

you are about to begin listening to the annual class day speech. relax. concentrate. you are graduating from princeton university tomorrow, eleven am. dispel every other thought. let the world around you fade. best to close your eyes. for once this long weekend, allow yourself to see absolutely nothing but the afterimage of the back of that kid's head in front of you. just listen now. are your eyes closed yet?

find the most comfortable position: seated with your feet firmly on the ground, or maybe you prefer them crossed. left over right or right over left? arms folded across your chest. or maybe you'd rather your hands folded in your lap. put them on your head if you like. careful, don't hit your neighbors with your elbows. apologize if you do. there. maybe scoot down in your chair, lean back a slight bit. is that better? alright, you know best.

of course, the ideal position for the next five minutes is something you may never find. take off your shoes, if that helps.

it's not that you expect anything in particular from this particular speech. you're the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything. there are plenty, younger than you or less young, who live in the expectation of extraordinary experiences: from books, from people, from journeys, from events, from college.

you cast a perplexed look to the person sitting next to you (or, rather: it was she who looked at you, with the amused expression of someone who cannot believe that this is the chosen class day speech she's being forced to listen to, only to forget the words in a few minutes' time).

are you disappointed? let's see. perhaps at first you feel a bit lost, as when a person appears who, from the name, you identified with a certain face, and you try to make the features you are seeing tally with those you had in mind, and it won't work. but then you go on and you realize that the speech is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the unexpected speaker,

it's the work in itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is. because the truth of the matter is that when you know where you're going, you turn into a piece of stupid concrete.

allow me to recount to you a brief story of an alphabet that might help make this right now a little more concrete. this speech is brought to you by a font i designed during my time as a visual arts major here. it's a font based on my handwriting. maybe you've seen it around campus, via posters i designed or in the halls of one eighty five nassau street.

designing this font took the better part of two years. it's actually kind of absurd because this typeface, if you could see it, does not look so sophisticated (it's actually pretty wonky and awkward), and it's a wonder that it took anything more than a few hours to create, let alone two years.

it started one night junior year, while i was sitting in my empty fourth floor studio in the lewis center, doing homework. by doing homework, i mean i was observing my own handwriting in my class notebooks. the notes i was looking at were for cos three forty, reasoning about computation (i was a computer science major at the time), and there were small arrows and diagrams explaining various algorithms, side-by-side with columns of handwritten lecture notes. i needed to start a first project in studio, so i decided to make a font.

i began by photocopying my handwriting samples from my notebooks and cutting out individual letters, isolating them in small piles on my tabletop. all the different a's i placed in one pile, all the b's in the next, and so on and so forth. then i would go downstairs to the graphic design classroom on the third floor, where i would use the photocopier to enlarge each microscopic letter by one thousand percent, so it would fit on a poster-sized piece of paper. i enlarged twenty-six different versions of every letter. so in the

end, i had twenty-six alphabets in a stack of six hundred and seventy-six unique letterforms.

so then i thought it would be a good idea to finally digitize the photocopies and make the font. but then i got distracted by another idea; i wanted to make a book. so i made a six hundred and seventy-six page book called 'the alphabet, in letters'. and then i made an installation by deconstructing those hundreds of book pages onto the walls of the lucas gallery. after a month, i took that installation down, and started to make words out of it. i put up window signs on nassau street, and on the art museum walls. i used the letters on posters, on album covers. i finally made a font this year, a functional font! and then i used that font in a computer program that automatically typeset and printed my own tweets in that same gallery as part of my senior thesis show. most recently, i used the font to type this speech which i am reading to you now. and so, in a roundabout way, my hand-written notes from that computer science class i almost failed junior year before becoming an art major, those notes produced this speech. who would've thought.

i wanted to drag you through this extremely brief history of my short life in our visual arts department to say, on this day when we are coming together to celebrate our achievements and knowledge, not knowing can be a very productive life strategy. it's not as if i knew where i was going when i started working with my handwriting. i just wanted to produce something that resembles a font, and i did eventually which was great, but i let those letters pull me in approximately seventeen different directions first. and even now, when i could easily put the letters away in the attic and call it a finished work, i think i will not because i don't know where the letters might take me next. it's like my own work continues to propel me forward. it has taught me to embrace the not knowing. to be curious about everything. to use my eyeballs. to trust my guts. so thank you to my handwriting, i guess is one way to end this. but a better way is with a very big 'thank you' to princeton, on behalf of a good many of us here, i imagine: thanks for giving us a space to not always know what happens next.