I remember my all-girls Catholic high school as a series of statistics: how many APs; my GPA; frantically averaging points after every test; how many clubs; how many math classes; how many times had I been astonishing. The women I studied with were brilliant, competitive, and eager to change the world, but we all operated under one goal: get into a respected college. I could not have realized then that my idea of what it meant to be intelligent and educated was warping. Dreams were lost in the swirl of those numbers. Worth became getting into an Ivy, becoming a doctor, rowing on an award-winning crew team, scoring high on the SAT.

In my mission to impress an unknown college, I came to understand high school as a vendetta against the person I was trying to become: a struggle to find a space in which to fit. My spaces, the arts, were not always assigned the same value as the more quantifiable undertakings of a young student. Senior year I had a lead role in our musical. A strict policy allowed for the removal of a student from her extracurriculars if she received a C+ or below on a progress report. Weeks before opening night, AP European History, a class I was only taking because I thought it made me look smart to colleges, almost cost me the show. Numbers determined my life for the rest of that year, and I set out to adjust what I wanted from the world so that it was digestible for others, for me.

When you are always growing and changing, “fitting” is not a pertinent state. I arrived to Lang in the fall of 2010 and eagerly absorbed everything about my new community: instruments, art, design, poetry, Marxism, theater, a city that waited for no one. By the end of my first year at Lang, I quit politics and remembered writing. To the confusion of my poor parents, I also applied to the dual-degree BAFA program to pursue a BFA in Communication Design from Parsons.

At The New School, statistics came to mean something different. How much money does our government spend on bailouts versus environmental conservation or educational reform? How many typefaces can translate nostalgia onto a page? How much money are authors or musicians actually paid per book or album? How many more times will racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, hurt another human on our watch? Every day for the last five years, you, my capable, formidable classmates, have reminded me that the answers to the most important and complex questions only start with numbers. We are scientists, writers, international, nontraditional, musicians, caretakers, social justice advocates, artists, economists, politicians, dreamers, designers, thinkers—some of us all these things at once. We create our own spaces, and we question those spaces our society deems worthy of time and attention. We are not any one type or statistic.

There are commonalities between New School students that extend far beyond just a college community. As we stayed up too late composing song, crafting the written word, coding websites, reimagining the design of our world, New York was there, magnifying our errors and success to a haunting degree. We have the shared experience of living
in hyperbole. Our city is both demanding and magic. Her history, energy, giant buildings, secret corners, demand that we be the most extreme versions of ourselves. Perhaps you spent more time in the streets than in the classroom as a student here. Maybe you occupied Wall Street or marched for climate change. Maybe you cheered in the streets at Obama’s reelection or stormed them in protest for Eric Garner and Michael Brown. Maybe you performed at jazz clubs on school nights or worked two jobs to pay your way. No matter how different our interactions were with her, New York was a professor we all had at The New School.

Deciding to pursue any creative field, or to look at any field creatively, is a risk no matter how comfortable you are associating yourself with such an identity. Much of our world still only values the idea of creativity. Worth is often measured by how high the potential profit is, not by what we need. We need communities that value ideas outside of money. Ugly Duckling Presse, where I currently work, is a nonprofit publisher, and, like The New School, it prizes ideas and community. The skills I acquired here at The New School taught me to speak the language of creative confidence: one that resists oppressive systems and sees problems as opportunities to exercise that language. Having studied here, I have found a community at Ugly Duckling that allows me both to effect change and to live by my vocations.

This is what The New School, and, by extension, parts of New York have enabled us all to do, but outside of our accepting New School family, being champions of ideas and changing conversations won’t be as easy as calling ourselves “creative, progressive individuals.” We have to be brave. We have to learn and teach fiercely. We have to remember the strength of community. Annie Dillard wrote, “What can any artist set on fire but his world? What can any people bring to the altar but all it has ever owned in the thin towns or over the desolate plains? What can an artist use but materials, such as they are? What can he light but the short strings of his gut, and when that’s burnt out, any muck ready to hand?”

Congratulations to the class of 2015. Let’s set the world on fire.