

I really am honored to be a part of this celebration. When I sat in this very grove in my very own blue cap and gown, I couldn't even begin to imagine that I would be back here in this capacity. Honestly, I couldn't, in that moment, imagine most of the journey that would unfold from there.

At AFS I developed the tools I would need to shape that journey. Without the ability to carefully read and critique a complicated text, to express myself clearly and convincingly, to apply logic and systematic reasoning to a problem, to develop and test a hypothesis, to use my voice and movement and rhythm and color and composition to draw someone in and make a connection I could not possibly do my job as a teacher and a scholar. I could not possibly live the life I want to live! Graduates, listen. I am telling you from experience, with no exaggeration, that it all matters. The hard work, the late nights, the successes, the failures, in every class in every subject, in every team or club or production. It was worth it. Okay, the details will fade. Sorry, teachers! I do not remember much about the ancient Sumerians. If someone stopped me on the street and asked me to do an integration by parts, I would have to look it up. But the details were never the point. The tools will be with you for the rest of your life.

I'm a college professor, so I meet high school graduates from all sorts of backgrounds, and I've been thinking about what an AFS graduate brings to the world that many of my students, and frankly some of my colleagues have yet to really grasp. I honestly hadn't fully made this connection until I was asked to write this speech, but I keep coming back to the concept of "inner light." I know that many of us know what that is, but for those in the audience who might be unfamiliar, it is a central principle of the Quaker faith that every person has the presence of the divine within them, their inner light. For Quakers this is not just a platitude; it's a practice that actively and profoundly impacts how they approach living in the world. And even though most of the students, faculty, and staff of the school are not members of the Society of Friends, myself included, this principle and practice is baked into the very walls of the institution.

Your teachers see your light. They don't just teach, they teach you. They know that you have something to contribute that no one else can. They know that they are just as lucky to spend time with you as you are to spend time with them. You are the recipients of a remarkable – and unfortunately rare – gift: you have spent most of your waking hours being told in a million ways large and small that you matter, you are important.

As part of my job, I am a scientist. I don't know if you know this, but what that means is that I fail for a living. The fact is that most of my ideas are wrong, most of what I try fails, and the vast majority of effort in my research is spent figuring out why something isn't working. When new students begin working with me I warn them that research is almost entirely composed of disappointment. The same is true for basically any creative endeavor. Under those conditions it is all too easy to become discouraged, to become convinced that you have nothing to offer. Many

young researchers or artists succumb to this feeling and never return. Even the most accomplished luminaries describe the sneaking suspicion that all of their success thus far has been a lucky accident never to be repeated. It's true! It's called imposter syndrome. The only way I know of to push through, to keep working the problem and find the moments of genuine discovery is to have a tiny voice in your head telling you that you know something that no one else knows; you have a particular collection of experiences that no one else has; there are problems that only you can solve. If you know this about yourself you can make it through the discouraging times, the disappointments, the mistakes, the setbacks. In fact, you have to! Those problems aren't going to solve themselves! You have a light that is only yours; you have a responsibility to shine it as brightly as you can.

But...the funny thing is, in the Quaker faith, so does literally everyone else. That's literally literally, not figuratively literally. You are a light...in a sea of light. You know something that no one else knows, and everyone you meet, and everyone you will never meet, knows something that *you* do not know. Your lived experience is unique and also vanishingly narrow. Your knowledge and contributions are important, but they are not enough on their own. It is difficult to truly master the idea that everyone else is exactly as valid and important as you are; I'm not sure anyone truly does master it, to be honest. But you've been practicing. In a time of widening cultural chasms that seem unbridgeable, you know what it means for a genuinely diverse group of people to reach consensus. In a time when it seems like everyone is talking over and past one another, you know what it is to be silent, and still, and to truly listen. In a time when it seems like everyone is clutching an easy answer, wearing dismissiveness like a suit of armor, you know what it is to face complexity and messiness and have the difficult conversations that lead to real change. You can't stop now. If you know that everyone has a light within them, that everyone has a piece of the puzzle, you have no choice but to constantly seek out the voices you cannot hear, to constantly widen the limits of your understanding. If you can envision a vast expanse of human experience that you can barely comprehend, you have no choice but to constantly question what you think you know.

If you sense a tension here, I am right there with you. Belief in the inner light requires you to be self-assured and self-skeptical, confident in the value of your own perspective and yet prepared at all times to change and grow. It's hard work! But you can't let that tension go slack. If you become convinced of your own completeness, or your own insignificance, you lose your way. You miss opportunities to add good to the world. Here, you have been learning how to live in the tension, to let it stretch you. It seems to me that that, more than any academic training, is the preparation you need to make a genuine difference wherever you go.

Graduates, it's a cliché because it's true: you are crossing a threshold. You are stepping out into a bigger, more complicated world. Most communities you will join are not built upon the principle of inner light, and most will not be as intimate and connected as this one – this place is truly special. But you will carry it with you, a set of tools for shaping your journey, a small voice that lifts you up, an example of how

to practice the conviction that everyone matters. I hope that you go forward proud of what you have achieved, grateful for the gifts you have received, and excited for your next adventure. It's time to take your light into the world and to use it to help everyone around you shine all the brighter. Congratulations, class of 2017!