THE NEW SCHOOL

2009 University Commencement Remarks from Miles Strucker

I was put on the waiting list to get into Eugene Lang. I don't mean this as a zinger: not only was putting me on the waiting list an astute judgment of moral character, it was an act of common sense.

As we are known as The New School, a University, my high school was known as NOVA, we've got a mushroom garden. It was a public school, which meant adequate teachers, inadequate funds; but an alternative public school, which meant adequate teachers who had prior convictions.

If it seems odd that I'm mentioning high school here, it's to highlight a certain transition many of us experienced. My attitude towards education changed radically four years ago, and not just because it started costing as much as three-bedroom house used to. For the first time in your life, you're in a private school and it's not to steal from the lost and found; you're having meaningful conversations with adults and it's not because you're trying to sell them counterfeit raffle tickets; but most importantly, you're part of a progressive education that actually works. So, in honor of "Eugene Lang, The New School for Liberal Arts That Waitlisted Me," the title of this speech will be: "College Experience, A Speech I Wrote for Graduation." But enough about me. Part one: a personal history.

Before leaving Seattle, you ask someone what it's like living in New York City. Their smile resigns and they speak earnestly: "It's the only major city that has a multimillion-dollar ad campaign whose soul purpose is to convince people they love where they live...also, there's an abundance of small dogs and prepared food, you do the math."

Do the math? You can't do the math. You've been doing independent study for the last four years. Then, suddenly one summer, you get a notice saying you've been assigned to Loeb Hall, have you had your meningitis vaccination yet, what about rabies? You arrive with a keyboard and sandwich grill, deep down you wanted to go to the jazz school but will have to make do with modernism and panini. Your roommate is in fashion design. He buys you a glow stick and pinecones that smell good. Eventually, you'll have to move across town because he doesn't understand you. Now that you've got a single room, things seem better, but your desk is under the bed, and your head hits the ceiling when you wake up. One of the graduate students you live with says, "That's how

Platonists must feel." You like your new suite-mates even though there are twelve of them. They call you "the kid" and buy you nonalcoholic beer as a joke. Joke's on them, you think to yourself as you finish the last of it: at least I'm not leaving university during a time of great strife.

Soon you'll be asked to write an essay about Joan Didion. "Hasn't *she* already done that," you'll want to ask. There's an overwhelming urge to jot notes on the books you buy, underlining the sentences you like, also the ones you don't understand, in the true spirit of the avant-garde you'll get these confused. Time is divided between the Internet and the Lower East-Side. You see someone you recognize from back home. You ask what they're up to these days. They say, "I'm in Brooklyn." You're not sure if that's where they live or an adjective qualifying their mood. Whatever it is it smells like cigarettes.

Second semester, first year writing with (now dean of the college) Neil Gordon: "You're an absolute pleasure to have in class." You say this to yourself three times in the mirror before you leave the apartment. Neil Gordon says, "Although I enjoy teaching, and I think it's important, I'm a professional writer, and I don't want to waste my time on sloppy mistakes." Later it turns out he's just talking about the quality of your writing.

The Princeton Review says your college is number three in encouraging classroom discussion. In Princeton Review talk that's number three in people are judging you right now. You get caught silently mouthing the contours of your next sentence before you raise the hand and expose the words "social realism" that are smeared over the back in cool, blue, ink...but soon that rising hand is clean. Margins justified, font consistent, your outfit calling to mind the bold rationality of Times New Roman.

Above all, your verbal stylings are cogent and clear, except in front of crowds, ex-politicians, or in unbelievably stuffy theaters. So what if you drop your "Rs" when you're nervous. You don't have to talk yourself up in the mirror anymore. You find ways of tricking people into complimenting you. You're selling short story ideas to NYU kids for subway card money. One says he wants a moral history of his generation à la R.L. Stine. "I want you to hold a mirror up to nature," he says, "but not this one, I just did lines off of it." You take him up on the offer. The compensation

isn't much, but one way or another you'll probably end up getting a North Face fleece out of it. Compensation aside—and this is always what tips it—there's still a desire to convince people that you're smart, and even though you sense that you'll never really get over this desire, the practice of perfecting your performance bares the trace hints of a rather modest, rather personal interest in intellection.

Part two: when does my Bildungsroman start? My friends at the jazz school always say, "I didn't go to a conservatory to learn how to be a professional musician—I went to a conservatory to find people to gig with." Whether you're in music, design, or read-Kant-for-pleasure academia, there's always a gig at the end of the tunnel. You come with what you have and try not to ruin it. There's no muse to supplant the passions of a deadline, no way to become a better actor apart from getting up there and doing it.

But then there's that squirmy matter of marketing yourself. It's sophomore year, you're rehearsing at La MaMa—a playhouse so avant-garde they've got miso soup in the vending machines. You don't know why your character keeps throwing things at people. The director tells you, "It's better that way." To your disappointment you won't be asked to join in the theater's spring production, a retelling of *Paradise Lost* from the point of the gardener. Luckily, you've long decided on a more steady career choice: "What is it that everybody wants right now and there isn't enough of? Literary novels."

Not to be forgotten, your acting experience will get you a volunteer spot doing after school drama with some young people who, as simply as you can say it, need of a break from seriousness. So at the end of the semester you direct them in morally ambiguous Greek myths, and, taking your final bow as a rapping Medusa, wonder if this isn't a bit more valid than Lit.

This is volunteering, however, a joy that has its place. Food for the heart, not the pocket, and make no mistake: New York City is no place for the ennobled dietician.

Part three: Can I be a Byronic Hero and still get a job? Junior year. An internship at a literary agency. "So, do you want to go into publishing?" They ask. If by publishing you mean a midsized office were I'll avoid the secretary whose bitter because she had a one-night-stand in Park Slope and woke up with an MFA and now has to read unsolicited poetry (which is kind of like having a great heron crap in your mouth), all while I'm secretly growing the partial novel that will someday day find its way into your pale leather handbag under the pseudonym Future Client—then yes, the publishing industry suits me.

I'd like to share with you a few professional rules that I developed for myself as result of this internship.

- "Things I Learned About Working, A List."
- 10. When they ask where you found out about their company, don't say, "rehab." Likewise, when they ask why you want to be a part of their company, don't say, "Because I *like* you".
- 9. There are other ways to show them how much you like them.
- 8. Like spraying cologne on all your sticky notes.
- 7. If they ask why you're staring out the window, say that you're thinking of really smart ways on how to help the company.
- 6. Like composing all the unsolicited poetry into a floating island where people can go and work on their craft and stuff.
- 5. If you have to miss work because you're sick, tell them the truth. It helps to keep a list of possible illnesses you might have.
- 4. If you're a college student, chances are you have meningitis, rabies, or swine flu.
- 3. Don't ever do anything you don't want to do. But don't always do things because you want to.
- 2. If they ask what your novel is about, don't say an intern at a literary agency who falls in love with you. Because she might try and steal your idea.
- 1. Make sure you let them know you want to take on really challenging projects. When they give them to you, tell them it's interfering with your schoolwork. If you graduated in '09, and that was seven years ago, tell them you've extended your senior thesis into a lifelong journey.

I hate to end with such a recession of comedy. So I'll go on for a while until you forget.

I studied abroad recently, and came under the instruction of some truly fine artists, who simply had to overcome too much ego to contribute constructively to someone else's education. I returned to Lang with a little added appreciation for our professors. Looking back on my time at The New School, I'm astounded by how overwhelmingly positive these relationships have been.

At the moment I don't feel terribly inclined to go on to higher, higher education. It's a time of tough choices: not be able to find a job now, not be able to find a job later. And yet, if my commercial success didn't depend on one very callow, very cynical senior thesis to be peddled over the next seven years, I'd say that it's a time to be all the more ambitious. For now I suppose I better get up there and start doing it, before this hope gathers too much force.

Thank you.