Thank you, John, and thank you Senior Commencement Committee for the Class of 2013. I’m grateful for the chance to speak to you this evening.

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“As a boy I visited Alaska and watched great masses of ice break from the Muir Glacier and drop into the sea. The wave created by the huge displacement of water would swamp a small boat and cause a large steamer to strain at her anchor chains. The annual plunge of a senior class causes no visible wave in the ocean of the world, but its personal repercussions are none the less significant.”

Thus began the address to Amherst College seniors given in this Chapel on this occasion eighty-four years ago, on June 14, 1929. The speaker that Friday evening was Stanley King, class of 1903, who was at that point a Trustee of the College, and who from 1932 to 1946 would serve as the College’s eleventh president. His portrait hangs there, behind you, to the left of the door through which you will pass after today’s ceremony.

Put yourself, for a moment, in the place of those who, eighty-four years ago, sat where you sit today. During your teenage years, you would have read in your local newspaper about startling technological advances in the areas of film, radio, and flight. Upon arriving at Amherst, you would have learned about the ideas of a man named Albert Einstein, whose unusual theories you may have struggled to explain in letters to your parents back home. You and your friends might have debated the laissez-faire
economic policies of Calvin Coolidge, Amherst College class of 1895, who in 1929 was in his sixth and final year as President of the United States. You also might have argued about Upton Sinclair’s soul-searching novel Boston, which described the prosecution and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. The more daring among you even may have read, perhaps on the sly, Virginia Woolf’s Orlando. More likely, however, you and your friends would have seen Steamboat Willie, the first Mickey Mouse film with sound, or would have hummed Cole Porter’s “Let’s Do It, Let’s Fall in Love,” which was all the rage in the fall of your senior year. And more likely still, as you streamed into Johnson Chapel to hear that evening’s speech, you would have marveled at the beauty of the College’s new lighting system, which consisted of “lines of waterproofed Japanese lanterns strung [throughout] the trees” on the Quadrangle, or, as you would have called it then, “the College Grove.”

All in all, in other words, the chances are good that you would have been in a jubilant mood. It was, after all, still five months before Black Tuesday, the stock market crash that marked the end of the Roaring Twenties and the beginning of the Great Depression.

Here is what Stanley King said to you on that day, in this chapel, eighty-four years ago.

(And here I would like to thank College archivist Peter Nelson, who found the text from which I now quote.)
“To you as you leave this College, the dominant problem which will preoccupy your attention is that of making a living.” But the main problem before you “is not to make a living—[it is] to make a life. And that problem is difficult, more difficult than ever before, more difficult in America than in most other countries.”

“The strides that have been made in the past generation in the mechanical field have immensely increased the opportunities for making a living, have brought prosperity to many, and material comfort to most. But they have at the same time made more difficult and more complex the attainment of a good life. Life today offers greater opportunities for breadth, richness and variety, and greater incentives to narrowness, sterility, and uniformity. And just as mechanical progress has advanced more rapidly in America, so the art of living has become more difficult here than elsewhere. More difficult because of the increasing complexity of our mode of life, more difficult because of the enhanced inducements to a narrower, more specialized mode of life, more difficult because of the propulsion of new ideals.”

Now—and this is me talking again—I want you to listen closely to what King says next, because it’s not what you might expect.

Here it is:

“As you enter the ranks in the autumn, your superiors...will preach to you the doctrines of high pressure commerce. They will approach you by every device which
ingenuity has developed to make of you an efficient specialized instrument of
business...And so I say to you do not take your business too seriously.”

Instead, remember that “Amherst College gives its own answer...to the question
of the good life[.]” The good life “is still, as it has always been, the progressive
development of all our faculties [all our powers, all our capacities] to their utmost.” It is
still, as it always has been, the work of a rare and unique species of desire, a desire for
“breadth of vision,” a desire for “cultivated taste,” a desire for “wide understanding.”
A desire, in short, “to put forth all [your] strength in the adventure of living.”

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What I find so interesting about King’s speech, and the reason I quote from it
today, is what it reveals to us about the occasion that draws us together on this rainy
May evening.

King addressed students like you at a pivotal moment in their lives—at a
moment when they, like you, paused in this Chapel to reflect upon the threshold
between their past and their future, between their College and their world. But at the
same time, King’s own speech occupied a pivotal threshold of its own.

Before 1929, the custom at Amherst College had been for the senior class to invite
a faculty member to address it at the last of its mandatory daily chapel services. After
1929, this changed. Beginning with King, the “Senior Chapel address,” as it then was
called, was transferred to “Class Day,” one of the precursors for the “Senior Assembly”
we hold today. Included as a part of this event, the Senior Chapel address assumed a new and different meaning. It was no longer religious. It was now, as King put it, “worldly,” or, as we might put it, “secular.”

This was not an insignificant change. In 1820, remember, Noah Webster dedicated Amherst College to a clear educational mission. This was a place that would provide free instruction to “indigent young men of promising talents and hopeful piety, who shall manifest a desire to obtain a liberal education with a sole view to the Christian ministry.”

More than a hundred years later, following the failure of at least seven attempts to revive religion at the College, Webster’s language no longer would’ve been available to King, even if King had wanted to use it. Asked to give a Senior Chapel address that, for the first time, no longer would be a sermon, King instead had to define in a very different way the threshold between the College and the world. Speaking in a chapel, but without also speaking in the mode of a chaplain, King had to search for worldly terms to describe the educational mission of a college that, for most of its history, had defined itself with an otherworldly aim. Put simply, King had to figure out a way “to secularize” the Senior Chapel address.

King resolved this problem in a somewhat surprising way. He began speaking about his 1928 visit to what was then called the “protectorate” of Uganda. Thanks to increased cotton production, King claimed, Ugandan natives were wealthier than ever
before. But their very prosperity, he continued, was cause for concern. The paradox of
Uganda, at least according to King, was that its people had achieved technological
progress without any commensurate advancement in education, in spiritual and
intellectual life.

America, King then proceeded to suggest, is threatened by the same future. Like
Uganda, America is at risk of increasing its wealth and its machinery, but not its
intelligence and its wisdom. King’s implication was clear. Incomplete cultivation of the
intellect at home will produce the same result as incomplete colonization abroad.
Machines and wealth alone will not save Americans from savagery. For that only one
thing will do: education in general, and the liberal arts education in particular.

King faced a dilemma. He needed to enjoin graduating seniors to keep faith with
their education, but without also using the language of faith. He tried to escape that
dilemma by joining the purpose of the liberal arts education directly to a worldly
ambition. He snapped the College’s institutional mission into line with the “civilizing
mission” of colonialism itself. But where the fist of illiberal governance fits so neatly
within the glove of the liberal arts, the threshold between College and world is not
thereby clarified. It is collapsed. An education that reconciles itself to an unreconciled
world—that reconciles itself to a world of domination—is not, in the end, worldly. It is
world-weary. It is an education that sets out to make a life for some, but that ends up
providing a rationale for unmaking the lives of others. And that is a threshold we
should not want to cross.

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Today’s world, it would seem, is very different from the world of 1929. Today’s
machines, after all, are made of silicon, not steel. We run them with our fingertips, not
our arms and our shoulders. Above all, the very ether today swarms with information,
accessible to us at a moment’s notice. Today more than ever, then, our technology
would seem to allow us more knowledge, more freedom from constraints of time and
space, and more power to do whatever it is that we want to do. The machines of old
were efficient and tough. Our machines, by contrast, are miraculous.

But a world in which bits of information fly around at the speed of light is not
necessarily also an enlightened world. Look again. This same world often resembles
nothing so much as a duststorm. Unstructured by the intellect, these swirling particles
of information can create a whirlwind that, in turn, blots out important landmarks and
signposts, and obliterates our sense of direction and purpose. This is a world where
shutting our eyes sometimes seems like our best chance at preserving our eyesight.

Writing in Vienna in 1929, Sigmund Freud asked his reader to consider a
question not dissimilar from the question King posed to his audience in this chapel that
same year. The telegraph and the telephone, the railroad and the airplane—do these
machines, Freud asked, really make us happier? Are they really a means to the end of
the good life? Or, to the contrary, have they displaced that end, even replaced it? Why is it, after all, that when we try to imagine a newer and better future, we so often think first, maybe even only, of newer and better technologies? Why is it that we so often look to our machines to save us, and to solve our most pressing problems?

Freud’s answer to these questions is characteristically unsettling. Prior to the invention of any given machine is the desire for that invention. And the desire that calls forth the invention of modern machines is a desire that, as it happens, is not itself modern. It is an old desire, even an archaic one. It is the desire to pursue happiness by becoming as “God-like” as possible, to overcome our mortal limits and bodily vulnerabilities by aspiring to God-like levels of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. What then do our machines tell us about ourselves? Freud’s diagnosis is sobering. Modern individuals are defined by a compulsive desire to become “prosthetic Gods.”

Now look again at that miraculous device in your hand. It’s not just a tool; it’s a symptom of a forgotten desire. Your very faith in that device should be fascinating to you. It should remind you that even the most secularized world can remain firmly in the grip of the same religious attitude the secular world generally prides itself on having left behind.

In five years, maybe even sooner, that device in your hand will be buried, forgotten in some landfill. More enduring are the words that reach us from 1929 about
the tension that exists between technology, on the one hand, and your desire for a good
life, on the other. Precisely because of technology’s breathtaking advances, the art of
living today has become more difficult than ever. Because of technology, of course, life
today offers greater opportunities than ever for breadth, richness, and variety; but it
also offers greater incentives than ever for superficiality, ephemerality, and, increasingly,
ignorance and paranoia.

This is certainly a world where, as you well know, you’ll need to work hard to
make a living. King had that right. But he had this right too: your education will have
taught you that there’s more to life than this.

This is a place where we examine ourselves and our traditions. It’s a place where
we sometimes find ourselves in error, off the mark, unfinished. It’s a place where we
judge ourselves and sometimes find ourselves wanting. It’s a place, therefore, where
self-examination creates desire, a desire for renewal and repair—this difficult but
essential desire, this desire to become better and other than we already are. Living the
examined life together with friends—that is how we “make a life.” That is how this
place begins sculpting a life into what King would call “a good life.”

You who have sojourned here leave this place with a craving. You want more
than a life comprised of disjointed pursuits and unconnected jumbles of information.
You want more than a life spent chasing the promises of technologies that can so often
double as the object of a new and unstated faith. You want more from life than a mind
that protects itself from self-doubt with a hip smirk and scare quotes. You came to this
place not simply because you wanted knowledge, but more precisely because you
wanted to understand what knowledge is for, its purpose and its point. That is what it
means to have “a desire to obtain a liberal education.” You’re the ones who want a life
in which the whole is more than just the sum of its parts. You’re the ones who want the
flourishing life.

This desire won’t always sit easily with you, as you know. You understand that
attempts to barricade the flourishing life behind walls end up producing a life curtailed,
even mutilated, by the very barriers that claim to secure it. You understand that your
desire for a flourishing life sets you at odds with your present, with everything in this
world that is unflourishing. You understand that your desire is at one and the same time
a calling, a vocation that commits you to the repair of a broken world. You’re not naive:
you know that sometimes you will experience the flourishing life in a minor key, as
anxious care over unfinished work and unrealized potential, as worry over how to
intervene in a world that seems badly out of joint. But you’re not cowards: you know
that your head is connected to your spine, and that the life of the mind entails
backbone, the courage to take unpopular stands, to dissent against the majority, to sting
—lovingly—like a true Socratic gadfly. You know that you’ll be tested, but for four years
now you’ve committed ordinary acts of bravery on a daily basis. You know that. And
that is why you won’t give ground relative to your desire: you know how to persist in your being when times are tough.

Speaking eighty-four years ago in this chapel, and on the first such instance of this occasion, Stanley King treated the melting of the Muir Glacier as a metaphor for the threshold you seniors will cross as you leave this College. In the same way that a glacier slips into the sea, your class melts away from this place into the world. For us in this room today, the disappearance of a glacier has a very different meaning. It’s a metaphor for the sort of world-sized problem your class will be called upon to respond to during your lifetimes. King seemed to suppose that a melting glacier would have no great effect on the ocean of the world. But if he was off the mark about that, then he was off the mark as well about the effect a senior class can have upon the world it enters. By your thought and by your action, by your art and by your science, by your solitary example and by your public words, you are one and all capable of living a life that answers, to the utmost, the call this place has left ringing in your ears.

Class of 2013, you have my heartfelt congratulations on the great achievement of graduating from this College.

May you become who you already are.