I’d like to start by saying thank you to the English department for organizing this event, because we needed it.  Although we remain responsibly separated, it is with much gratitude that I share this virtual experience with you all, and I believe that this convocation is a testament to our adaptability to stand firm in celebration of us, because we are worth the praise.

When people ask me what I’m gonna do with a degree in English, I joke and I say literally anything that’s not waiting tables, but more seriously I inform them that I plan to *write*. Then for some reason I get a vibe of doubt comparable to the one people give you if you tell them you want to be an actor.  I’ve also heard of worried parents, who encourage their kids to pursue business or medicine, or something more stable or more practical.   Please don’t misunderstand me, ambitions such as business and medicine are obviously worthy pursuits and it's not my purpose to be reductive toward them, rather, I think that it is the English major who faces this reductionism.  We are English majors, we have guts, we have imagination, the world needs us, and our pursuits are no less praiseworthy than any other.

In class, Professor Elbert once asked us who we consider the transcendentalists today, and to her, I say it is us, the English majors.  I think there is something very special about us which allows us to explore the magic and the beauty of literature and of words.  As Albus Dumbledore says “words are in my not so very humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic, capable of both inflicting injury, and remedying it.”  And I believe that it is *this* magic that the English major harnesses with eyes that view the world differently than the other majors.

Last year at the English department awards, Professor Greenberg said that this is the Oscars for the English majors.  And I confess that with my time in quarantine, instead of ticktocking, I sometimes pretend that I’ve won an Oscar, and I rehearse what I would say. So sometimes I look on YouTube at famous speeches for inspiration.  One of my favorites is a speech JK Rowling gave at Harvard on what she calls the benefits of failure.  She says she was as poor as it was possible to be in modern day Britain without being homeless—and that failure is what allowed to her to be honest with herself about what she is: a writer.  I dare not compare my story with her colossal success; however, I, myself, have failed in my life.  Five years ago, I was struggling with drug and alcohol addiction and sleeping on a cot in a church basement in a shelter in Paterson Nj. I had failed on an epic scale, as JK Rowling also says.  I make this very public confession not to shock, or to make anyone uncomfortable, but because I guarantee that everyone listening to this speech deals with hardships that are *seemingly* insurmountable, especially considering the state of the world and the collective global pain-body we find ourselves a part of today.  But sometimes, what we don’t realize, is that is exactly what these problems are: *seemingly* insurmountable.  Our resilience is what brings us here today, because we are a generation of students who have graduated under circumstances unlike any other generation in recent history.

To anyone still struggling, and I imagine many of us are, I offer these words of encouragement, my unsolicited sage wisdom: be obsessively grateful.  As my good friend Rachel says, gratitude is the attitude.  Be grateful for your delicious cup of coffee in the morning.  Taste it.  Don’t let it be just another part of your routine, fading into the periphery when you’re getting your day started.  Taste it like you’ve never had coffee in your life.  When you wash your hands a million times from corona-phobia, feel the hot water and smell the gorgeous soap.   Think about all the stupid things you have in your life: your rundown car, your regrettable commitments, your iPhone.  These are but privileges and luxuries that go unnoticed as you autopilot through your day, hellbent on crossing out the next thing on your to-do list.  Be grateful for your mistakes and your regrets, because they’ve taught you something.

    .  Through a cultivation of obsessive gratitude, I pulled myself out of that hole of desperation.  I became honest with myself about who I was and what I wanted to be, and now here I am graduating with all of you, and that means that today, we are not failures.

I am so grateful for my heroes.  Thank you, Dr. Elbert, for teaching me that I like Hawthorne much more than I thought I did, and for teaching me that I am a transcendentalist--I'm going to miss you trying to get us to show up to class dressed up like Scarlet Letter characters for Halloween.  Professors Samaras, Shields, and Rotella, for making me a better creative writer, I owe you guys so much.  Professor Gonzalez, the poor man had me in so many classes, and the patience he demonstrated from my incessant emails, professor, you introduced me to the world of Postmodernism, to Toni Morrison, and the rich world of Black literature—you offered words of kindness during my corona-depression, and I’ll say what others won't—that everyone thinks you’re the coolest professor.  Dr. Cutler, Hitchcock—need I say more?  And I'll never forget when you said, “I don’t wanna hear about how he was mean to Tippi Hendren”--hilarious.  Dr. Naomi Liebler—out of all the professors—you taught me guts, you challenged me.  You showed me that I have the guts to meet your challenges, and professor, you know more about Shakespeare than William Shakespeare does—Professor, you are my hero.  Dr. Galef—thank you so much for your bad jokes, Dr. Galef, thank you so much for your good jokes, you hit the target more often than not.  Dr. Galef, I mentioned earlier in this speech the power of words, and you told me that I have the talent and the work ethic to write novels—words that have changed my life.

Dear English majors, I'd like to end my speech by reading you the very last fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm Collection—it is only one paragraph long.  This is called “the golden key” by the brothers Grimm.

Once in the wintertime when the snow was very deep, a poor boy had to go out and fetch wood on a sled. After he had gathered it together and loaded it, he did not want to go straight home, because he was so frozen, but instead to make a fire and warm himself a little first. So he scraped the snow away, and while he was thus clearing the ground he found a small golden key. Now he believed that where there was a key, there must also be a lock, so he dug in the ground and found a little iron chest. "If only the key fits!" he thought. "Certainly there are valuable things in the chest." He looked, but there was no keyhole. Finally he found one, but so small that it could scarcely be seen. He tried the key, and fortunately it fitted. Then he turned it once, and now we must wait until he has finished unlocking it and has opened the lid. Then we shall find out what kind of wonderful things there were in the little chest.

So here are my final thoughts: be brave, take risks, work hard, and most of all: have fun, because if you're not doing that then what's the point?

Congratulations, class of 2020.  Thank you.