To begin with, I want to extend a formal but very warm welcome to President Van Zandt, to David. This is a truly happy occasion. I am honored to be here as a Co-Chair of the University Faculty Senate, and as a member of the faculty in the School of Art and Design History and Theory at Parsons. And most of all, I am proud to be here as a citizen of a University that places such a high premium on an education that is directed both inward and outward, to the life of the mind and to the lives of others, to shape the kind of world we want to live in—a just world.

The New School’s ethos of thoughtful, informed activism is clearly evident in the external partnerships that engage our community with communities around the world—whether building a new swimming pavilion in Washington Heights or collaborating with the United Nations’ Human Settlements program in Uganda. The mutuality of those engagements is powerful; it reorients perspectives of students, faculty and their partners: the people who’ve welcomed us into their countries, cities, and neighborhoods.

That same thoughtful, informed activism—with the stress on “thoughtful and informed”—is pursued equally in the introspective search for knowledge—in the act of writing, in studio research, and in work that is propositional and poetic. These are not passive activities; they, too, are incubators and catalysts for change.

We won’t relieve pain or evil without interrogating their roots. We can’t enter a neighborhood without understanding its history, without taking memory into account. Even the empathy and sympathy that compel us to act need to be examined as ideas, lest we do more harm than good.

And to my mind, we can’t be effective at all if we don’t cultivate our own particular crafts. And here I use the word craft, not in the colloquial sense of arts and crafts, but, as the sociologist Richard Sennett means it—in the sense of working well—working conscientiously, so that our thinking and actions are informed by context, and that our knowledge and talent are practiced, and well-rehearsed, so they can be usefully shared. The development of craft—some of us call it scholarship, some of us call it musicianship, others call it design—is critical. If we don’t value our respective, albeit imperfect, crafts, we may come to the table with good intentions but we come empty-handed.

Now those of you who have been members of the New School community much longer than I, may think I’ve just tried to make a distinction between theory and practice—between projects done in the field, as it were, and those done as pure research—a distinction that the New School has worked to erase. Since its inception, this University has held the ideal that theory is practice, and practice is theory. And it is an ideal to which I whole-heartedly subscribe. Nonetheless, I am concerned that the reality of our current situation may be putting this symbiotic relationship at risk.

Our current situation—the meta-situation, if you will—is dominated by economics. It is one in which growing numbers of our elected officials want test scores and numbers to justify public education budgets. It is results oriented—education as business. Granted, paychecks don’t fall from the sky. I am addressing the substance of education, itself.

There is a certain irony here. For roughly the past 50 years, educators have been under fire for adapting the factory model to the classroom. We were told education was not a matter of treating students like bottles to be filled on an assembly line; it was not an efficiency business. And reforms were made. Instead of memorizing, students are being taught to think critically. Rows of desks have been replaced by circles of chairs. Students aren’t empty vessels and teachers are no longer the sole experts in the room. Learning by doing has been validated. All well and good. Very good.
But in the process, we seem to have swapped one business model for another—the factory for the shop. Fear of the unquantifiable aspects of education—for example, the capacity to translate ideas from one context to another, a capacity that can't be tallied numerically—has led to doubts about educators' value. Teachers must be watched over by statisticians, who turn assessments into percentages; education becomes a set of deliverables; and courses are evaluated in terms of their relevance to careers. In short, the current political and economic climate threatens to reduce education to a commodity, like a fuel-efficient car. The questions become: How much mileage can you get out of this course or that? What kind of job does it guarantee?

I'm not insensitive to the financial investment that educations like ours require. But I am frustrated about the search for guarantees. There are none in life. And education is not a car. If it's truly worth its price tag, it won't end up in the junkyard. Education alters brain cells, and lives as long as they do. But for those brain cells and nerve endings to spark, everyone involved in the process has to value curiosity, and the prospect of changing one's mind, both literally and figuratively.

These values have to supersede the simplistic equation of education = jobs, paradoxically, for a very practical reason. As I tell my students: no one hires a "major," as in a history major or an illustration major. (Unless, perhaps it's the academy.) Flexibility and openness are essential in a world where attachments are fragile. Jobs for life and corporate loyalty died in the late 20th century, if not before. Professions for life died with the advent of the technologies that made them obsolete and the landscape of labor will continue to shift.

I also tell my students that there is another, and a far more valuable reason, to be open to different ways of thinking, to seeing their education as a time to be exploratory. To live well in this world is no small thing. We all face challenges in this regard—especially young graduates. So while they must work to cover their rents and college debts, I believe that they also need to create and sustain private practices of self-directed work and self-directed research. And the skills they need to do that are those at the heart of a true education—knowing how to find out what you don't know, and having the mental agility to make unexpected connections and leaps.

And I would argue further that self-directed work is good for the soul. When the realities of employment come into conflict with ideals of justice and fairness, of sustainment, or intellectual honesty, independent projects—be they written, acted or performed—can keep those ideals in tact and ready for action when circumstances permit. The value of independent practices can't be underestimated—and of course they don't have to be conducted in isolation, as we know from the rise of small collectives. But they do need to be built on a foundation of cultivated minds, who have found space in their educations to begin a personal intellectual maturation process that will continue long after they leave school.

Now in speaking to the virtues of what I’ve been calling “introspective” learning, I don't mean to imply that courses and projects that are predicated on direct action and engagement with living, breathing people are conducted in a vacuum here. That would be a gross insult to the intelligence and planning that they’re founded on, and would overlook the fact that they live in the context of a University, with all that that implies. Nor am I championing the kind of narcissism that fosters the cult of personality. That is quite different from the kind of personal growth that I am concerned with. I simply want to speak up for the quiet side of our work, at a time when the culture at large is applying pressures to make it louder—and, in the parlance of the day—more transparent. Transparency is always promulgated as a virtue, but when we use it reductively we run the risk of marginalizing those aspects of education that don't have a clear product. And I for one can't imagine shaping a just future without poetry, without conscientious ambiguity and speculation about what might be. Thank you.