President Austin, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, members of the Class of 1999 - the Great Class of 1999 - parents, friends, ladies and gentlemen.

I have an interest in science and the natural sciences appeal particularly. I've written about the work of Louis Agassiz on glaciers. I've written about the work of Miriam Rothchild on fleas. (Did you know that if you were a flea, you could jump as high as Rockefeller Center? What is more you could do it 30,000 times without stopping).

I've written books in which science, medicine, and, technology all play a part. I don't believe it's possible to understand history without a sense of the impact of science, medicine, and technology -- certainly not the history of our own time.

Over the years a number of engineers have been kind enough to help me understand how such marvels as the Brooklyn Bridge and the Panama Canal were built. And my experience is that it's possible with science and technology to understand more than you might imagine, and, furthermore, find it extremely interesting, if someone is good enough to put it in English for you.

I've found considerable pleasure reading into the lives of scientists and engineers of the past, and often in their own writings I've been well-advised in other ways as well.

I think of the great American botanist, Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell, who when a woman wrote to ask his advice on what to do about the dandelions in her lawn, replied,"Learn to love them."

But it is the humanities that have come first and that count above all for me. I am an English major who happened into history. I am a reader who decided to try to write the kind of books he loved to read.

So it's the banner of the humanities that I carry and happily. It is why I feel so honored to take part in this high occasion and why I want so much to say what I have to say.

To perceive clearly and make sense of the time in which one lives is always difficult, and moreso in the midst of rapid change. Paleantologists speak of what they call "punctuated equilibrium," the idea that evolution doesn't occur at a steady even pace over time, but happens in bursts. The fossil record of sea urchins, for example, may show little or no variation over millions of years, then suddenly change greatly in no time at all, geologically speaking.

It's a concept that might apply to us. Change, tremendous change is all around, and acceleration faster than we know. And as the world changes, we are changed. Electronic marvels proliferate by geometric proportions. Everything moves faster and our notions of time and space adjust of necessity, whether we realize it or not. Information is available as never before and at the touch of a finger. Information has become an industry, a commodity to be packaged, promoted, and marketed

incessantly. The tools for "accessing" data grow ever more wonderous and ubiquitous and essential if we're to keep in step, we've come to believe. All hail the Web, the Internet, the Information Highway.

We're being sold the idea that information is learning and we're being sold a bill of goods.

Information isn't learning. Information isn't wisdom. It isn't common sense necessarily. It isn't kindness. Or trustworthiness. Or good judgement. Or imagination. Or a sense of humor. Or courage. It doesn't tell us right from wrong.

Knowing the area of the State of Connecticut in square miles, or the date on which the United Nations Charter was signed, or the jumping capacity of a flea maybe be useful or valuable, but it isn't learning of itself.

If information were learning, you could become educated by memorizing the World Almanac. Were you to memorize the World Almanac, you wouldn't be educated. You'd be weird.

My message is in praise of the greatest of all avenues to learning, to wisdom, adventure, pleasure, insight, to understanding human nature, understanding ourselves and our world and our place in it.

I rise on this beautiful morning, here in this center of learning to sing again the old faith in books. In reading books. Reading for life, all your life.

Nothing ever invented provides such sustenance, such infinite reward for time spent as a good book.

Thomas Jefferson told John Adams he could not live without books. Adams, who through a long life read more even and more deeply than Jefferson and who spent what extra money he ever had on books, wrote to Jefferson at age 79 of a particular set of books he longed for on the lives of the saints, all forty-seven volumes.

. . . Once upon a time in the dead of winter in Dakota territory, with the temperature well below zero, young Theodore Roosevelt took off in a makeshift boat, accompanied by two of his ranch hands, down-stream on the Little Missouri River in chase of a couple of thieves who had stolen his prized row boat. After days on the river, he caught up and got the draw on them with his trusty Winchester, at which point they surrendered. Then, after finding a man with a team and a wagon, Roosevelt set off again to haul the thieves cross-country to justice. He left the ranch hands behind to tend to the boat, and walked alone behind the wagon, his rifle at the ready. They were headed across the snow covered wastes of the Bad Lands to the rail head at Dickinson, and Roosevelt walked the whole way, 40 miles. It was an astonishing feat, what might be called a defining moment in that eventful life. But what makes it especially memorable is that during that time, he managed to read all of Anna Karenina.

I often think of that when I hear people say they haven't time to read.

There's always time to read. And if your experience, you of the Class of 1999, is anything like my own, the best, most important books you will ever read are still ahead of you.

"Education is not the filling of a pail," Yeats wrote," but the lighting of a fire."

I have some calculations for you to consider.

Reportedly the average America watches 28 hours of television every week, or approximately four hours a day. The average person, I'm told, reads at a rate of 250 words per minute.

So, based on these statistics, were the average American to spend those four hours a day with a book, instead of watching television, the average American could, in a week, read:

- The complete poems of T.S. Eliot;
- Two plays by Thornton Wilder, including Our Town;
- The complete poems of Maya Angelou;
- Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury;
- The Great Gatsby; and
- The Book of Psalms.

That's all in one week.

If the average American were to forsake television for a second week, he or she could read all of Moby Dick, including the part about whales and made a good start, if not finish, The Brothers Karamazov.

Read for pleasure. Read what you like, and all you like. Read literally to your heart's content. Let one book lead to another. They nearly always do.

Read, *read*, *read*, is my commencement advice.
Take up a great author, new or old, and read everything he or she has written. Read about places you've never been. Read biography, history. Read the books that have changed history -- Tom Paine's Common Sense, the Autobiography of Frederick Douglass, Rachel Carson's Silent Spring.
I love the mysteries of Ruth Rendell and the letters of E.B. White. I have an old copy of Wind, Sand and the Stars by St. Exupery that I would hate ever to part with. I'm particularly fond of Carson McCullers and Wallace Stegner, and for a book I'm working on I'm having the best possible time reading writers of the eighteenth century - De Foe, Sterne, Fielding, and the amazing Tobias Smollet. To judge by their prose I can't help but feel that the quill pen is still well ahead of the word processor.

Imagine all there is to read that has been written here in Connecticut by Connecticut authors: the works of Twain, Barbara Tuchman, Paul Horgan, John Hersey, William Styron, the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, the poetry of Robert Penn Warren and Wallace Stevens, not to say Mr. Webster's dictionaries. In times past, old Noah Webster's "blue-back speller," as it was called, published first in 1783, found its way everywhere in the new nation, from the eastern seaboard to the frontier beyond the Mississippi. It ran to 404 editions and except for the Bible may have been the most widely read book in eighteenth and nineteenth century America.

By all means read Dickens. Read those books you know you're supposed to have read and imagine as dreary. A classic may be defined as a book that stays long in print and a book stays long in print only because it is exceptional. Why exclude the exceptional from your experience? Read the classics.

Go back and read again the books written supposedly for children - and especially if you think they are only for children - my first choice would be The Wind in the Willows.
There's much, very much to learn in the company of Toad, Rat, and Mole.
Do not, whatever you do, wait as I did until you're past 50 to read Don Quixote.

To carry a book with you wherever you go is old advice and good advice. John Adams urged his son John Quincy to carry a volume of poetry,"You'll never be alone," he said,"with a poet in your pocket."

And when you read a book you love, a book you feel has enlarged the experience of being alive, a book that "lights the fire," spread the word. Spread the word.

Warmest congratulations to you all. You're on your way and if I'm any judge, the future is full of more promise than ever before. Times of great change can be times of extreme stress, but they are also the times when we can learn the most. We need as never before the capacity to think - and to think with a heart as well as the mind. For all our troubles and problems, the best is yet to come.

Thank you.