



ENGLISH SPEECHES

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SUBTITLES



NATALIE PORMAN

DON'T DOUBT YOURSELF

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjxbqKcPX_4

Hello, class of 2015. I am so honored to be here today. Dean Khurana, faculty, parents, and most especially graduating students. Thank you so much for inviting me. The Senior Class Committee. It's genuinely one of the most exciting things I've ever been asked to do.

I have to admit primarily because I can't deny it as it was leaked in the WikiLeaks release of the Sony hack that when I was invited, I replied, and I directly quote my own email, "wow! This is so nice! I'm gonna need some funny ghost writers. Any ideas?" This initial response, now blessedly public was from the knowledge that at my class day we were lucky enough to have Will Ferrel as class day speaker and many of us were hungover, or even freshly high, mainly wanted to laugh. So I have to admit that today even 12 years after graduation. I'm still insecure about my own worthiness.

I have to remind myself today you're here for a reason. Today I feel much like I did when I came to Harvard Yard as a freshman in 1999. When you guys were, to my continued shock and horror, still in kindergarten. I felt like there had been some mistake that I wasn't smart enough to be in this company and that every time I opened my mouth, I would have to prove that I wasn't just a dumb actress. So I start with an apology. This won't be very funny. I'm not a comedian. And I didn't get a ghost writer. But I am here to tell you today. Harvard is giving you all diplomas tomorrow. You are here for a reason.

Sometimes your insecurities and your inexperience may lead you, too, to embrace other people's expectations, standards, or values. But you can harness that inexperience to carve out your own path, one that is free of the burden of knowing how things are supposed to be, a path that is defined by its own particular set of reasons.

The other day I went to an amusement park with my soon-to-be 4-year-old son. And I watched him play arcade games. He was incredibly focused, throwing his ball at the target. Jewish mother that I am, I skipped 20 steps and was already imagining him as a major league player with what is his aim and his arm and his concentration. But then I realized what he wanted. He was playing to trade in his tickets for the crappy plastic toy. The prize was much more exciting than the game to get it.



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I, of course, wanted to urge him to take joy and the challenge of the game, the improvement upon practice, the satisfaction of doing something well, and even feeling the accomplishment when achieving the game's goals. But all of these aspects were shaded by the little 10-cent plastic men with sticky stretchy blue arms that adhere to the walls. That-that was the prize. In a child's nature, we see many of our own innate tendencies. I saw myself in him and perhaps you do, too.

Prizes serve as false idols everywhere, prestige, wealth, fame, power. You'll be exposed to many of these, if not all. Of course, part of why I was invited to come to speak today beyond my being a proud alumna is that I've recruited some very coveted toys in my life, including a not so plastic, not so crappy one: an Oscar. So we bump up against a common trope I think of the commencement address people who have achieved a lot telling you that the fruits of the achievement are not always to be trusted. But I think that contradiction can be reconciled and is in fact instructive. Achievement is wonderful when you know why you're doing it. And when you don't know, it can be a terrible trap.

I went to a public high school on Long Island, Syosset High School.
Ooh, hello, Syosset!

The girls I went to school with had Prada bags and flat-ironed hair. And they spoke with an accent I who had moved there at age 9 from Connecticut mimicked to fit in. Florida Oranges, Chocolate cherries. Since I'm ancient and the Internet was just starting when I was in high school, people didn't really pay that much of attention to the fact that I was an actress. I was known mainly at school for having a backpack bigger than I was and always having white-out on my hands because I hated seeing anything crossed out in my note books. I was voted for my senior yearbook "most likely to be a contestant on Jeopardy" or code for nerdiest. When I got to Harvard just after the release of Star Wars: Episode 1, I knew I would be staring over in terms of how people viewed me. I feared people would have assumed I'd gotten in just for being famous, and that they would think that I was not worthy of the intellectual rigor here. And it would not have been far from the truth.

When I came here I had never written a 10-page paper before. I'm not even sure I've written a 5-page paper. I was alarmed and intimidated by the calm eyes of a fellow student who came here from Dalton or Exeter, who thought that compared to high school the workload here was easy. I was completely overwhelmed and thought that reading 1000 pages a week was unimaginable, that writing a 50-page thesis is just something I could never do.

I had no idea how to declare my intentions. I couldn't even articulate them to myself. I've been acting since I was 11. But I thought acting was too frivolous and certainly not meaningful. I came from a family of academics and was very concerned of being taken seriously.



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In contrast to my inability to declare myself, on my first day of orientation freshman year, five separate students introduced themselves to me by saying I'm going to be president; remember I told you that. Their names, for the record, were Bernie Sanders, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton. In all seriousness, I believed every one of them. Their bearing and self-confidence alone seemed the proof of their prophecy where I couldn't shake my self-doubt. I got in only because I was famous. This was how others saw me and it was how I saw myself. Driven by these insecurities, I decided I was going to find something to do in Harvard that was serious and meaningful, that would change the world and make it a better place.

At the age of 18, I'd already been acting for 7 years, and assumed I find a more serious and profound path in college. So freshman fall I decided to take Neurobiology and Advanced Modern Hebrew Literature because I was serious and intellectual.

Needless to say, I should have failed both. I got Bs, for your information, and to this day, every Sunday I burn a small effigy to the pagan Gods of grade inflation. But as I was fighting my way through Aleph Bet Yod Y'shua in Hebrew and the different mechanisms of neuro-response, I saw friends around me writing papers on sailing and pop culture magazines, and professors teaching classes on fairy tales and The Matrix. I realized that seriousness for seriousness's sake was its own kind of trophy, and a dubious one, a pose I sought to counter some half-imagined argument about who I was.

There was a reason that I was an actor. I love what I do. And I saw from my peers and my mentors that it was not only an acceptable reason, it was the best reason.

When I got to my graduation, sitting where you sit today after 4 years of trying to get excited about something else, I admitted to myself that I couldn't wait to go back and make more films. I wanted to tell stories, to imagine the lives of others and help others do the same. I have found or perhaps reclaimed my reason.

You have a prize now or at least you will tomorrow. The prize is Harvard degree in your hand. But what is your reason behind it?

My Harvard degree represents, for me, the curiosity and invention that were encouraged here, the friendships I've sustained, the way Professor Graham told me not to describe the way light hit a flower but rather the shadow the flower cast, the way Professor Scarry talked about theatre is a transformative religious force, how professor Coslin showed how much our visual cortex is activated just by imaging. Now granted these things don't necessarily help me answer the most common question I'm asked: What designer are you wearing? What's your fitness regime? Any makeup tips? But I have never since been



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embarrassed to myself as what I might previously have thought was a stupid question. My Harvard degree and other awards are emblems of the experiences which led me to them.

The wood paneled lecture halls, the colorful fall leaves, the hot vanilla Toscaninis, reading great novels in overstuffed library chairs, running through dining halls screaming: Ooh! Ah! City steps! City steps! City steps! City steps!

It's easy now to romanticize my time here. But I had some very difficult times here too.

Some combination of being 19, dealing with my first heartbreak, taking birth control pills that have since been taken off the market for their depressive side effects, and spending too much time missing daylight during winter months led me to some pretty dark moments, particularly during sophomore year.

There were several occasions where I started crying in meetings with professors, overwhelmed with what I was supposed to pull off when I could barely get myself out of bed in the morning, moments when I took on the motto for school work. "Done. Not good." If only I could finish my work, even if it took eating a jumbo pack of sour Patch Kids to get me through a single 10-page paper. I felt that I'd accomplished a great feat. I repeat to myself. "Done. Not good."

A couple of years ago, I went to Tokyo with my husband and I ate at the most remarkable sushi restaurant. I don't even eat fish. I'm vegan. So that tells you how good it was. Even with just vegetables, this sushi was the stuff you dreamed about. The restaurant has six seats. My husband and I marveled at how anyone can make rice so superior to all other rice. We wondered why they didn't make a bigger restaurant and be the most popular place in town.

Our local friend explained to us that all the best restaurants in Tokyo are that small and do only one type of dish: sushi or tempura or teriyaki, because they want to do that thing well and beautifully. And it's not about quantity. It's about taking pleasure in the perfection and beauty of the particular. I'm still learning now that it's about good and maybe never done. And the joy and work ethic and virtuosity we bring to the particular can impart a singular type of enjoyment to those we give to and of course, ourselves.

In my professional life, it also took me time to find my own reasons for doing my work. The first film I was in came out in 1994. Again, appallingly, the year most of you were born. I was 13 years old upon the film's release and I can still quote what the New York Times said about me verbatim. "Ms. Portman poses better than she acts." The film had universally tepid critic response and went on to bomb commercially. That film was called *The Professional*, or *Leon in Europe*.



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And today, 20 years and 35 films later, it is still the film people approach me about the most to tell me how much they loved it, how much it moved them, how it's their favorite movie. I feel lucky that my first experience of releasing a film was initially such a disaster by all standards and measures.

I learned early that my meaning had to be from the experience of making a film and the possibility of connecting with individuals rather than the foremost trophies in my industry: financial and critical success. And also these initial reactions could be false predictors of your work's ultimate legacy.

I started choosing only jobs that I'm passionate about and from which I knew I could glean meaningful experiences. This thoroughly confused everyone around me: agents, producers, and audiences alike. I made *Gotya's Ghost*, a foreign independent film and study our history visiting the Prado everyday for 4 months as I read about Goya and the Spanish Inquisition. I made *V for Vendetta*, studio action movie for which I learned everything I could about freedom fighters whom otherwise may be called terrorists. From Menachem Begin to *Weather Underground*, I made *Your Highness*, a pothead comedy with Danny McBride and laughed for 3 months straight.

I was able to own my meaning and not have it be determined by box office receipts or prestige. By the time I got to making *Black Swan*, the experience was entirely my own. I felt immune to the worst things anyone could say or write about me, and to whether an audience felt like going to see my movie or not.

It was instructive for me to see, for ballet dancers once your technique gets to a certain level, the only thing that separates you from others is your quirks or even flaws. One ballerina was famous for how she turned slightly off balanced.

You can never be the best, technically. Someone will always have a higher jump or a more beautiful line. The only thing you can be the best at is developing your own self. Authoring your own experience was very much what *Black Swan* itself was about.

I worked with Darren Aronofsky, the film's director, who changed my last line in the movie to: it was perfect. My character Nina is only artistically successful when she finds perfection and pleasure for herself not when she was trying to be perfect in the eyes of others.

So when *Black Swan* was successful financially and I began receiving accolades, I felt honored and grateful to have connected with people. But the true core of my meaning, I had already established. And I needed it to be independent of people's reactions to me.



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People told me that Black Swan was an artistic risk, a scary challenge to try to portray a professional ballet dancer. But it didn't feel like courage or daring that drew me to it. I was so oblivious to my own limits that I did things I was woefully unprepared to do. And so the very inexperience that in college had made me insecure and made me want to play by other's rules now is making me actually take risks I didn't even realize were risks.

When Darren asked me if I could do ballet, I told him I was basically a ballerina which, by the way, I wholeheartedly believed. When it quickly became clear that preparing for film, that I was 15 years away from being a ballerina, it made me work a million times harder and of course the magic of cinema and body doubles helped the final effect.

But the point is, if I had known my own limitations, I never would take of the risk. And the risk led to one of my greatest artistic personal experiences, and that I not only felt completely free, I also met my husband during the filming.

Similarly, I just directed my first film, A Tale of love in Darkness. I was quite blind to the challenges ahead of me. The film is a period film, completely in Hebrew, in which I also act with an eight-year-old child as a co-star. All of these are challenges I should have been terrified of as I was completely unprepared for them, but my complete ignorance to my own limitations looked like confidence and got me into the director's chair. Once here, I have to figure it all out, and my belief that I could handle these things, contrary to all evidence of my ability to do so, was only half the battle. The other half was very hard work. The experience was the deepest and most meaningful one of my career.

Now clearly I'm not urging you to go and perform heart surgery without the knowledge to do so! Making movies admittedly has less drastic consequences than most professions and allows for a lot of effects that make up for mistakes. The thing I'm saying is, make use of the fact that you don't doubt yourself too much right now.

As we get older, we get more realistic, and that includes about our own abilities or lack thereof, and that realism does us no favors. People always talk about diving into things you're afraid of. That never worked for me. If I am afraid, I run away. And I would probably urge my child to do the same. Fear protects us in many ways.

What has served me is diving into my own obliviousness, being more confident than I should be, which everyone tends to decry American kids, and those of us who have been grade inflated and ego inflated. Well. It can be a good thing if it makes you try things you never might have tried.



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Your inexperience is an asset, and will allow you to think in original and unconventional way. Accept your lack of knowledge and use it as your asset.

I know a famous violinist who told me that he can't compose because he knows too many pieces. So when he starts thinking of a note, an existing piece immediately comes to mind. Just starting out of your biggest strengths is, not knowing how things are supposed to be. You can compose freely because your mind isn't cluttered with too many pieces. And you don't take for granted the way things are. The only way you know how to do things is your own way.

You here will all go on to achieve great things. There is no doubt about that.

Each time you set out to do something new, your inexperience can either lead you down a path where you will conform to someone else's values or you can forge your own path, even though you don't realize that's what you're doing. If your reasons are your own, your path, even if it's a strange and clumsy path, will be wholly yours, and you will control the rewards of what you do by making your internal life fulfilling.

At the risk of sounding like a Miss American Contestant, the most fulfilling things I've experienced have truly been the human interactions: spending time with women in village banks in Mexico with FINCA microfinance organization, meeting young women who were the first and the only in their communities to attend secondary schools in rural Kenya with free the Children group that built sustainable schools in developing countries tracking with gorilla conservationists in Rwanda.

It's cliché, because it's true that helping other ends up helping you more than anyone. Getting out of your own concerns and caring about some else's life for a while, remind you that you are not the central of the universe, and that in the ways we're generous or not, we can change course of someone's life.

Even at work, the small feat of kindness crew members, directors, fellow actors have shown me, have had the most lasting impact.

And of course, first and foremost, the center of my world is the love that I share with my family and friends. I wish for you that your friends will be with you through it all as my friends from Harvard have been together since we graduated. My friends from school are still very close.

We've nursed each other through heartaches and danced at each other's weddings. We've held each other at funerals, and rocked each other's new babies. We've worked together on projects, helped each other get jobs, and thrown parties for when we've quit bad ones. And now our children are creating a second generation of friendship as we look at them toddling together. Haggard and disheveled working parents that we are.



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Grab the good people around you and don't let them go. The biggest asset this school offers you is a group of peers that will both be your family and your school life.

I remember always being pissed at the spring here in Cambridge, tricking us into remembering a sunny yard full of laughing Frisbee throwers after 8 months of dark frigid library dwelling. It was like the school had managed to turn on the good weather. As a last memory, we should keep in mind that would make us want to come back.

But as I got farther away my years here, I know the power of this school is much deeper than weather control. It changed the very questions that I was asking. To quote one of my favorite thinkers Abraham Joshua Hechel: To be or not to be is not the question; the vital question is how to be and how not to be. Thank you! I can't wait to see how you do all the beautiful things you will do.