

The Wand Chooses the Wizard: On Carleton, Children's Books, and Creating Yourself

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I gave this speech as a Convocation at my alma mater, Carleton College, in April 2010.

- Thank you, Anju, for that introduction.
- As she said, my name is Cheryl Klein, and I'm a 2000 graduate of the college
- And I really appreciate your all coming out, especially you students
- I admit that *I* often skipped Convo to finish a paper or do some reading
 - So I know exactly how much this hour is worth to you.
- And I'm not being modest when I say, in all my time at Carleton, I never really thought I would be up here.
- I *daydreamed* I'd be up here, certainly—that I'd do something interesting enough or important enough that the school would want me to come back and speak.
 - I think I especially daydreamed this during boring Convo speeches.
- But I couldn't see my way to *how* I would be up here . . .
 - to what I would be doing as a grown-up that would matter enough for Carleton to want me back.
- Indeed, when I was a student and I thought about life after graduation, it all just seemed like a great fog to me.
 - Not uncharted waters and “here be dragons,” but that I wasn't even sure the water and the dragons existed.
 - Would I go to grad school? To the business world? Into nonprofit work of some kind?
 - Back to Missouri, where I'm from? Portland, or D.C., or New York?
 - I had *no* idea—in my senior spring especially.
- And from everything I've read about economic reports, and the job prospects for new graduates,
 - I imagine many of you are in this same boat.
- So ten years after graduation, I have returned to report on a supposedly grown-up life,
 - And how the eventual map of my new world unfolded

- Thanks to Carleton, and children’s books, and the Harry Potter series, and keeping faith
 - All of which I’ll talk about a little as well.
- I hope you’ll hear something in this worthy of your time, and the College’s invitation,
- And if we have time left over at the end, I’d be glad to answer some questions.
- So I came to a career in children’s books genetically.
- My grandfather was a professor of children’s literature at a state university in Missouri
 - And he always brought me copies of new books he’d received,
 - So I can’t remember a time I wasn’t either reading or being read to constantly.
- My mother has a collage at home that features me, as a baby, eating newspaper;
 - me, at three, with a bowl haircut and *Make Way for Ducklings*;
 - me, at five, still with the bowl haircut and *Ramona the Pest*;
 - And so on, through my senior picture in high school, which was puffed bangs and a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*.
- When I was in fourth grade, a boy named Jason Hart came up to me and said, “Wow, Cheryl, you sure read a lot”
 - Which was the first time I’d ever thought about myself as different from other people in the amount I read,
 - And that this habit might be worthy of remark.
- This sense of difference increased through middle school and high school—this sense that I was, to put it bluntly, a book-loving weirdo.
- I *loved* reading, more than anything, especially about girls who likewise were a little displaced
 - *Jacob Have I Loved* by Katherine Paterson, or *The Glass Menagerie*.
- But as lovely as reading is, it isolates you from other people,
 - Because you’re spending time with the imaginary characters on the page rather than the real characters around you.
- At the same time, I wanted to be popular,
 - with lots of friends, and the right clothes and laugh,
 - and seemingly boundless confidence in every situation.
- So I was torn between who I was,
 - and who I wanted to be desperately.

- Now, the standard adult advice for kids in these situations is to “Be yourself! Let other people see the real you!”
 - Where the adults don’t get that it’s the real you that’s the problem.
- There is a very definite genre of children’s books that I think of as “Be Yourself” books.
- They’re always directed at the kid who’s suffering, not at the popular kids or bullies
 - Which maybe is a mistake—maybe we should have more “Don’t Be a Jerk” books.
 - But writers are rarely the bullies when they’re kids, and writers tend to write the emotional experience they know.
- Anyway. These “Be Yourself” books inevitably feature someone who’s a little bit different, because of the clothes they wear or their love of dance or whatever it might be,
 - getting tormented or ignored by the people around them, usually their peers.
- And these stories almost always follow one of two plot structures:
- One is Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.
 - Someone who is different is scorned, reviled, made an outsider. “They wouldn’t let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games.”
 - But the outsider sticks to whatever makes him different—
 - usually because he has no choice—
 - and eventually that difference ends up saving the entire community.
 - “Then how the reindeer loved him, and they shouted out with glee—Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, you’ll go down in history!”
 - This is also a Christ story, you’ll notice, someone suffering at the hands of the community and coming back to redeem them all.
 - And at the same time a story about Darwinistic evolution—the community at first resisting an odd mutation, and then adapting to and benefiting from it.
- The other “be yourself” plot structure is the Ugly Duckling—the reverse of Rudolph.
 - Here the outsider is again scorned, reviled, tormented inside and out. But rather than saving his community, he leaves it, to find another group that truly understands him and appreciates his talents.
 - That is, when the community rejects him, he finds a new community.

- This happens at the very beginning of the Harry Potter books, when Harry leaves the Dursleys for Hogwarts, and finds a place where his magical skills can be developed.
- Now, there are other directions a “be yourself” story could go
 - The outsider could make direct and declared war on the community—the beat ’em path
 - The outsider could give up what makes him different and become part of the community once and for all—the join ’em route
- But those are not the stories we tell children again and again and again.
- We tell the Ugly Duckling and Rudolph. And what fascinates me about these two plot structures is that they do not offer the option of change.
 - The Ugly Duckling never tries to pluck its feathers out to be like the other ducks in the yard.
 - In the cartoon version, Rudolph paints his nose black—but it washes off again in a snowstorm.
- These stories say, You can only be who you are. You can try to act like a duck, you can try to hide your red nose, but you are still a swan and the light will still burst through.
- And—going back to my own story—this was the lesson I was learning in middle school.
 - That as hard as I tried to care about New Kids on the Block,
 - Or make jokes with the popular girls to prove I was one of them
- The fact that I was trying *showed*,
 - And popularity seems to be one of those things where if you have to make an effort, you’ve already failed.
- So at some point I realized, I was never going to be one of the popular girls.
- And that was one of the best things that ever happened to me,
 - Because it set me free to be a book-loving weirdo with my whole heart.
- In eighth grade, I picked up a Jane Austen novel for the first time, and I was swept away by how romantic her books were, how funny and delightful
 - MY Edward Cullen was named Mr. Darcy.
 - (He also was incredibly rich, handsome, and brooding, as a matter of fact. But he didn’t sparkle.)
- In high school, I was the only freshman to try out for the quiz bowl team, and I made it.

- And while I still twinged with envy at all the people who went to parties on weekends,
 - I was pretty happy with the non-partying friends I had and the reading life I lived.
- I also started thinking about college around then, and my life after college.
- My mother found a book at the library called “Great Careers for Readers”
 - And I read about being a book editor, and tucked that away in the back of my mind.
- I got the course catalog for a school I’d never heard of before, up in Minnesota
- And when I flipped to the English-department listings, I saw they had an *entire class* in nothing *but* Jane Austen
 - Carleton immediately shot to the top of my list.
 - True story
- I came here for the Midwesternness, the terrific teachers, the sense of humor combined with intellectual seriousness and ambition, the fact that my fellow students were also book-loving weirdos—and the Jane Austen course.
- Since I know there are some prospies in the audience, I have to say: I had an AWFUL Accepted Students weekend here,
 - 14 years ago this weekend, I think.
- And that was entirely my fault, and not the college’s.
- I was by myself, and from the moment I met my host, I could tell we wouldn’t get along
 - And I didn’t really bond with any other accepted students either.
- So I spent the weekend in the library reading a book
 - And I went to two late night movies—*The Road Warrior* and *Raging Bull*
- I went home to Missouri thinking that, “Well, I might not be happy *socially* at Carleton, but I’ll at least get a great education.”
- And I decided to come here anyway.
- Contrary to that weekend: I was pretty happy at Carleton, in almost every way.
- I was an English major, naturally, and studied abroad in London one term

- I was part of the Carleton Quiz Bowl team, which won the undergraduate national championship my junior year
- I wrote for the Sports Information Office, tutored in the Write Place (the Writing Center), and worked as a copyeditor on the Carletonian and Carl.
- I read—not just the books assigned for classes, but kids’ books I picked up at the Northfield Public Library and the PZ section of the Libe
 - I remember rereading *The Phantom Tollbooth* during an Ebony II rehearsal,
 - And I finished *The Golden Compass* on a quiz bowl trip to St. Louis, almost throwing it across the van because of that cliffhanger of an ending.
- I took the Jane Austen course with Professor Connie Walker,
 - Loved it MADLY,
 - And learned Aristotelian ideas about plot structure and emotional development
 - Rising action and climaxes and recognitions
 - That I now use every day in my work.
- And I made some of my dearest friends—people I could call up right now, after not speaking for months, and we’d instantly be right there together emotionally.
- Altogether, my life was taking the path that started in high school, once I accepted I’d never be popular:
- The ugly duckling route,
 - Now that I had a community where I truly belonged.
- In August of 1999, my roommate Katy and I were driving up from Missouri for our senior year.
- She had been working at a Barnes & Noble that summer, and she'd fallen in love with this new fantasy series for kids
- She was in the front, driving, and I was in the backseat with her copy of the third book, which had just come out: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*
- So I picked it up--just to see what all the fuss was about.
 - And a few minutes later, she said "You're really quiet all of a sudden."
 - I said "Mm-hmmm"
 - And she said, "Are you reading my book? That's my book! Mine!"
- But it was too late--I was hooked on Harry.

- I bought the first book in the bookstore that fall with my textbooks, and I read *Chamber of Secrets* over winter break.
 - And since the fourth book in the series was set to be released in the summer of 2000,
 - I often went to the CMC and checked the Unofficial Harry Potter Fan Club—the first of the major HP fansites—
 - For any spoilers I could possibly find.
 - (There weren't any, for the record.
 - Most books are released with a lot of advance information—advance reader's copies, publisher summaries, all this stuff.
 - But *Goblet* was the first book where J. K. Rowling asked her publishers in the U.S. and U.K. not to do all that, to keep everything a secret, so all her readers would discover the surprises at the same time.
 - And when I was scowling in the CMC because I was desperate to know something, anything, about what would happen to Harry, and *the Internet couldn't tell me*—
 - I had no idea how much this would figure in my later life.)
- As the end of my senior year approached, I started to feel that fog of future uncertainty pressing around me.
- When I thought about what I wanted to do, I kept returning to one phrase as a watch-cry: “a mind at work.”
- I'd first heard this phrase (to really notice it) on my study-abroad program in London, with Professor Susan Jaret McKinstry
- We kept reading journals on that trip,
- and Susan told us that what she wanted to see in those journals was evidence of “a mind at work”
 - That we were engaging the ideas of these books, exploring their nuances, connecting them with other parts of our reading and lives
- That was what I wanted in my career, I thought, that sort of intense interaction with ideas and emotions.
 - That and books.
- So I took the GRE because I thought I might want to go to library school.

- But I had never forgotten that idea of being an editor, so I also applied to the Denver Publishing Institute,
 - a summer course for aspiring publishing people out at the University of Denver.
- And I was accepted, and told it would start exactly a month after graduation, in early July.
- That June before I went to the Publishing Institute was one of the worst months of my life.
- I had graduated, and now I was back at home, living in my old bedroom, fighting with my sister like I'd never left for college at all,
 - Literally in the fog, without a map.
- I am a pretty structured, straight-ahead, goal-oriented person.
 - I love having things to do and checking them off the list one by one.
- But my life was in so much flux at this point, with four weeks until the Institute, no idea what I would do afterward, my friends all scattered to the winds—
- There was nothing I could do, nothing I could make a list *for*.
- This uncertainty made me doubt everything I had ever done in my life.
- I had received a magna cum laude degree in English, with honors in independent study, from one of the best colleges in the nation,
 - And I was convinced that my degree was so impractical that no one would ever want to hire me.
- I'd fallen out of touch or grown apart from most of my high school friends at home, and nearly all of them had jobs and adult lives already.
 - I'd been a swan, and now I was back to being the Ugly Duckling.
- I didn't think I wanted to stay in Missouri. But Minnesota seemed to belong to Carleton, and I'd graduated now, so I didn't want to be here either. And of course if I did go into publishing, I might need to move to New York, but did I *want* to be in New York?
 - That was a moot question—no one was going to hire me anyway.
- You can see how productive all these thoughts were.
- And the way other people who feel unmoored take to drugs or religion or video games,
 - I took to mystery novels, reading a 20-volume series in about three weeks.
 - I remember cruising past the library to see if it was open, the same way an alcoholic might go past a bar or liquor store.

- The books were fun, but it was not a good time.
- The one good thing in that period: On July 7, I went to a midnight release party for *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.
 - I was probably the oldest non-parent reader there, but I didn't care.
 - All I wanted was the book—the book!
 - And I remember how excited I was when the clerk handed it over,
 - The wonderful weight of it, all its secrets mine at last.
- The next day, I left for the Denver Publishing Institute.
 - DPI is a four-week course where two weeks were spent on editorial work, one on marketing and publicity, and one on tying all the pieces of the publishing industry together.
- And as the time passed, I felt the fog lifting.
- Part of it was being back with people my own age, who loved books as much as I did, and whose lives were all in flux like mine was.
- Part of it was just having something to *do*.
- But a lot of it was discovering that my passion for reading and editing
 - Really could lead to a grown-up professional life.
- Thanks to my experience on the *Carletonian*, I bonded with the lady who taught us copyediting
- And our speaker on children's books, Susan Hirschman, had edited one of my very favorite novels ever—
 - *The Hero and the Crown* by Robin McKinley.
- Listening to her, all of my love of children's literature fell into place,
- And I thought, "That's it, *that's* who I want to be when I grow up."
- With the encouragement of these two women, I started to think that I should pursue a career in editing
 - Maybe even in New York, even though that scared Midwestern me.
- One day toward the end of the course, I was browsing in the University of Denver Bookstore, and I found an article by Dave Eggers in *Harper's* magazine.
- This was right after *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* came out, which made a huge splash back in 2000.

- And some Harvard students had asked him how he, I quote, “kept his shit real,” how he remained authentic now that he was a bestselling author in high media demand
- And he said that basically there is no real shit or unreal shit
- There is only saying yes to opportunities whenever they come—
 - Trying whatever makes your world larger, your experience greater, your life better—
 - Sometimes just for the pleasure of trying new things, of saying yes.
- I left the bookstore in a daze, thinking about this
- And I finally saw what I’d been missing all that time I was reading mystery novels:
 - I’d been depressed about how foggy the future was in front of me, how my path wasn’t clear.
 - But the lack of a path meant there were no boundaries on what I could do.
 - I could step off in a new direction at will,
 - With nothing to hold me back.
- So I said yes to the opportunity that was there in front of me, and
- That night I bought a plane ticket to New York.

- I’m going to pause for a moment in my story here to say
- I know some Carleton graduates have the opposite problem than I did.
- Rather than being oppressed by the lack of a clear path through the fog,
 - They’re oppressed by the multiple directions you can go in the fog,
 - And particularly by wanting to take all of them at once.
- They want to say yes to the Peace Corps AND to grad school,
- Yes to paying off student loans AND to touring with a band for a year.
- If this is your problem, I would remind you that statistically,
- you have fifty-odd years ahead of you to do everything you want.
 - Don’t stress out about doing it all right now.
- But there ARE some things that are best suited to life immediately after graduation,
 - Like fellowships, or Teach for America, or taking a year off to travel around the world.
 - All things that are easiest to do when you’re not tied to one place or responsibility for other people.
- The final tipping point in my decision to move to New York

- Was my realization that I owned nothing, really, except what I had taken out of my dorm room.
 - I didn't have a car, I didn't own furniture
 - And I knew that if I stayed in Kansas City and somehow found a job there, I was going to start acquiring THINGS.
 - And if I wanted to move to New York later, I would be encumbered with THINGS I would have to move or get rid of.
 - So it was best to go right then.
- It's a truth of adulthood that the world narrows as you get older, as you acquire furniture, and friends, and roots, and a family of your own.
- So think about what you can do right now, when the world is wide open to you,
 - Versus what you might save for later, when you might be grateful to be a little more tied down.
- So I came to New York to interview for jobs.
 - I actually felt oddly calm through most of that trip.
 - The biggest YES had been said—the decision to take a risk,
 - And now I was just seeing how that decision shook out.
- I went on a bunch of interviews that week, across the whole spectrum of the publishing industry
- But most importantly, I had written to Susan Hirschman, the children's book speaker at the Institute, and asked if I could come work for her.
- And she left me a message saying she didn't have a job available, but Arthur A. Levine was looking for an assistant, and she'd given him my name.
 - Arthur A. Levine, the editor of the Harry Potter books.
 - Which meant that if I got the job, I might get to help with the future Harry Potter books.
 - Which was an idea so awesome, I screamed and jumped up and down
- So I went in for my interview with Arthur,
- And it was, unequivocally, the worst interview I went on all that week.
- I was so much in awe of him and I wanted the job so desperately that I was pretty much rendered silent for fear of saying the wrong thing—
 - Not a good quality in a job candidate.
- In addition, I'd been wearing my contacts all week, so my eyes were really red,

- And Arthur told me later that he thought I might have been a very sweet, very shy, pothead.
- But despite this, he still gave me the opportunity to read three manuscripts and write reader's reports on them.
 - A reader's report is basically one page of summary and analysis of a manuscript, ending with a recommendation about whether to buy the manuscript, get further reads, or reject it.
 - I knew how to write reports, thanks to the Institute
 - I knew how to analyze a manuscript thanks to Carleton
 - And of course, I'd been reading kids' books all my life.
- And three days later, Arthur hired me on the strength of those reports.
- I worked as his assistant for three years before being promoted and taking on books of my own.
- And I'm now a senior editor at Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic.
- My job as an editor really consists of THREE jobs.
 - I'm a talent scout, first of all--I read manuscripts and choose the ones I think have the most promise, commercially and artistically.
 - Then I'm an editor, working with the author and illustrator to turn the manuscript into the very best book it can be.
 - Finally, I'm a producer, overseeing the book's finances, shepherding it through the design process, arranging for it to have the best title and cover it can possibly have, talking it up to our sales reps and to librarians and booksellers, being sure the people who should see it do.
- Our imprint tries to publish books that have rich, fully developed characters,
 - Gorgeous writing,
 - Big ideas,
 - And stories whose emotions connect directly to children's lives.
- I try to publish books that I would have loved as a child or teenager,
 - Because I've learned that those are the books and authors I can best serve—the ones I truly connect with.
- Editing, like most arts, is sustained paying attention
 - To what the book is,
 - To what the author wants it to be
 - To what the book needs to be, for its financial and artistic success.
 - And then helping it break through to all those things.

- And thus now my mind is very much at work,
 - So much that I wish I could clone myself and have multiple minds at work!
- I've edited a wide range of projects, from exciting YA novels to quiet translations, a picture book by Ted Kennedy and funny chapter books.
 - And many of them have been recognized with great reviews and awards.
- In particular I have to give a shoutout to a book called *A Curse Dark as Gold*, the very first book I acquired and edited all by myself,
- which won the American Library Association Award for Best YA Debut Novel
 - It's a retelling of Rumpelstiltskin, set in a woolen mill on the cusp of the Industrial Revolution
 - So instead of spinning straw into gold, they spin straw into gold thread
 - And the author is the sister of a guy I knew from Quiz Bowl.
 - So you never know where your Carleton connections may come back.
- But by far the most famous thing I've worked on is the Harry Potter books
- I helped with last three books of the series, from *Order of the Phoenix* onward.
 - My boss, Arthur Levine, was the real editor of the book.
 - He was the one who gambled on buying the first book in the series, *Sorcerer's Stone*
 - And he made the ultimate decisions about what points we should raise with J. K. Rowling, and talked to her directly.
- But I was the "continuity editor"-- making sure events, references, spellings, and actions were consistent and correct within the book and from book to book, in the ever-expanding Wizarding universe.
 - So every time "Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans" appeared on the page, I had to make sure the text said Bertie, not Bernie; B-O-T-T-apostrophe-S, not B-O-T-T-S-apostrophe; "Every Flavor" didn't have a hyphen, and "Flavor," contrary to British spelling, didn't have a U.
 - Or if Harry left his Invisibility Cloak in his trunk in one scene, I had to be sure he didn't pull it out of his pocket in the next scene, without our seeing him run back to his room to get it.

- Again drawing on all my copyediting knowledge from the Carletonian and all the memory practice from Quiz Bowl.
- Arthur and I worked with a team of three copyeditors and proofreaders,
 - And it was exhausting and thrilling in turns.
- Most of the books I edit are read by many thousands of people, kids and adults alike, and goodness knows we work hard to get them right.
- But with the Harry books, we were very conscious that they'd be read by many MILLIONS of people,
 - All of whom were trying to figure out what would happen next.
 - And as so many of the little details or passing references in the series later blossomed into major plot developments, every word held huge weight.
- So there was serious pressure on us to do not just a good job, but a perfect job if possible
 - Because if the books had any typos or mistakes—readers would let us know.
- Of course, because Ms. Rowling wanted to continue to preserve the surprises,
- We were also doing this work under the tightest security I think any novel has ever enjoyed,
 - To the extent that I still can't talk about it very much.
- But I can say that I once flew over to the UK to pick up the manuscript for *Deathly Hallows*, because we didn't want to trust it to the mail service or have it on the Internet in any way.
- I got the manuscript in London, I headed out to Heathrow, I checked in, with the pages in my carryon
 - A stack of paper probably this thick, which nobody in the whole world was allowed to know I had
- And I got pulled out of line for a random bag check.
- The guard—a kind-looking, portly older lady—made me empty my bag onto a table and went through the items one by one.
 - I didn't have much in there besides the manuscript—a notebook and a book or two
 - And as she looked at those things, I was frantically trying to come up with a lie in case she noticed the words “Harry” or “Hermione” and “wizard” on the pages and recognized their significance—
 - I was going to say it was my fanfic.

- And she did run her hand over the stack of manuscript, sort of fanning the pages out a bit.
- “You have a big pile of paper here,” she said.
 - “A big pile of paper,” I agreed.
- And she nodded and smiled and pushed the items back to me,
- And I made it back to New York with the secret intact.
- Still, my favorite memories of my Harry Potter days remain the very first time I read each of those manuscripts.
- It was not just being among the first ten or so people in the whole world to read those books
 - Even though that was very cool.
- But because the feeling never changed from when I read *Goblet of Fire*—the almost physical anticipation,
 - The pleasure at being with my old friends Harry and Sirius and Dumbledore again,
 - The surprise and delight and horror at what they went through.
 - I cowered in my desk chair, my arms over my head, the first time I read the climax of book six,
 - And I wept like I have never wept at a book before during a certain chapter in Book Seven.
- Yet at the same time, as an editor, I was making notes on my reactions: *when* I started crying, how the impact of the scene might be sharpened if we moved *this* line *here* or added that detail or removed that phrase altogether, whether the plot as a whole hung together.
- The single most important thing I have learned as an editor is that art is the creation of emotional reaction within the viewer,
 - Coupled with beauty and truth, if those are things that interest the creator.
- And I was honored to be able to help Ms. Rowling shape the reactions of millions of readers around the globe.
- So I am extraordinarily lucky to have hit the trifecta:
 - I love my work passionately,
 - happen to be good at it,
 - and found a way to be paid for it.
- That does not mean that everything is happy and easy.
- I said earlier that the Rudolph and Ugly Duckling stories had the same moral: You can only be who you are.

- And even as I embraced that in growing up and coming to Carleton and now doing the work I do,
 - I still often find that truth depressing and painful.
- I think a lot at work about the emotional lives of children
- And when you're a child who's different from others, it often means you have to endure the teasing, the abuse, even the torture of people who are different from you or have power over you.
 - And unless the adults intervene in some way—which everyone knows is the ultimate shame—
 - or a giant arrives with a letter inviting you to magic school,
 - there isn't any immediate escape.
 - We get letters at work addressed to Professor Dumbledore, with kids begging to be allowed to come to Hogwarts because they don't fit in where they are.
- As an adult, you can get away from your tormentors, generally, and find people who are more like you.
 - The Internet has been a great boon to people of all ages in finding others to connect with
- But you're still limited by your responsibilities, your finances, your history—your furniture
- And quite often who I am (who I have to be, according to the stories)
 - Is not the most efficient and productive person to be in the world.
- If you look at the kids' New York Times bestseller list, it is full of books about vampires.
 - And some days, boy, I wish I loved vampires
 - Or zombies, or angels, or whatever the supernatural flavor of the month is.
- Because then I could publish a book that would appear on the Times bestseller list
- And I'd be succeeding by the standards of a world that values fame and money, and the power that comes with fame and money
 - More than beauty or emotional truth or all the things I hope my books have
 - Without vampires.
- I would really, really, really like that success and security.
- Also, I live in New York, one of the most expensive cities in the world,
 - So there are days when I think “*Man*, I wish my innermost self was an investment banker”
- This is all the exact same dilemma I had in middle school, you'll note,

- When I was torn between being a book-loving weirdo and trying to be popular.
- Another truth of adulthood: Those doubts and dilemmas never go away.
- But I love the books I edit and the writers I work with madly.
- I love gossiping with my authors about their characters, and giggling over fantastic plot twists,
 - Weighing every word in the book in service of the author’s vision,
 - And getting letters from readers saying “This book made me see the world in a new way.”
- And when I think about those things, those pleasures,
 - That’s what I want to have more of in my life.
 - I try to remember that, when I doubt.
- You can only be who you are,
- And the work of adulthood is learning to balance the limits set by the self and what it needs and loves,
 - With the demands placed on you by the world, and by everything you want within it.

- There’s a scene early in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*
- where Harry goes to Ollivander’s Wand Shop in Diagon Alley
- And the slightly creepy Mr. Ollivander tells him that though he can try all the wands he likes, “it’s the wand that chooses the wizard, of course.”
- So Harry waves a number of wands in the air, and finally puts his hand to the right one
 - Can anyone tell me what Harry’s wand is made of?
 - (Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches)
- “He felt a sudden warmth in his fingers. He raised the wand above his head, brought it swishing down through the dusty air, and a stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework, throwing dancing spots of light onto the walls.”
- And that will be his wand for the rest of the series.
- I find this idea of the wand choosing the wizard both a little scary and remarkably comforting
 - Scary because apparently those pieces of wood are conscious
 - (And if you’ve read *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, you know how much turns upon the wand’s choice)
- And remarkably comforting because it’s a case of predestination: the universe reaching out a hand and offering something just for you:

- All your hidden interior qualities finding an exterior analogue
- In the *only* wand that will suit you perfectly.
 - “You’ll never get such good results with another wizard’s wand,” Mr. Ollivander says later.
- Wands in the series are actually an expression of each wizard’s deepest nature and values.
 - Hagrid’s wand is oak, strong and powerful.
 - Lily Potter’s wand is willow—a tree that bends mightily, but doesn’t break.
 - Lord Voldemort’s wand is yew, the tree of death
 - And of course the entire series happens because of his fear of death and desire to kill baby Harry
 - And Harry’s, of course, is holly, a tree traditionally associated with Christ and the resurrection
- In the Muggle world, we do not have wands that naturally reveal our innermost selves, alas
 - Nor anything where fireworks go off once you find the one thing that’s perfect for you
- What we have instead is what we love—
 - the people and books and activities we take to heart
 - as anchors, tools, and inspirations.
- And as Dave Eggers taught me, we have the freedom to say yes, and no,
 - As we quest for the *many* things that might be right in our lives.
- I’m going to conclude with three pieces of advice for you graduating seniors,
 - Or anyone else who might be unmoored in the fog:
- 1. Think less about finding a career than about finding your work: the thing you’re passionate about, the question that drives you, the way you’ll serve the earth and your fellow human beings, your reason to get up in the morning.
 - I love above all stories, and clarity, and truth.
 - And while my job is being an editor,
 - My work is about bringing those three things into the closest relationship I can
 - And helping other people to do the same.
 - Your work will likely be very different:
 - To relieve suffering
 - Or share knowledge
 - Or discover something unknown

- Or create beauty
 - But once you know what it is, it opens up many paths out of the fog.
 - If I lost my job—which, granted, I’d rather not—
 - I could be a writer, or a teacher, or a dramaturg, or a copyeditor.
 - If I couldn’t find another paying job immediately, I could still blog about writing, or tutor kids in writing skills
 - And practice my work that way.
 - Your work might not be prestigious or paid for a while.
 - It might not be something the world regards as work at all.
 - If you become a parent, that is absolutely the most important work you’ll ever do
 - But you can’t put it on a resume.
 - And your work will almost certainly change over time, as you do.
 - But at this time, after graduation, it might provide an anchor for you, and help you to see possibilities wider than just a job board.
 - We all chose to come to Carleton because we believed in a liberal arts education.
 - More than being trained to perform the tasks of one specific and limited job,
 - We wanted to learn to read, write, think, and understand widely in a certain field
 - And that’s the distinction I’m making here between a career and work—
 - Something you do for a set number of hours a day
 - Versus a lifetime’s way of being in the world.
- Number two. If you’re graduating, going back home, and uncertain about your long-term future,
- come up with something you want to do in the short term that will give you discipline and a goal.
 - If you love animals—volunteer for an animal shelter one day a week.
 - If you’re a runner—look for a marathon in the fall.
 - If you love politics—contact your local campaign committee and get involved with the November elections
 - If you’re a writer—resolve that you’re going to write a novel by September 1.
- The best way to be yourself is very often to get outside yourself

- To connect with work or a person or a cause you love
 - So you're thinking about IT and not about you.
- And that often leads to other opportunities or possibilities.
- Number 3 is along the same lines.
- If you've ever been caught in an actual thick fog,
 - You know that your field of vision is limited to basically your own body:
 - The view down to your feet; the reach of your arms.
 - The same is true of our metaphorical fog: We can see only ourselves,
 - Which can lead to a self-obsession that is neither healthy nor useful.
- As important as becoming ourselves is,
 - In the grand scheme of things, we matter only as much as the good we do in the world.
 - And even small goods count toward this:
 - Listening to someone else's pain,
 - Being kind in the face of impatience or rudeness
 - Developing a compassionate understanding of others' lives
 - Which is one of the things good books help us to do most of all.
- So Number 3: Remember that the world is still there around you,
- and think about what you can do for its good, even more than your own.
- And if absolutely none of that works for you after graduation, I highly recommend the Amelia Peabody mysteries by Elizabeth Peters,
 - Or the Aubrey-Maturin novels by Patrick O'Brian.
 - There's twenty of them, and they're fantastic.
- There are many differences between books and life, obviously
- But to me the most important one is this:
- Books have endings,
 - Which create their shape—their rising action and climaxes and all those good things.
- But the real happy ending in life is its not having an ending.
 - We live in the ever afters,
 - Making it up as we go,
 - Shaping the meaning to our lives
 - through the pains and the joys alike.

- From Aristotle to Austen to Hans Christian Andersen to J. K. Rowling,
 - The great writers teach us, in Keats’s words,
 - “how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul.”
- And the end of *The Ugly Duckling* is this:
- “But what did he see in the clear stream below? His own image; no longer a dark, gray bird, ugly and disagreeable to look at, but a graceful and beautiful swan. . . . He now felt glad at having suffered sorrow and trouble, because it enabled him to enjoy so much better all the pleasure and happiness around him; for the great swans swam round the newcomer, and stroked his neck with their beaks, as a welcome.”
- In children’s books and in life, growing up is a matter of enduring the sorrow and trouble, being patient, and keeping faith with your passions and strengths
 - As you treasure the people you love and try to do good in the world.
- I thank you again for your kindness and attention today.
- And I wish you all wonderful, thoughtful, painful, useful, even *magical*
 - ever afters.
- Thank you.