

Chancellor Sobolik, distinguished faculty, honored guests, cherished families and friends, and most importantly, graduates in the social sciences and of the school of social work for the Class of 2025: it is my distinct honor to address you today.

I've had the privilege of attending many commencement ceremonies—sometimes as a proud parent, sometimes as a supportive friend, sometimes as a speaker, and of course, once as a graduate myself. And on every occasion I have been energized -- by the sense of fulfillment that comes from the end of a long journey, the jubilation of accomplishment, and the tangible sense of possibility that the future will bring. It's no surprise that I've often heard graduates say that commencement is the first day of the rest of their lives. And it is in that spirit that I want to help you understand how profoundly fortunate you are.

Now, there is not a single person in this auditorium that has not had misfortune in their lives. And I don't doubt that there have been times when you have felt very unlucky. Still, graduates, here you are in this hall having completed the work you set out to do and having obtained new tools at this wonderful University with which you can build your future success.

But let's zoom out for a moment. Let's think about your existence from a cosmic perspective. Daniel Dennett, the eminent philosopher and cognitive scientist who sadly passed away last year, offers us a remarkable insight when he writes: "Every living thing is incredibly lucky simply to be alive. Over 90% of all the organisms that have ever lived, have died without viable offspring; but not a single one of your ancestors, going back to the dawn of life on Earth, suffered that normal misfortune. You spring from an unbroken line of winners going back millions of generations. However unlucky you may feel in a given moment, your very existence testifies to the astonishing role of luck in your past." So yes, you *are* fortunate.

I could at this point pivot to urge you to use your good fortune to "follow your dreams," "make a difference," or "live your passion." And while that is all excellent advice, I'm going to take a different tack. Instead of focusing on what you should strive for, I want to focus on something you will certainly encounter along the way: mistakes.

I just completed my 58<sup>th</sup> trip around the sun, and in that time the mistakes I've made have included some doozies. Some highlights include sending an email out to people who were helping me coordinate a surprise birthday party and not realizing that I had included the email address of the person we were surprising (surprise!); or while refereeing an NCAA soccer playoff game, blowing the whistle to call a foul just a split second before the player's teammate kicked the ball into the goal (and it goes without saying that they missed the ensuing penalty kick, which made the rest of that game oh so much fun); or rehearsing over and over and over the pronunciation of the name of a

person I was asked to introduce at an event, and then absolutely butchering the name at the podium in front of 500 people. I suspect you have had your own moments of Doh! We try to anticipate every outcome, to plan meticulously, to dodge failure at all costs. But what if mistakes were essential to your growth—and even to your existence?

Last year, I came across a fascinating interdisciplinary field of study: the Science of Mistakes. In particular, I read a paper by David S. Oderberg, a professor of philosophy at the University of Reading in England. He asks: how it is that organisms like humans, who are composed of the fundamental building blocks of the cosmos which adhere to the laws of physics with perfect precision, should be so mistake-prone. As Oderberg writes, “no one ever caught an electron or an atom committing a mistake.” Oderberg goes on to build a framework for understanding errors and concludes that they are “a universal feature of biology” and in fact “fundamental to life itself.”

Mistakes, Oderberg argues, are not artifacts. They are signs of something uniquely human: our capacity to set goals, to aspire, to try. This insight has special resonance for you who have chosen disciplines deeply invested in human complexity, imperfection, and transformation. I think it is invigorating to know that every mistake you make is proof that you are striving for something. And striving always carries the risk of error.

This goes beyond the popular advice to “embrace failure.” That has never resonated with me. I certainly felt no desire to “embrace” the errors I mentioned earlier. But Oderberg’s insight gave me a new perspective: mistakes aren’t signs of inadequacy; they’re evidence of life.

To put it another way. An inanimate object—a rock, for example—doesn’t make mistakes. It doesn’t strive for anything, and it doesn’t err. But human beings have purposes, we act toward them, and in so doing, mistakes are not just possible; they are certain. And that inevitability is what makes life dynamic, creative, and meaningful.

And here’s an ancillary but important element of this: mistakes don’t just teach us about ourselves. They teach us about others. Once you understand that mistakes are universal, you’ll hopefully find it easier to extend compassion to those around you. Because just like you, they cannot escape error. We are all navigating this imperfect, mistake-filled world together.

As you commence the next chapter of your lives, the world will continue to challenge you. There will be moments when you feel beaten down, exhausted, or even defeated. There will be jobs that test your patience, relationships that break your heart, and unexpected obstacles that derail your plans. In those moments, mistakes will be easy to make—and hard to forgive. But I urge you to remember: mistakes are not failures of character; they are signs that you are living.

Let me finish where I began. Don’t forget that you are singular. There has never been and there will never be another like you. Don’t keep your uniqueness to yourself, don’t

passively adapt. Transform the world. Be like Orpheus in one of my favorite shows, Hades Town: Strive for how the world could be in spite of the way it is. This is the real work, whether you are stepping into the field of social work, advancing human well-being through research, policy, or service, or taking on the wide-ranging challenges addressed by the social sciences.

So, Class of 2025, carry this with you: You are your best self when you accept your whole self - mistakes and all, and when that whole self is dedicated to the society you are part of. Live, strive, learn, grow. And no matter what challenges lie ahead, never forget how fortunate you are to be you. Thank you.