Good morning!

Dr. Cowlishaw, Faculty, Staff, Board of Trustees, Graduates, Family and Friends- thank you for the opportunity to be with you all today. It is truly an honor. And after 2 1/2 years of talking about COVID-19, I am so thankful for the opportunity to talk about something- anything- else.

Graduates- today is your day! You have just completed an epic journey and here you are with happy and eager faces, ready for more. Congratulations to the Providence Day School Class of 2022!

When I graduated from HS, my father gave me a typewriter as a gift. This version had all the bells and whistles, and by that, I mean it had a white-out option built in. If you typed the wrong word, you could back-type over it with white ink so that the mistake was erased. Magic!

Accompanying the typewriter was an index card on which my father had written a message:

“Do your best as you move forward, and, if you make a mistake, back up and try again.”

Looking before me, I am sure a few of you have it figured out. You know what you want to major in and where you want to end up…in courtrooms or operating rooms, Wall Street or Broadway. But others among you- many I would guess-are still trying to figure it out. What my father was saying, of course, is that I had yet to figure it out. And that is okay- that is how it should be.

Life is a journey- that may sound like a cliché, but it’s the season for cliché and quotes and- of course- unsolicited advice. Ahead of you on this journey are the experiences that will define who you are and who you are not. From each experience, you will learn about yourself, and you will gain perspective. There will be triumphs and failures, lucky breaks and missed opportunities, love and heartache. Mistakes are allowed. You do not have to have it figured out today. Today is not a finish line. Today is commencement- the beginning. For your parents’ sake, though, I suggest you figure most of it out in the next four years.

As for experiences, you all have just had the mother of all experiences- a pandemic.

Your lives have been warped by this blemish in history. You will forever mark memories as “pre-pandemic” and “post-pandemic.” Corona covered your faces with masks and Maskne. It derailed summer adventures and school trips. It scrambled the college application process. I have never heard the word “pivot” as much as I have in the last two years- it’s become my starting Wordle. You learned to pivot from in-person to Zoom, from dress codes to pajamas back to dress codes. What did you learn about yourselves from this experience? You learned that you are resilient and yet flexible - cliché but true just the same. You learned the value of human connection simply by its absence. Along with dismay and disappointment, I hope you also experienced gratitude. Gratitude for access…access to viral tests, access to vaccines, and access to information.

Early in 2020, a friend asked me if the pandemic was the Olympics of infectious disease-something I had been training for. What I had not trained for was the “infodemic”- the onslaught of information and misinformation to cull through to get the right answer, or at least the right answer for the moment. We could provide guidelines, but people needed reassurance that we were doing the right thing. Early in the pandemic, for example, we had to separate mothers with COVID -19 from their newborn babies. It was heart wrenching, but at the time we had no idea what could happen to a newborn with COVID-19, so we did what we thought was safest. How do you explain this to a mother? We had to learn the art of messaging-explaining the why behind the what. Fortunately, we quickly learned that it was safe to keep mother and baby together. Guidelines were revised, new messaging went out. Rinse, repeat. What did I learn from this experience? The pandemic was the greatest reminder that medicine is not just a science but also an art. And yes-a pandemic is the Olympics of infectious disease.

I was reminded last week about the NPR series called “This I Believe.” NPR invited individuals to write essays about their core beliefs, and they would then broadcast them. My favorite was “I Believe in the Power of Love” about a mother who had adopted a Chinese boy. Had I been invited, my essay would have been “I Believe in the Power of Perspective.”

My charge to you is this: On life’s journey, seek out experiences that will teach you not only about you but also about the world around you…experiences that will broaden and sharpen your perspective.

How? Step outside of your comfort zone**.** Put yourself where you may be a bit anxious or lonely but where you may discover a talent or passion. Go abroad. Volunteer. Connect with someone outside of your circle. Ask questions.

In residency, I stepped outside my comfort zone and went to Haiti to work at the Schweitzer Hospital. I had no idea what I was getting in to, working in a politically charged and bitterly impoverished country. My parents were terrified. But I wanted to see how others practiced medicine- I wanted perspective. That experience led me to infectious diseases, but it also revealed to me an opportunity to use my abilities to give back- to fulfill a purpose beyond me.

Ken Jeong- Dr. Ken Jeong- the actor/comedian who played Mr. Chow in the movie *The Hangover* initially followed a path like mine. Ken grew up around the corner from me in Greensboro, North Carolina. He was my brother’s friend, a few years younger. Ken went to the same high school as me, he was pre-med at Duke like me, and he went to UNC medical school like me. When he did his clinical rotations in Charlotte, he stopped by to say hello. He told me he was headed into internal medicine, and I wished him luck. The next time I saw Ken, he was climbing out of the back of a car in full frontal nudity in *The Hangover*. What happened? Ken tells the story of how, on a whim, he took an acting class while in college. It was totally out of his comfort zone, but it is where he found his passion.

I will stop lecturing to you now to say a few words about Providence Day, which has been a second home for my family as I am sure it is for yours. My twin daughters graduated as Lifers in 2019. I was amazed at how happy the teachers looked every morning at ferryboat…day after day. I would think, “What are they smoking?” Still, I worried about my kids being at the same school for 14 years and not being exposed to other settings. Then one day while at a medical conference I got a call from the Extended Day- “Hey! It’s 6:45 pm- you picking up your girls?” I replied that that would be difficult since I was in San Diego. My husband had gotten busy in the operating room doing “brain surgery” and had forgotten to call to say he was going to be late. I can’t remember how the situation got resolved, but what I remember is, across the country, I knew that my kids were safe. That was all the perspective I needed. I am forever grateful to this village!

So, when the village chief Dr. Cowlishaw called to ask me to be the commencement speaker, my immediate response should have been “Of course!” Instead, I thought “Why is he asking me? Is it because he knows I am the only person likely to quarantine well enough to guarantee showing up on this day?” Regardless, of the reason, I will always show up for Providence Day.

I don’t remember my HS commencement speaker, but I am determined to not be forgotten. So, I am gifting you a book to remember me by. It is the same book I gave my girls at graduation, the same book I give my resident advisees graduating from pediatrics. The message is universal: Life is a journey of good and bad experiences, and they all add up to you. The book, of course, is *Oh! The Places You’ll* *Go* by Dr. Seuss…from Dr. Ahmed.

I will read you a few excerpts- in case you never crack the book. First, I have a message for your parents.

Job well done! You have come a long way from TK circus, Fort Fisher, and -my favorite- Field Day. Your hard work is reflected in your children, and they are ready.

I recently listened to a podcast on parenting by best-selling author and fellow Georgetown parent Kelly Corrigan. Here is what I learned:

First-The only expert on your child is your child.

Someone once told me that our kids go off to college and come back different people. Actually- they are the same people…they have just had different experiences and are unpacking who they are.

Second- Parenting is a long, slow letting go.

Back to Dr. Seuss...

**Congratulations!
Today is your day.
You’re off to Great Places!
You’re off and away!**

More importantly, you are off to the *right* places. You may take a detour, but you will end up where you are meant to be.

One of my daughters started out pre-med in college. She had watched a few episodes of Gray’s Anatomy in high school and thought “I can do that!” Then, first semester in college- through new experiences- she figured out she did not *want* to do that. So, amidst the frenzy of a pandemic, she pivoted into the business school, which is the right place for her.

The other daughter is still finding her path. She took an acting class- at Duke-so maybe she will follow Ken Jeong’s path. Last semester she took a detour to Spain and certainly gained perspective. Like my father said, she will figure it out.

**You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself any direction you choose.**

I have heard it again and again – from my children’s’ friends and my friends’ children. PD students ARE prepared. Remember to thank your teachers. You are gifted writers and confident speakers, and with these tools, you can steer any direction you choose.

**So be sure when you step. Step with care and great tact**

**and remember that Life’s a Great Balancing Act.**

Perspective balances you. Balance ambition with empathy. Balance assertiveness with kindness. Balance knowledge with lifelong learning. Balance introspection with connection. Balance screen time with real life.

**And will you succeed?
Yes! You will, indeed!
(98 and ¾ percent guaranteed.)**

Nothing in life is 100% guaranteed.

Relish the successes, accept the failures, step outside of your comfort zone, look back with gratitude.