

Brandeis SCA Commencement Speech  
22 May 2016

Thank you, Dr. Ankori, Dr. Chang, President Lynch, distinguished faculty, parents, — and a big congratulations to the Brandeis University School of Creative Arts Class of 2016! You did it! It is wonderful to see you all here today, hearts filled with enthusiasm, joy, and relief for having achieved a worthy milestone. The body of work that you have committed to over the duration of your degree program has challenged and shaped you in ways that you could not have imagined at the start of your Brandeis journey. That you are here today is testament to your ability to meet those challenges, to persevere, and to exceed at least certain of your own perceived limitations.

As graduates of the School of Creative Arts, you have experienced not only individual artistic growth, but you have amplified your aesthetic development through collaborative endeavors as well. The close friendships and personal networks that you have built here have greatly enriched each of your lives, and no doubt seen you through some difficult passages already. For many of you, these relationships will form the cornerstone of your young professional lives, will bloom as you traverse winding career paths, and will resurface again and again over the course of a lifetime. This support network is one of the great benefits and privileges of attending a liberal arts college in America. Take a good look around you today—this is an impressive and accomplished cohort. Celebrate and enjoy this moment together. Tomorrow, keep your compatriots in your heart as you leave the safe confines of Waltham, Massachusetts. Nurture the relationships you have made at Brandeis, and you will always have an artistic family wherever you walk in your lives.

Ok, sounds like I'm done!! Go forth and prosper. I'm stalling. This is hard. For it is both a great honor and a daunting task to be asked to deliver a commencement address. I'm a musician, a performer, and although I spend a significant part of my life onstage, public speaking is not my thing, and writing does not come easily to me. Every day since I have agreed to do this, I have grappled with one thought:

I am the wrong person to give this speech.

Don't get me wrong. I am grateful to have been honored with the Brandeis Creative Arts Award, and pretty excited to get to send you off with a message and blessing as you enter the next chapter of your lives. Although, I have to say, that from my perspective, as the youngest of 5 children, the baby of my family, it is a kind of cosmic joke that anybody would think me adult enough to do this thing.

You see, the older I get, it becomes increasingly apparent that there is a direct, inverse relationship between my chronological age and my actual knowledge. Or at least my certitude about things like career paths, success— the items about which I'm supposed to provide insight and inspire you to action today. That I might convey something meaningful has seemed like a remote possibility; the notion that I might say something flat-out wrong has appeared in more than one recent dream.

And the idea that I could say ANYTHING original is completely off the table. There's a gnawing voice inside that's been dreading my inevitable regurgitation of the "Top-Ten, Greatest Hits of All Time: Commencement Speech Edition" — you know the routine, it goes something like this— I give a grand, rousing exposition on your future encounters with:

- Failure
- Mistakes
- Success
- Fear: of failure, mistakes, and success
- Courage: the antidote to fear
- Change: the only constant in life
- That catalyst for change: Rule Breaking—
- and its evil twin: Rule Making
- Luck: the existence of which I would acknowledge reluctantly
- And.... In a speech destined for the ears of aspiring Artists in America, of course I would talk about that central, aesthetic issue that burns hot in our loins and fuels our vision to create a body of unique, profound and enduring work guided by the principles of our unswerving artistic integrity— obviously, the most important thing about Art, we must be passionate about— Entrepreneurship.

Let me tell you: I am the wrong person to give that speech.

My nature, though perky and positive on the outside, belies a deep-seated self-doubt. I bet many of you are quite familiar with this feeling. Self-doubt eats at me, and I'm given to expressing it in gallows humor. When I told a friend that I was invited to give this speech, the first thing she said to me was: "did you ask them if you could deliver it in a minor key?"

And so. In truth there is much to say about the "greatest hits" of fear, courage, creativity, productivity, and finding your way in the world. There have been myriad books, philosophies, entire industries built upon the exploration and exploitation of these common tropes. I don't mean to make light of them, or of advice-giving as a genre. But it is all too easy to find bromides that tie everything up in a neat package and send us on our way with a pat on the back. "Go get 'em Tiger! Here's a copy of 'How to Win Friends and Influence People.'"

Deep in my soul, the self-help generation has left me wanting. I just can't buy it. That's one reason why

I am the wrong person to give this speech.

And yet, it is absolutely certain that each of us needs inspiration in order to navigate our world— our beautiful, cruel world. Inspiration is as crucial to survival as food, water, shelter, and love. In fact, inspiration is the air we breathe— to in-spire, from the Latin *spirare*: to breathe; the same root that gives us "spirit": that which animates us, gives us life.

And so when the banal platitudes fail us, (you know – "if at first you don't succeed...") we can instead look to great Art to find our inspiration. I must say from experience, it is a very satisfying place to look. But, as we go on our earnest quest to draw wisdom from rich treasure-troves, the "Cultural-Economic Complex" is following closely behind, cherry picking the nuggets that make us feel good and give us hope, re-packaging and feeding them back to us.

Thus, eloquent turns of phrase replace the old chestnuts of yore. There's one particularly powerful example from the great writer Samuel Beckett, and it goes like this:

*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.  
Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*

Words to live by. A clarion call to action.

• The tennis champion Stanislas Wawrinka thinks so. He has Beckett's words tattooed to his forearm. Lose a match? Look at your arm. It tells you to work harder. Learn from your mistakes. "Fail better," on the road to success. • Search Amazon to find a plethora of self-help titles using various configurations of "Fail Better." One of my favorites: "Seven Powerful Ways to Fail Better (and Succeed Sooner)." • Meme of motivational posters, "Fail Better" apparently has become the mantra rising from conference rooms of start-ups and Silicon Valley stalwarts alike.

"Fail better". A little like "Think Different". We like the irony of these statements, and the winking, avuncular challenge they throw down before us. Non-conformist. Slightly perverse. Maverick. Indelibly American.

*Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter.  
Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*

There's only one problem: it's not what Beckett said.

Uh Oh. I AM the wrong person to give this speech. When things sound too good, too easy, too positive, you can always count on me to sniff out the doubt, to bring in the dark side in order to balance the equation.

Indeed, Beckett may have written these 12 words— but, as you know, context is everything.

OK. The only way to do this right is to read you the entire passage. These 12 words come from a piece of astonishing prose entitled "Worstward Ho". I'm going to read you the first page of the 15-page essay. The quote comes near the beginning, but it takes the entire passage to grock where Beckett is going with those words.

—READ BECKETT—

*On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.*

*Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for missaid.*

*Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still.*

*All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.*

*First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other. Sick of the either try the other. Sick of it back sick of the either. So on. Somehow on. Till sick of both. Throw up and go. Where neither. Till sick of there. Throw up and back. The body again. Where none. The place again. Where none. Try again. Fail again. Better again. Or better worse. Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. Where neither for good. Good and all.*

*It stands. What? Yes. Say it stands. Had to up in the end and stand. Say bones. No bones but say bones. Say ground. No ground but say ground. So as to say pain. No mind and pain? Say yes that the bones may pain till no choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Or better worse remains. Say remains of mind where none to permit of pain. Pain of bones till no choice but up and stand. Somehow up. Somehow stand. Remains of mind where none for the sake of pain. Here of bones. Other examples if needs must. Of pain. Relief from. Change of.*

*All of old. Nothing else ever. But never so failed. Worse failed. With care never worse failed.*

*Dim light source unknown. Know minimum. Know nothing no. Too much to hope. At most mere minimum. Mere-most minimum.*

*No choice but stand. Somehow up and stand. Somehow stand. That or groan. The groan so long on its way. No. No groan. Simply pain. Simply up. A time when try how. Try see. Try say. How first it lay. Then somehow knelt. Bit by bit. Then on from there. Bit by bit. Till up at last. Not now. Fail better worse now.*

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*(With a smile)* Well, that's a punch in the face. Hardly the inspiring message we were looking for.

OK, what am I doing here? What is BECKETT doing here in this speech? Wow. [Gannit, Yu-Hui] you made a big mistake! I REALLY AM the WRONG PERSON to give this speech – because I actually DO find the Beckett, *especially* in its full context, to be... inspiring! This acrid, biting, terse account of the futile hamster wheel of life, littered with false starts and self-doubt --- I find it amazing. Astonishing. Liberating. *Hopeful*.

Why? Because it does something that only ART can do: it rewires my brain, it blasts through preconceptions and expectations, it radically reframes how I perceive my self and my world. For a moment. For a series of moments. ART takes the most troubling, difficult parts of life, the parts we don't like to look at, that we fear examining, and reconfigures them, illuminates them, injects them with possibility, and life, and breath, and thereby, just the slightest crack of hope. ART re-shapes my insides in profound ways that the "Cultural-Economic Complex" only wishes it could.

*"Fail better worse now"*? I don't think Madison Avenue is touching that one. But I'll play in that sandbox all day long. It's full of possibility, wonderment— and the inspirations and passions that have led you all here, to this moment, today.

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Am I the wrong person to be giving this speech? Probably.

I joke, of course, but if it's funny at all, that's only because it is partly true. The world is big. There are a lot of crazy talented, accomplished people out there; and many worthy projects that I'd like to take on, but am not sure if I'm quite up to the task. Self-doubt is my constant companion. I bet it's yours, too; especially at this moment, with so many question marks ahead of you.

What cures self-doubt? Well, nothing, really. I think Beckett does a pretty good job of illustrating that. We venture, we hesitate, we change our minds, we look for a green light, we stop ourselves short, we consider and reconsider, we begin again too late, we breakthrough, we retrace our steps. Self-doubt is everywhere.

*"Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for be missaid."*

Although self-doubt is incurable, it does have a flip-side which is not self-confidence, but rather self-knowledge. Self-Knowledge is the adult to the Self-Doubt child. Self-Doubt says “Don’t cross the street! You might get run-over!” Self-Knowledge says, “you looked both ways, now go across the street. Because don’t you see? that’s where your feet are already taking you.”

It’s hard to hear Self-Knowledge because her voice is usually obscured by the racket of Self-Doubt, who shouts: “What will the others say? What if something bad happens?” Self-Knowledge usually just sits there, smiles to herself, and lets Self-Doubt spin away. You have to get her in a quiet place, and ask the right questions to be invited to unpack the wisdom of Self-Knowledge.

We hear things in our head that sound like the voice of Self-Knowledge. “It just makes sense!” “I have the right skills, I ought to be able to do that.” “If I just try hard enough, I can make it happen.” We hear voices from our past: parents and teachers who have our best interests at heart. We hear their words as Self-Knowledge. We are often mistaken.

Case-in-point: before my current iteration as a singer, I had different career. For the 10 years after I graduated from college, I was an orchestral conductor.

Since I can remember, all I have ever known was music. I was one of those kids who played every instrument I could get my hands on. None particularly well. By the time I got to conservatory, I had a very broad range, but not much depth, at least in terms of technical ability. I was probably lucky to be at conservatory at all. I was inspired and encouraged by a great teacher, a conductor, and I realized that my skill set was a really good match to be a conductor myself. I had enough native ability, a certain amount of expertise, a desire to do big things, and a ton of inspiration to fuel me. I was on my path.

I went to graduate school, got my Master’s degree. I became an orchestral conductor. I was prepared enough, and lucky enough, to land several very good jobs for a young person in that field. My parents were proud. Who wouldn’t be? Their daughter was succeeding in a visible, viable, honorable and glamorous career. And I was succeeding in a man’s world, to boot. Added pressure, added rewards.

Throughout my twenties, at the end of every phone conversation I had with my father, he always asked, “Are you doing what you love?” He asked this of all my siblings. My father was great, and supportive in all the right ways— all the little,

meaningful ways. “Are you doing what you love?” And my answer was, of course, “Yes!” I was moving mountains, to some degree, and I felt good about it.

Over the years things started happening. My marriage was not so good any more. My health had taken a hit— nothing life threatening but serious enough: a digestive disorder that was painful at times, especially stressful times. When your body starts talking, it’s time to listen. I didn’t. I powered through, with platitudes as my unconscious mantras. I was becoming more agitated about leading groups in repertoire that I had lost enthusiasm in performing. I was having trouble keeping up with administrative responsibilities. I was burning out. Still, when my father would ask me, “Are you doing what you love?” I would answer, “Yes.” I believed my answer. How could I not love this career, this full, impressive expression and embodiment of music? Of course I loved it. And I was making him proud.

When I was 30 years old, my father died unexpectedly. It was very difficult. I had just returned to graduate school to get my Doctorate in conducting, and was simultaneously leading two orchestras. Marriage– poof. Health– not better. And I suddenly found myself without my most trusted guide— without the voice of my father. He wasn’t there any more to ask that all-important question; I had to ask it for myself.

“Are you doing what you love?” And the answer came: “No.” And I was surprised.

Here was my first conscious experience of Self-Knowledge, my Inner-Guide... not self-doubt, self-knowledge. It was scary. Self-Doubt was there at the ready, and went into hyper-drive “Don’t cross the street! You’ll get hit!” It was a noisy, rough ride for a while as I tried desperately at first to hold on to both marriage and career, neither of which were working for me. I had invested so much in the IMAGE of me doing these great, important things, having this picture-perfect life. It was really painful to come to the realization that my feet had already been leading me across the street.

And that street was pretty wide. The thing my Inner-Guide was telling me to pursue was risky. Not tried and true. A little weird. Not lucrative, in the least. I wish I still had the copy of the letter I wrote to the Dean when I dropped out of school, turning my back on a full conducting fellowship “in order to pursue a career in contemporary vocal music.” For those of you who don’t know my work, have a look at YouTube sometime, you’ll see what I mean. My advisors must have thought I was insane, or certainly imprudent. *“Fail better worse now.”*

When I got to the other side of the street, there was the sandbox, waiting for me—the same sandbox that Samuel Beckett plays in. It contained the raw materials ripe for new juxtapositions, that would rewire my brain, float my boat, put me on a path of inquiry and exploration that was sustaining, fascinating, challenging, bottomless in possibility and inspiration. I had found my ART, my way of being with the world. I was the right person for this.

There were practical changes that had to be made, for sure. I had quit all my conducting jobs, which paid relatively well, so I took secretarial work in order to make ends meet. I did this willingly, *gladly*. I made the conscious decision that for a time, while I was developing new skills and a new way of being, I would DISENTANGLE the issues of money and profession. I could not have made a better decision, for me. It was a relief and a revelation. You may find this consideration to be useful: value and money are two entirely different things. Listen to your Inner-Guide closely about this one, it is a complicated issue for everybody, not just artists.

My Inner-Guide led me back to the exhilaration that I felt so keenly as a child. It is more tempered now, because of experience, but it is stronger than ever. This was not accomplished by any grand gesture. I did not will it to happen. I listened long enough, and hard enough, and got real with myself about what felt true to me. The thing I ended up doing with my life was much smaller— much stranger, much less marketable, much harder to talk to my family about— than the first thing I set out to do. *“No matter.”* It was the right thing to do, because it was my thing, it was the Only Thing. *“No choice but stand. Somehow up and stand.”*

You have your thing, too, the Only Thing. Some of you know it already, and it's the right thing, and you're the right person for it, and it will take you far in life. Some of you are still searching, and that is as it should be. Keep listening, deep inside. There is no such thing as a wasted experience or a wrong path (or even a right path). It's all just preparation for the Only Thing: Your Thing.

*“Look both ways, cross the street. See? Your feet are already taking you there.”*