

27 Bits of Wisdom from 2012 Commencement Addresses - Mental Floss

At Goucher College last month, Ira Glass said that commencement speakers “give stock advice, which is then promptly ignored.” He may be right. Every year, speakers spew the same old sayings: Never give up! Embrace failure! Be passionate! Here’s a look at speakers who said things a little differently this year.



Image credit:
Mount Holyoke

1. Neil deGrasse Tyson (Astrophysicist): Mount Holyoke College, MA

“I need the rest of you to help me fix the world. The rest of the world is getting stupider.”

2. Adam Savage (Host: *Mythbusters*): Sarah Lawrence College, NY

“Think about what you thought college would be like, and what you expected yourself to be like. Now look at

yourself. I’m going to hazard a guess and say that things totally didn’t turn out like you expected. This process will repeat itself ad nauseam throughout your entire life.”

3. Samuel Palmisano (Former CEO IBM): Johns Hopkins University, MD

“Maybe the best decision for you is to run away and join the circus. But don’t model yourself on one of the animals, performing tricks for the trainers who throw peanuts.”

4. Aaron Sorkin (Screenwriter, Playwright): Syracuse University, NY

“You’re too good for schadenfreude. You’re too good for gossip and snark. You’re too good for intolerance... you’re too good to think people who disagree with you are your enemy—unless they went to Georgetown, in which case they can go to hell.”

5. Neil Gaiman (Author): University of the Arts, PA

“The problems of failure are hard. The problems of success can be harder, because nobody warns you about them.”

6. Jane Lynch (Actress): Smith College, MA

“If I could do so much of my early life over, I would have taken more moments like this to breathe... I wouldn’t have been forever trying to look around the corner to see ‘What’s next, what’s next?!’”

7. Eric Schmidt (Former Google CEO): Boston University, MA

“Don’t just push a button saying [you] ‘Like’ something. Actually tell them. What a concept!”

8. Tom Brokaw (Journalist): Arizona State University

“All your life you have been hearing about how your lives will be changed on this occasion as you enter the real world. I have a news bulletin for you tonight. You’ve already been there. Turns out, junior high was the real world ... The same petty jealousies, the insecurities, the snobs, the cliques, the dorks, the egos, the tantrums, and the dopes that you met in junior high, you’re going to encounter for the rest of your lives.”



*Image credit:
Goucher Col-
lege*

9. Ira Glass (Radio Personality): Goucher College, MD

“You will be stupid. You will worry your parents. You will question your own choices, your relationships, your jobs, your friends, where you live, what you studied in college, that you went to college at all... If that happens, you’re

doing it right.”

10. Dom Sagolla (Twitter co-creator): Becker College, MA

“Embrace constraints; seek them out. Many people feel that social or political constraints are an excuse to fail, but I find them to be freeing. You know, you look at Twitter with 140 characters to get your message across... Some of the best small companies thrive because constraints inspire creativity.”

11. Ted Koppel (Journalist): UMass Amherst

“If we ignore all the serious issues or try to reduce them all to 140 characters or fewer exchanges, we are going to have ... genuine problems, not just in the economy, but in foreign policy, education, health.”

12. Laurie Anderson (Multimedia Artist): School of Visual Arts, NY

“No one is ever going to ask you to do the thing you really want to do. This will never happen. So just think about what you’d like to do, and then just start doing it.”

13. More Aaron Sorkin at Syracuse

“Make no mistake about it, you are dumb. You are a group of incredibly well-educated dumb people... There are some screw-ups headed your way. I wish I could tell you that there was a trick to avoiding the screw-ups ... but they’re coming for ya. It’s a combination of life being unpredictable, and you being super dumb.”

14. Jamaica Kincaid (Novelist): Grinnell College, IA

“You must bite the hand that feeds you. You are perhaps always told the opposite of this...But from time to time, I tell you, you must.”

15. Anna Quindlen (Author, Journalist): Bucknell University, PA

“The voices of conformity speak so loudly. Don’t listen to them. No one does the right thing out of fear. If you ever utter the words, ‘We’ve always done it that way,’ I urge you to wash out your mouth with soap.”

16. Amy Kule (Organizer, Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade): Ithaca College, NY

“You will find the most onerous chains to break in your lives are the ones that you’ve tethered there yourselves.”

17. David Simon (TV writer, producer): Georgetown University, DC

“Marching out into this beleaguered world of ours – you suckers are gonna need all the laughter you can get. Take solace in humor, people. As much as you can.”



Image credit:
University of Virginia

18. Katie Couric (Journalist): University of Virginia

“Don’t look for jobs. Look for people.”

19. Jim Lehrer (Journalist): College of William and Mary, VA

“Please don’t mistake what is happening here today. The fact that you are receiving a diploma from one of America’s finest

institutions of higher learning does not mean you are educated.”

20. Steve Karmen (Composer): Binghamton University, NY

“If your parents support your dreams, say thank you. Over and over and over again. And if they don’t? Well, you’ll just have to show them, won’t you?”

21. Rick MacArthur (Journalist, Author): Columbia University, NY

“My advice to all of you today...is to absorb, to question, to challenge, to refute any author on any subject—or for that matter, any politician or commencement speaker.”

22. Bill Strickland (Author, Educator): Middlebury College, VT

“Do not give up on the poor kids. They might end up being the commencement speaker one day.”

23. Robert Smith (NPR Correspondent): Reed College, OR

“I’m going to get in trouble for this. I know, for your whole life, people have said, ‘Be yourself.’ I’m telling you: not yet.”

24. Anne Fadiman (Author): Trinity College, CT

“I ask you to do two contradictory things—honor difference and commonality. There is a way to do both. Don’t assume that you...stand at the center of the universe. It isn’t true and it never helps.”

25. Leymah Gbowee (Nobel Laureate, Peace Prize): Vassar College, NY

“Let me tell you something. If you think there are social problems and you are comfortable in your fence, trust me, if you don’t help to address those problems, they’ll come knocking at your door.”

26. Elie Wiesel (Author, Holocaust Survivor): Wagner College, NY

“Remember that despair is never the solution. Remember, hatred is never an option. Remember that hope is not a gift given to us, hope is a gift that we give to others.”

27. Robert de Niro (Actor): Bates College, ME

“I have one message for you, class of 2012: Stay in school.”

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Do you remember anything your commencement speaker told you? Want to throw any advice on the pile for the class of 2012?

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