

Good evening graduates, friends, family, President Holmgren, and colleagues. Thank you for coming and for the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you tonight.

And from the faculty – thank you, graduates for the privilege of working with you during your time at Mills, and to parents, friends, and families, thank you for entrusting your daughters (and sons) to us.

Apropos "commencement" is a phrase common in sacred texts: "In the beginning...." As usually heard, it designates a fixed spot in time, a long ago. A temporal location.

But let's try to hear the phrase differently. Not as a noun designating a fixed point, but as a gerund, naming a process, an activity.

Just take away the "the": Beginning. Like “running” or “singing” or "studying" or "texting."

Can you hear "the beginning" the way you would here "the running" or "the singing"?

But, enough with the linguistics.

You know, one of my favorite moments at graduation, is meeting your parents. And you seem to like it too, saying "mom, this is the professor I was telling you about...." And then she and I lock eyes for an instant and your voice fades into the background as we share a moment of communion, a little magic because your mother (or brother or aunt or dad or uncle) and I can see how much what you are as you leave contrasts with what you were when you arrived. And we see that it is good.

But I digress.

Sometime in the next 15 hours, someone near you will ask "why do they call it commencement?" The rhetoric of the last few weeks has been all about "the end" and "wrapping up" and "meeting deadlines." Every phrase says "stop" not "start."

The bread that's come out of the oven. The capstone placed on the building. Pick your metaphor, it's all about completion. So why commence?

Wikipedia to the rescue: we call it commencement because graduation is the beginning of your working life.

You now have a BA (or an MA, MBA, or MPP) and so go and harvest your reward. That is why you did this after all – you earned the credits, passed the exams, fulfilled the requirements. You are done: **JUST DO IT. GET A JOB! THIS IS THE BEGINNING.**

But this is why we re-imagined the word "beginning": not as a point in time, but as an activity. Frankly, if all we have to offer you this weekend are some congratulations and a starter's pistol – "graduates

take your marks, get set, be successful!" then we are falling down on our job. At the risk of upsetting you (and your parents, relatives, and friends): YOU ARE NOT DONE YET. The license you get tomorrow is your license to start beginning. If we were at all successful, you are ready to some good beginning, and to keep on doing it for years to come.

Allow me to explain.

In the beginning that begins tomorrow there are no syllabi. No one will tell you how many pages or how many points it is worth. There are no "As" to say you have done enough. There is no GPA.

Everything is, to use a Mills term, pass/no pass.

Which leads me to my main point. In beginning, you can embrace an important truth: you have to be bad at something before you can be good at it. I first heard it phrased like this by Ira Glass, but it's something my teachers have been telling me for years. One, Soo Bong Chae, used to tell us not to fret about the what to work on,

but to stick with it for at least ten years because it takes that long to see if you have a real contribution to make.

Now, in the fast paced world in which you will be beginning, the message "succeed already!" will come fast and furious. But remember that beginning is an activity and before you can be good you have to be bad, and, if you want to be really good at something, you probably have to be bad at it for a very long time.

If you hold to this notion, you will have the guts to try things that you cannot expect to be good at right away. You will master the art of separating failure from self. You can cultivate persistence and patience. You can inoculate yourself against fluster and know that stumbling means not "can't" but "not yet."

In the book *Outliers* Malcom Gladwell reports on research that suggests that to be good at almost anything you have to do it for about 10,000 hours. – that's about five years of full time work – even longer if you are multi-tasking with Facebook open. And 10,000 hours on the way to being good at something, will involve

lots of being bad at it. His most colorful example is the Beatles playing over one thousand gigs in Hamburg in the early 1960s before gelling as the band we know.

So take the degree you are getting tomorrow as a signal not that you are done, but that the beginning has begun. Those of us who shared that glance I mentioned earlier are still beginners and we welcome you the world of beginning.

Now, there WILL come a moment, sometime late tomorrow, or maybe on Sunday, or, more likely still, Monday morning, when, beholden to the conventional thinking, you will suspect that the real meaning of commencement is "NOW WHAT?"

But relax and breathe. The beginning is beginning. And IN the beginning is where life happens and it is in the beginning that you become who you are.

Go forth, class of 2011 begin beginning and be bad ... at some things on the way to being great at many things.