Karyn Peyton, Class of 2017

Let me start out with a confession: I am a fifth-year. You weren’t expecting that. “She doesn’t even go here.” I know. Yes, I am that unicorn. And I’m an Odyssey Scholar. So I have the wrong class t-shirt AND I have too many loans to pay for the right one.

Let’s review:

First-year: You’re not that bright. You “play” broomball. You use a lot of synonyms in your essays. But you realize there is no synonym for “bad argument.”

Second Year: You’re hoping you learn the material by osmosis. You’ve found five majors to pack yourself into. You ask someone out who speaks three languages and in all three of them they said no.

Third Year: Your living situation deteriorates. Your toilet explodes. Your upstairs neighbor is a good, er, tap dancer. Your method of selling yourself for internships is, “If you give me this opportunity, you will give me this opportunity.” Most pre-meds are no longer.

Fourth Year: I forgot Core Bio.

For the past 4+ years we have been measuring ourselves against failing systems and lucky moments. We asked ourselves, “Do you like who you’ve become?”

And the answer was often, “No.” You know, no one wants to hear a graduation speech about dark matter unless it’s related to physics. But I can’t stand here being grateful without acknowledging that gratitude is the result of pain and failure. That pain is now humility, and that failure has become a habit of maintaining a steady diet of truth.

Many of us came here excited and leave here angry. Many of us struggled with our mental health.

Many of us were punished for it. Some of us are better for it. Some of us lost things or found things.

Met people who changed us. Partied hard or didn’t. Lost people. Lost hope here. I know I did.

Like many students, I am a fifth year because I went on leave. Why? Because I thought about ending my life here. I came close twice. I stand here, two years after one of the worst years of my life, to acknowledge that most of college is rarely having anything turn out as you expected, and the things that do work out are often the result of luck and privilege. And acknowledging that uncomfortable truth is eye-opening, really.

We have learned so much from the darker parts. For years I couldn’t think critically except about myself. But the depths of that sadness opened me up. The days ahead won’t be harder for us. We’ve already been in the real world. It isn’t hard; it’s just a new challenge. But we are resilient. And our curiosity is real. I stand here like everybody – a bit damaged, but ready in my unreadiness, prepared to fail again.

And what a wonderful feeling it is to know that you received one of the best educations in the world that showed you that you are not the best, that you are of the world. Realizing that a good education makes you question the institution you received it from. How it has taken your passions and
matured them. How it can restore your vision in a time of darkness. Graduation not only marks a moment of change; it marks a moment that you have changed. And I do firmly believe, with everything in me, that that is the aim of education.

And remember to give back if you’re working at Goldman Sachs. We don’t have to choose between comfort and social change because we have the privilege to do both.