Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts
2013 Commencement Address
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Friends, family, faculty, and Langsters: welcome.

Last summer, thanks to the generosity of The New School, six classmates and I were able to participate in "Lang in Cambodia," an international civic engagement program led by the chair of Education Studies, Jas Dhillon, focused on grassroots social change and the politics of development. One August afternoon towards the end of our trip, as we perched on the open-air upper terrace of the modest guesthouse that doubled as home base for our partner Cambodian NGO, The Ponheary Ly Foundation, our small class met to reflect on our collective experiences. For the past five weeks, we had traveled, worked, and studied all across the country. We had met the first female reporter in the history of Siem Reap city; had taken Khmer language lessons from a young Buddhist monk-turned-scholar who quoted Nelson Mandela and wanted to ignite a non-violent revolution, and spent a week with a group of 30 incredible teenagers who had convinced their parents to let them leave home for three years in order to attend the nearest high-school in a neighboring village – the first from their village to do so in close to 30 years. We had encountered a complicated nation plagued by its history of colonization, auto-genocide, and international aid dependency -- and a resilient graceful people determined to change the conditions of their lives.

As our small class sat on flimsy plastic chairs around a few folding tables, the discussion shifted towards a question that had recurred throughout our trip: *what does civic engagement mean to you?* If you're like me, and tend to find clunky academic phrases like "civic engagement" a bit vague and overly intellectual, their frequent occurrence in what are actually meaningful conversations, like this one, is simply the small price you pay for getting to hang out with a bunch of people who are smarter than you are. I have gladly paid that price for the past four years at Lang. However, on this particular Cambodian afternoon, with 90 degree heat pressing down and low monsoon clouds rolling endlessly across the rice fields, our class was joined by our friend, the president of the PLF, Lori. Known to Siem Reap locals as the big white lady with the shaved head and the motorbike, Lori is one of those special people who speak in proverbs without really trying, every line overflowing with wisdom and truth. On this particular afternoon, as we students searched our hearts and our minds, struggling to make sense of our recent

experiences and articulate some sort of thesis as to what exactly "civic engagement" meant to us in this corner of the world, Lori, who had been silently typing on her laptop for several minutes, glanced up and in her soft Texas drawl, offered a typically profound remark: "volunteering is showing up; civic engagement is showing up and paying attention."

What I'm going to suggest to you on this special occasion is that showing up and paying attention are two of the most powerful tools at our disposal. They have real world payoff. Forgive me for the moment for making what seems like an elementary school point at a college graduation. After all, the fact that each of us made it here to this stage implies that we already know how to do these things quite well. Essentially, we are each about to receive a very pretty, very expensive piece of paper confirming this. It says, in effect: "You have shown up. You have paid attention." However, it is one thing to do these things when they are expected of you, or when the degree or result they confer benefit you in some immediate way. It is quite another thing to do them when they are not expected of you, when there is no one waiting to shake your hand, pat your back or applaud you, and when it is far easier and more comfortable to tune out. Yet that is when it matters most.

In Cambodia, showing up and paying attention meant that our work was deeply shaped by an understanding of the Cambodian context. It meant taking a semester-long course prior to our departure studying the history and politics of the region. It meant not parachuting in and pretending we knew all the answers, but rather understanding our role as responding to the French colonization, US bombing, Khmer Rouge genocide, and UN intervention. It meant understanding why half of the population of the entire country is under 23 years old, and why 80% are rural subsistence farmers who face constant malnutrition.

Yet, at the same time, showing up and paying attention meant being self-reflexive. It meant being constantly aware of your own identity, and how who you are not only shapes your own thoughts and ways of understanding the world, but also shapes others thoughts and ways of understanding you. In Cambodia, because we were foreigners and obvious outsiders with our clean skin, soft hands, multiple pairs of clothes, and three meals a day, maintaining this

perspective was actually quite easy. We were walking dollar signs. Obvious targets. Perpetually reminded of our own privilege.

The far more interesting question for today, though, is how to be self-reflexive and self-aware when you are surrounded by people like yourself. This is much harder, but more important, because no one else will do this for you. This is where the most basic level of self-awareness comes in: your inherent inescapable subjectivity; the fact that you will only ever experience the world through your own eyes and ears; that your sense of mind and consciousness is unique; the whole 'your red is my blue' type of thing. Shortly before his death, the brilliant writer David Foster Wallace delivered a commencement speech on this very subject. When I told my dad what I wanted to talk about today, he suggested I perform with a hologram of Wallace. In his speech, Wallace makes the point that we are all biologically hard-wired to the default setting of self-centeredness and must vigilantly remind ourselves of this simple and obvious reality.

The real value of a liberal arts education is not so much the cliché of *learning how to think*, but rather gaining the empathic perspective and intellectual freedom to choose what you want to think about. It's about getting to choose whether or not you should question your own assumptions, interpretations, and lived experiences. It's about choosing to look at the world through another's eyes. Wallace advises us to use that freedom to keep ourselves sane and make day-to-day life bearable. However, I believe the real value of this freedom is that it allows us to choose to think about the things in our world that need doing. We are facing an unprecedentedly complicated, volatile, and unsustainable future; we must choose to show up and we must pay attention.

I believe that as graduates of Eugene Lang College, we are uniquely prepared to make that choice. We have spent the past four years in Lang's open curriculum and seminar style classes. We have directed our own studies towards the things we are passionate about, and learned how to negotiate our own ideas, identities, and perspectives in relation to our classmates. We have become empowered and critical; we have learned how to show up and pay attention. The real

value of our Lang education is that now that is has come to an end, each of us gets to choose what comes next.

Bill Nye the Science Guy once said, “everyone you will ever meet knows something you don’t.” Intuitively, we know this to be true. After all, we have all lived different lives, experienced different things, and created meaning and purpose for ourselves in different ways. Whether the “thing” you know is a secret recipe, your mother’s voice when you get sick, or why the four year old Cambodian boy who used to live in the crawl space beneath his school now calls himself *Tien*, or *candle*, our worlds are defined by these niches of intimacy. Yet, beyond intuition, I believe the greatest gift of our education is that our ability to truly think critically and reflexively gives us the humility to acknowledge the things we do not know.

Within the first few days of arriving in Cambodia, our group had sat down with Lori for a different type of conversation. In the warm night air, we gathered together on the roof of the guesthouse where Lori briefed us on the day-to-day operations of the PLF, including its project sites, budget, and expenses. Once she had finished, she looked at us and asked point blank: “so why are *you* here?” At the time, our answer was simply that we wanted to help; we wanted to volunteer. However, today, almost a year later, I’ll answer differently: we were there to develop a visceral understanding of ourselves as powerful and privileged, and to become deeply, critically aware about who we are in relation to the rest of the world so that even after we had left the country, we would *choose* to do the work that matters. By fighting harder and smarter. By finding the cracks within the seams. Volunteering is showing up; civic engagement is showing up and paying attention.

This, I submit to you, is the real value of our education: the freedom to think and act when it matters most.

Show up. Pay attention.