Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts
2013 Recognition Ceremony
Keynote Faculty Remarks from Jennifer Wilson

I do not know many of you. Perhaps it's because I teach mathematics and most of you chose to avoid me. And you almost made it. Lest you think you get through four years of college without mathematics, I'd like to warn you that there will be a quiz at the end of the talk. You may turn it in on your way up to the podium to collect your diploma.

I want to start by acknowledging that this might be a strange moment for you. Strange, because you're in transition, and as with all transitions, you are probably feeling caught between where you've been and where you are going. Yesterday you were in the end-of-semester rush, finishing assignments and churning out essays. And suddenly, now, it's over. You may be feeling relieved, exhausted, strung out on caffeine or something stronger, exhilarated, scared, or maybe, just plain spacey.

I remember the mixed feelings I had when I finished my graduate work. I had submitted the final version of my thesis so late in the year, that my "defense" (which is half presentation; half oral exam, and wholly like going to the dentist), was not scheduled until mid September. By that time, I had already started my new job at a small college in Pennsylvania. Immersed in the challenge of my first teaching experience, it felt unreal to leave early one sunny afternoon and drive back to my old campus to meet with the assembled group of eminent faculty in front of whom I had to defend. Thankfully, the stress I felt over my new job masked my stress about the defense—or maybe it was vice versa. (Kind of like my experience this week toggling back and forth between grading papers and writing this speech.) And when I was congratulated at the end, it was hard to believe it was over. I certainly did not feel "graduated." It was not until a couple of days later as I was driving to work that it sunk in. It was in a very beautiful spot—some of you may know it—the bridge over the Delaware River that joins Lambertville, NJ and New Hope, PA. And I realized that the quiet buzz of happiness I was feeling was not due to the geography, but was more deep-seated—something to do with the sense of a long project accomplished and the opening up of new, if unseen, possibilities.

I tell you this in case you find your emotions have not quite caught up with you yet. There's always a point on a journey when the balance of your thoughts shifts from the life you just left to the life you are entering. If you find that it's taking awhile to make this shift, don't worry. It will happen. And I hope that your internal celebrations, whether they have already started, or have yet to appear, are everything you want them to be.

In the meantime, the external celebrations—including this ceremony—proceed.

There's a funny thing about graduation speeches. You have to have one, even though no one seems to remember their own. This gives me a lot of freedom. Unfortunately for you, I am not so funny, and—I veer toward the abstract (a side-effect of too much mathematics). I don't plan to exhort you to go out and make the world a better place. I know enough of you to know that you will do this on your own.

Instead, I'm going to start by talking about something I know well, which is education. When you graduate from a liberal arts college, it is obligatory for your commencement speech to address the state of education nationally, the economy, jobs, and the world you are likely to enter. These are real, pressing issues, and so without irony, I will note that there's been a lot of attention in the press and in academia about the value of a college education in the age of rampant tuition increases, a depressed economy and the increased availability of online classes. Those of us who are affiliated with liberal arts colleges argue that the larger purpose of college is not to train people for jobs, but to help them to think deeply, read critically, communicate, and to know something about the larger world. We cite research suggesting that today's graduates will have on average seven careers over their lifetime, many of which have not yet been invented. What is needed, goes the argument, is people who have learned how to learn. For in this economy, we are continually reinventing ourselves.

I agree. Learning is good. It helps us find jobs. It helps us do our jobs. It also gives us perspective and allows us to appreciate things we might not have known about. It helps us have a better understanding of cultures and experiences outside our own, and motivates us (some days) to get out of bed. But learning is also discouraging, because there is just so much of it to do. I am sure many of you have had the experience—working on a long essay, or developing a thesis project—thinking that you've got a really great idea, only to find, when you do a little research that's it's already been written about—written about, commented on in *Slate*, reblogged and tweeted. I remember as a graduate student spending many days despairing that I would find the one "original idea" that I could use as the basis of my thesis. (And if you haven't had that experience—you didn't do all your reading.)

Although these experiences can be discouraging, I would argue, in fact, that one of the primary purposes of an education and of learning in general, is to demonstrate to us our own ignorance. I don't mean this in an overly moralizing way but literally, and with appreciation. Literally, because the more we seek to uncover, the more we find there is to uncover. My brother-in-law, who designs online platforms for physicians to help them keep up with recent medical research, claims that the total amount of knowledge in the medical field doubles every ten years. I'm sure it's true in other fields as well. As tomorrow's speaker, Nate Silver, will no doubt remind us, we live in an age where data is everywhere. Even those of us not destined for a job in data analytics are confronted with a wealth of information. Too many facts. Too many people. Too much history. We constantly encounter situations that remind us of our own lack of expertise. As someone who has been affiliated with higher education for many years, I can attest to this. (I have spent a lifetime learning and know practically nothing.)

But there is a positive side to all this ignorance. For one thing, it teaches us a little humility. We learn to value other's experiences and knowledge, and to listen. And we are, paradoxically, motivated to go and learn some more.

I want to say something here about mathematics. People are, I think wrongly, drawn to or repelled by mathematics because they think it is all about right and wrong answers. They view mathematics as a worthy enterprise—a little dull and leaving no room for ambiguity. In fact the opposite is true. Mathematicians spend their lives defining ideas and then proving things about them. The goal is to construct arguments that are demonstrably true. But they are only true in the precise, somewhat austere language of mathematics. Applied to the real world, the

certainty vanishes. Conclusions that seemed definitive become contingent—dependent on how much we believe the mathematics actually represents what we want it to. Looked at through one lens, the result suggests one conclusion about the world. Looked at through another, it suggests something else. This does not mean, as is commonly held, that “statistics lie,” but that the world does not fit neatly into the language or categories of mathematics. Personally, I love this juxtaposition of clarity and complexity. It increases my appreciation of both the mathematically provable and the lived ungraspable.

Of course mathematics is not the only subject that does this for us. I could say that learning and education in general is a cyclic process in which we learn some stuff, realize we don’t know enough, and then learn some more. But I think it’s more that our learning and ignorance coexist, and we just become more comfortable moving back and forth between them.

I hope you will allow me a short digression.

When I was a teenager, my father, who was a composer, used to quote John Cage, who I am reminded taught at The New School, with eye-rolling frequency over the breakfast table. So much so, that his line, “I have nothing to say and I am saying it” became a kind of inside joke, a family punch line accompanied by a silent percussive ba da bing.

So, in his honor, I need to pause here briefly, and say, “look Dad, here I am doing it.”

I do not know how much of what I have said rings true for you or whether you think any of it is relevant at this moment. But you are about to go out and experience both learning and ignorance in a whole new set of ways. Here’s a truth we don’t often talk about: your twenties can be hard. There are plenty of things to worry about—jobs, debt, rising inequality. But I'm also talking about the personal stuff—the sense that you have all this freedom now and should live up to it. That you need to start making your life meaningful and doing your part to improve the world: setting goals and moving forward. Some of this may happen. But you will also likely feel uncertain a lot of the time. Like you don’t know what you are doing. You will learn a lot—because new situations will constantly confront you. But you will also find yourself constantly challenged (which is a nice way of saying that you will spend a lot of time feeling incompetent).

I don’t say this to bring you down. I say this because we place such high expectations on being young—and then wonder why we aren’t happy. So, for those of you who are a little anxious, it's ok to be anxious. But, as they say, “it gets better.” It gets better not because external circumstances change—although they may—but because you begin to feel more competent in subtle ways. In learning and relearning, and in starting again. In acting in the face of uncertainty, and dealing with complexity. It sounds undramatic, but it is profound.

I want to say a few final words that are specific to Lang. When I first arrived at the college, a colleague tried to give me some perspective about the place by explaining that half the students wanted to write their autobiographies by the time they were 25, and the other half wanted to save the world. She said this with a mixture of affection, respect—and irritation (the latter stemming from a sense that the budding writers should maybe wait to have lived a few more years before starting those autobiographies). Over the years, I’ve amended her statement to

match my own experiences. Many of you do want to write, to create, to work for non-profits, to tackle the large problems of poverty or global climate change. What makes you unique, I think, is the number of you who want to do all these things—simultaneously.

Too frequently in what we call “the real world,” self-expression is seen as antithetical to a life committed to social change. We put our creativity on one side and our politics or idealism on the other. Maybe you have experienced this, completing tedious tasks for an organization that you believe in, or volunteering your writing skills for a large corporation. But if this dichotomy does not ring true for you, it’s probably not because you are uninterested in expressing an artistic side or in trying to make the world better, but because you don’t see any contradiction in these ideas. If so, it might be in part because of your years at Lang. What makes this place special, is the assumption that these two things can and do go together—that there is always room for the individual who thinks outside the metaphorical box –whether it is the soap box or the black box.

But I say it’s only in part because of Lang, because many of you have brought this predilection with you—this belief in the dual importance of creativity and commitment—and have strengthened us accordingly—in which case, we are lucky to have convinced you to spend these years with us.

I have often heard people reminisce about their college years, saying, “that was the best time of my life.” And I’ve always felt it sounded a little sad. Sad that the following 40, 50 or 60 years of that person’s life paled in comparison. So my advice to you: do not be one of those people. Go out and create and agitate. And when your friends, your children, or your grandchildren ask you where you went to college and how you liked it, I hope you smile and say, “oh I went to this wild and wonderful place—let me tell you all about It” and then go on to say, “but let me tell you what comes next . . .

My final instructions—interrelated but in no particular order: learn a lot, know less, do great things, and be grateful for the ride. Good luck on your quiz.