versatile, convenient, mutli-purpose tool, instrument, or person, often in a small package. Football fans use the term for the rare all-around player who can run, catch, return punts, even throw an occasional pass. Volkswagen marketed its Golf as the Swiss Army Knife of cars, equally useful for the starts and stops of city driving or the excitement of tight turns on mountain roads. Some cognitive scientists believe that the human mind is structured like a Swiss Army Knife, with a varied array of tools or functions that can be taken out and put away as needed for the task at hand.

Why am I telling you this? Because tonight, graduates, we are giving you all, each and every one of you, your own Swiss Army Knife. That Swiss Army Knife… is your English degree.

I need hardly tell you, amid this pandemic which has prevented us from sharing handshakes and hugs tonight, that you are entering a world far more unpredictable than the one Swiss soldiers faced in 1890. You are embarking on a journey in which you will probably have not one career but several, in which you may hold jobs that have not even been *imagined* yet. And it is not only the job market that is uncertain: it is the fate of our economy, our society, our democracy, even our planet.

Yet we take heart this evening in reminding ourselves that the moment of graduation has *always* been an uncertain time. Whether we’ve admitted it or not, the future has *always* been a great unknown. Through the ages, every young graduate who has shaken his or her or *their* Magic 8 Ball has had seen the same answer float to the top: Reply Hazy, Try Again. To the Class of 2020, I say: You are not the first to climb a mountain, only to behold a great valley spreading out below, shrouded in mist.

As you descend into that valley, an ever-changing landscape will present you with challenge and excitement, danger and surprise and reward. There is no clearly marked trail. You must blaze your own. You will need to travel light. You will require, in one small package, the tools to open cans, clean rifles, scale fish, trim your toenails--maybe even take down a caribou or hot-wire a Humvee. That’s what your English degree is for. Metaphorically speaking.

Some fields of study teach you a particular skill. They can make you very good at that one single skill. But if you realize in five years that you really don’t love that skill, or if all the jobs doing that skill are sent offshore or given over to robots, then you’re out of luck.

Your English degree, however, folds neatly in your pocket and travels with you wherever you go.

Equipped with your English degree, you can drill deep into primary sources with you *research tools*, measure the validity of the evidence with your *your reading tools*, hammer out an argument with *your writing tool.* As you advance, in your life and career, you will solve problems, you will appreciate nuance, you will tell good stories. You will learn and you will teach. When public discourse becomes strident, you will inform the discussion with your thoughtful study of race, gender and sexuality. Having read the stories of the downtrodden and the distraught, you will speak out in clear, eloquent prose. When others are stuck arguing in circles, you, the English major, will use your creative capacities to imagine a future and better world.

In your personal life, you will find that the poets, dramatists, and novelists you’ve studied will be there for you in times of need. You will turn to your favorite writers for words of congratulations or consolation when you are struck speechless—confronting the death of a loved one, perhaps, or the birth of a child. The literature that you have studied – Shakespeare and Joyce, William Blake and Toni Morrison, Charlotte Brontë and Alfonso Cuarón– will give you insight into the struggles that we all face: the histories of our families and our communities, the nature of love and friendship, the place of each one of us in a vast society.

All that in your Swiss Army Knife.

To the Class of 2020, I urge you to use your Swiss Army Knife. At every turn in the road you’ll find another tool or gadget that you didn’t know was there. The future may be hazy and uncertain, but that’s because it is yours to fashion…. Go fashion the future -- for all of us.

[Introduce Nelson V.]