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First of all, welcome -- parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, and every member of every kind of extended family.

So, here you are at last, class of 2010, about to graduate. But from what? First of all, of course, from a lifetime of being students. This is a major identity shift, with intimations, perhaps, of an identity crisis. From now on, even if graduate school intervenes for a few years, *you're* in charge of your education -- that intricate process by which the mind, the heart and the soul are trained to examine themselves thoroughly and encounter the world honorably.

As Lang faculty, we've pushed you to test ideas, balance heady abstractions and earthbound realities; high-minded politics with personal uncertainties and ambivalence. And you've pushed back. We've shaken our heads in wonder as you came up with ideas, interpretations, desires even that were altogether new to us.

The city played its part too. New York is the most poyglot, polyphonic seminar anyone could experience Every street corner or subway ride threw out a challenge to your mental quickness, your cultural resources and

improvisational skills; your capacity to process unfamiliar information and stimuli. You took up that challenge, and let me add, with great respect, that many of you did so while working 30 and 40 hours a week.

It's not easy to be at a school pledged to uphold and further social justice, political responsibility, and cultural awareness. Desirable yes, yes but demanding --grueling, even. It's not easy to live up to these ideals honestly.

Some of you know already what you'll be doing as you leave here. You've mapped out your career, your vocation, your destiny. Maybe you found those here. Maybe you came here knowing, and asked us to was hope we helped you shape the discipline, talent and character you need to go forward. And that could be astounding to witness. I've seen writing students take hold of their art and their craft-word by word, comma by semi-colon by em-dash, sentence by sentence – building beautiful structures of fact, of thought, of imaginative coherence. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” wrote John Keats in one of the 19th century's most luminous poems. And in the 20th, knowing what the modern world demanded we see and hear, Theolonious Monk called one of his most luminous jazz compositions, “Ugly Beauty.” You're post-modern. You're finding your own meanings for each kind of truth and beauty.

But amid these lofty words, plenty of you may be sitting out there feeling, confused, uncertain, even guilty and

inadequate, because you don't know where you're going. You're confused and uncertain, or divided about your path and your future. That's how I felt the day I graduated. I was terrified of being a dilettante, the all-too-frequent fate of a young woman in the pre-feminist late 60s; of having a smattering of little gifts that weren't going to add up to much. It took me time to find my path.

But you know, you each have what you need. I believe you've spent these years learning that the intellect, the imagination, the emotions and the conscience all work together, as life hurls questions, crises, trials and glories your way. Let me explain why. I'm a critic by profession. My beat has been and always will be the arts, and the culture, And you are leaving Lang as critics – critics in a broader sense. Not only classroom critics of a text, or an idea, but critics of the civilizations that produce those texts and ideas, that produce the myths and ideologies we live by that produces the art and the politics we live with. You know how to be critics of yourself, your assumptions and presumptions, the habits of thought that make you too comfortable; the feelings that make you resist a new reality, or act self-abusive and self-destructive. Good critics work to bring clear thought, clear speech, clear feeling to everything around them. But not at the expense of what's too complicated or confusing to smooth over with rhetoric and certainty. Critics

pay close attention to their uncertainties, to the irrational strands of emotion, to the riotous evidence of their senses.

Critics never stop asking questions, not least of themselves; critics must hold onto a core of vulnerability, because that's what keeps them alive to experience, to those "enormous changes at the last minute" or over the long haul. You're a critic when you turn on your computer or your I-phone and send your first tweet of the day; go gaming or clubbing with friends; walk into your job and start navigating your way through its requirements, compromises and power structures, when you choose, friends, lovers and partners. And you're a critic when you articulate, to yourself or to the world, society's harshest, ugliest conflicts. You've heard a lot about those conflicts in your years at Lang, conflicts of: class, ethnicity, gender, language, politics, race, religion and sexuality. (Please note that I listed them alphabetically).

As a critic, to critics, I say: Never trust abstractions until they're concrete parts of your everyday life. You'll find, each of you will find your own particular ways to make that happen, ways that mesh with your history, your temperament, your psyche. "Each of us has his own sphere of fact and trouble." William James said that. Each of us has her portion of privilege and suffering. I say that.

I'm not going to be unrealistic here. You'll make compromises, and some of them will gnaw at you. I went into

criticism with strong ideas, opinions, emotions and principles. But wherever I worked, I was obliged to make some tonal, adaptations, and compromises. Some were irritating. A few were liberating. Some felt shameful. At *Newsweek* I was brisk and sleek. For *The Nation* I was blunt and impassioned; for VOGUE I was intimate and chatty; for *The New York Times* I was ironic, and somewhat authoritative; august, when need be. I'm very grateful to Neil Gordon for inviting me to teach here at Lang 5 years ago. Now, my mistakes, as a teacher and a writer, are in my own voice, and that's a good thing. Protect your voice. Work at it, play with it, question it, never be completely satisfied with it, but take pleasure in the fact that's there and can always be re-tuned

When I graduated from college in 1968, my commencement speaker told us – intoned to us, for he was a poet and he admired Dante -- that ours was a commencement into hell. It was. There was the brutally unjust war in Vietnam; thousands of people were dying and killing. There were violent demonstrations and political protests in cities and at colleges across the nation. And a series of political assassinations had targeted President John F. Kennedy, civil rights leaders Medgar Evers and Malcolm X,; civil rights workers Viola Liuzzo, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. One month before we graduated, Martin Luther King was murdered.

Robert F. Kennedy would be murdered one month after.

And it didn't end there.

What does the world of your commencement look like? It looks hellish too, and violently polluted. The environment is tainted by oil spills, and decimated by hurricanes –Haiti and Katrina – that exposed generations, and in Haiti's case, centuries of economic and social exploitation. Wars are taking place on every continent largely inhabited by human life; likewise ethnic, racial, religious and linguistic and gender struggles.

Your world is also an extraordinary technological wonderland, a strange mix of the utopian, the dystopian and the wholly unpredictable. All of you live there with a skill and confidence your teachers and parents envy, admire and perhaps fear. Your reality is global, plural and virtual. Between Facebook, Twitter, chat rooms and gaming your individuality is a form of multiple personality!

So you're utterly unlike the graduating generations that preceded you. You're so much less sheltered, You've had to see earlier, so much complexity; and try to process sooner so much contradiction and ugliness. The world will demand things of you that we can't imagine here today.

So let me end humbly, and modestly. The playwright Adrienne Kennedy described the brave, complex plays she writes as "states of mind." Know and honor your states of mind. Let diverse forms of life thrive there. Keep the

infrastructure solid and the borders fluid. Break up Tea Parties. Value desire and pleasure. Loiter with intent. Refute and repeal ignorant laws, whether such laws address immigration, education or a woman's right to choose. Don't be ashamed of fear or depression; just find your way through them. Take imaginative leaps. Turn around and test them. Then, go on your way rejoicing.