

**Commencement 2016  
Pepperdine University**

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Looking out on this assembly, I can see your joy—clad in your gowns and caps and set to enter the working world. But, there may be cause for worry.

Why, because the robots are rising, the cars are driving themselves, and computers are humiliating humans in contests of wit. The most recent example is Google's AlphaGo Computer annihilating Lee Sedol, the reigning champion in Go—a 2500 year old game so complicated that there are more moves than there are atoms in the universe. Machines seem poised to replace humans as tomorrow's skilled workers.

It is understandable if you are questioning whether your years of liberal arts study have done much to make you valuable in the Ex Machina utopia that is unfolding in front of you. Are you destined for a life as R2D2's nursemaid, keeping him cool and changing his batteries—perhaps reading Tolstoy, Plato and Shakespeare to pass the time?

I know that Millennial's cherish their digital ways, but I wonder if you are being lured to your demise. Could it be that while you are deliriously tweeting and re-tweeting, posting and re-posting, snapping and chatting, the machines are modeling your behavior and learning your skills so they can cast you into a corner and leave you suckling your iPhone while they take command of the work that drives our economy?

Does a liberal arts student have a chance these days? There certainly is a chorus of critics who say no. To the minds of these naysayers, a liberal arts college is an expensive system that produces well-read students with no practical skills. To them, the arts and humanities should be put aside and replaced with science, technology, engineering, math and, of course, CODING— My God everyone must CODE!

Well, I say these academy haters are wrong. The value of a liberal arts education is not fading. To the contrary, I believe that the greatest tasks to be accomplished in the modern Digital Age require women and men with broad knowledge, creative minds, deep intellectual curiosity and, above all, a strong moral sense. This is exactly what liberal arts colleges produce and what the world needs. The world needs you.

While creative destruction and disruption are the narratives of tech glory, they are deconstructing and eroding traditional institutions, changing societal values, convulsing political and economic systems and changing the nature of human relationships. Making sense of it all requires more than coders and technocrats. It requires the perspective of the historian, the insights of the sociologist, and the

reflections of the philosopher. Weaponry and technical wizardry will not halt the spread of terrorism and religious extremism. What will, are thoughtful people who comprehend the fundamentals of religion, understand its true purpose and can find a path to restore the true meaning of faith, forgiveness and peace.

In the Digital Age, the only constant is change. A large number of jobs available today did not exist five years ago. Millennials today are likely to change jobs 12-15 times in their lives. The furious explosion of technology makes it impossible to predict the world in five years, let alone in fifty. In an ever-changing world, the future will belong to those that are adaptable—those who can change direction, reinvent themselves, spot new opportunities, and continuously innovate.

Liberal arts study has molded you into this type of person. Above all, the most valuable thing you have been taught is how to teach yourselves. You are capable of life long learning and that will be your competitive edge in an unpredictable and undulating world.

But making a meaningful life goes well beyond adapting to whatever vocation awaits you. In a world where many tasks will be mastered by machines, you will have to rely on the thing that most distinguishes you from circuits and silicon. And that is your humanity.

To cultivate your humanity you must consciously move beyond the career-centered work of collecting data, accumulating information and acquiring knowledge. A purposeful life, instead, is found in the steady, graceful and humble pursuit of wisdom.

I reserve special admiration for Seaver College and its unflinching commitment to encourage you to that path. It's mission is "to prepare persons . . . to become moral and intellectual leaders and to challenge them to value service above material success." Wisdom seekers must define their worth beyond the external measures of societal achievement. Wisdom at its core is discovered internally. It begins with understanding your weaknesses and your shortcomings and quietly attending every day to being a better person when the sun sets than you were when it rose that morning.

The search for wisdom has never been easy, but today the path is obscured under the weeds of a culture obsessed with fame, money and celebrity. Personality has become more celebrated than character. The loud are revered more than the quiet.

Technology is partly responsible. The candied-treats of technology while delicious are siphoning many in our society into the shallows. Young people today risk being turned into self-centered, personal brand managers—obsessed with managing their image on social networks, spending their energies collecting likes and followers, and curating their highlight reels for friends on Facebook.

In short, we feel like a nation of people chasing attention more than achievement. One obsessed with 140 character bits of information, rather than words of meaning and substance. Our politics seems to have convulsed into reality television. YouTube is the new Andy Warhol canvas where you find your fifteen minutes of fame. We have become utterly self-centered and in the process risk losing our souls.

If you want to find higher purpose, you must resist becoming a “celebrity apprentice” running around collecting trophies, trinkets, certificates, titles and big bonuses. You must find [The Road to Character](#).

David Brooks authored a brilliant book of that name. In it, he says there are two sets of human virtues; the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. The resume virtues are the skills that contribute to your external success in the job market. The eulogy virtues are deeper:

They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being—whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed in life... This person wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong—not only to do good, but to be good. [He] wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent trust, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors creation and one’s own possibilities.”

A wise person cultivates eulogy virtues throughout her life. A sage is forged in the kiln of time, from decades of experiences that you have yet to have. But if you set your compass to that destination now as you take your first steps, you will surely get there. To help you start your journey, I offer a few lessons from my own crucible of experience.

### **A wise person is confident but never certain.**

A wise person understands that certitude is a vice and that doubt, rather than a weakness, is a virtue. If you appreciate the vast complexity of our universe, you know that our senses limit our perceptions to a tiny fraction of reality. Much more is unknown to us than is known. Doubt leaves your mind open to see that you might be wrong and leaves you prepared to revise your opinion based on new facts, a new perspective or the weight of a better argument. Certitude is blinding. It leads to arrogance. It closes the mind.

### **A wise person develops a moral compass routed in uncompromising principles.**

Avoiding certitude does not mean living a life without conviction. In a world of ambiguity and temptation, you need a moral compass. You must develop principles that you will not compromise for anyone; not for a loved-one, for a job, or for a

chance at fame or wealth. They serve as your anchor in a storm, preventing you from being blown away by the winds of expediency, and help you be at peace with the choices you make in life.

### **A wise person is highly observant and understands the power of silence.**

Train yourself to notice the littlest of things. I mark when I see the first flower in spring, or the drop of the first leaf in fall. “Noticing” lets you see more keenly into the world and gain insights others miss in the rush of the day. Moreover, it keeps you mindful of the present, not stressed by a past you cannot change or a future you cannot know. Silence is golden, for as they say when you are talking you are not listening. It is a very powerful skill to be able to be alone with your own thoughts.

### **A wise person practices gratitude, compassion, acceptance, forgiveness and sees a higher meaning in life<sup>1</sup>**

**Gratitude** is acknowledging and appreciating your blessings. It is an outer expression of humility.

**Compassion** is being in tune with the inner state of another with an intention to ease suffering and share joy. A well-known quote says, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

**Acceptance** means appreciating what is not in your control. As Rhinehold Niebuhr put it, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

**Forgiveness** is the choice to give up anger and resentment. It is the gift you give to others, even to those who do not deserve your kindness.

**Higher Meaning** gives life and your work a purpose. It makes you happier, more focused and more spiritually connected.

### **A wise person knows she is mortal**

When I sat where you are now, I gave no thought to the fact that the life before me will have an end some day. Often people first struggle with mortality when they reach middle age, and their knees hurt, their cholesterol is bad and their blood pressure is up. But appreciating that life is finite while you are young will give you the proper perspective for living meaningfully. As Emily Dickenson say, “That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet.”

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Dr. Amit Sood of the Mayo Clinic for setting out these concepts so powerfully in his work on stress-free living.

I learned this lesson when I was only a few years out of college. I was an Army officer in Germany living my dream. Then one day without warning, I was thrown from a jeep and lay in a highway with a broken spine and a shattered pelvic cradle. At that moment, I did not know if my life had hours or years remaining. I spent a year in a hospital, relying on the skilled hands of others, the love of family and friends, my own spirit to live and my determination to have a meaningful life.

It was the best thing that ever happened to me, for it taught me that life is precious. It taught me that nothing is more important than relationships. It taught me to move toward those who are loving and kind and move rapidly away from those wallowing in negativity and blinded by self-promotion and ambition. It taught me the majesty of the universe and how small I am in it. It taught me the power of perseverance. And, it taught me the true importance of pursuing wisdom.

If I can impart this same lesson to you now, without having a jeep fall on you, then you will have a life rich with meaning. And, you will have nothing to fear from the Robots.