First of all, I would like to express my thanks to Kalamazoo College, its President and the Board of Trustees, the faculty and staff, and--most of all--the students, for inviting to speak here, again. I am unspeakably flattered by the honor you have bestowed upon me.

But then I also I have to make a confession: I feel a bit like a fraud standing here, seeing you looking up at me, for I cannot make myself think that I actually know anything that could be of use to you as you depart for the brilliant shores of your professional and personal future. Ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing I know.

On the one hand, what flimsy life wisdom I have, I either acquired through occasionally absurd serendipity and attendant various failures, or I gleaned it from other, much wiser people. On
the other hand, I am a writer by vocation, and a writer of literature-rather than stock market reports or legal opinions--which is to say that I am well aware that no useful or specialist information can be procured by reading my books.

Therefore I can give you no practical advice you could note down, no nuggets of wisdom that you could put away and live by. But what I can tell you about is what I learned in the course of the pursuit of knowledge I am embarked upon for life, the pursuit that is prompted by the unceasing feeling that what I know is not enough and never will be. Writing books is a means of that pursuit; I write not because I know, but because I don’t.

What is this knowledge, then? Well, I don’t know. What I know, however, is that it has very little to do with information--which is, we are lead to believe, always at the tips of our fingers. Unlike knowledge, information can be broken up in units--indeed, measurable units--which can be stored, catalogued, and retrieved as per request, which also means that it can be traded, bought and sold, and it can be lost, stolen and corrupted. Information comes
from a finite number of identifiable sources, and its value is measured by its utility. Many of you will make a living brokering and handling all kinds of information; many of you are at this very moment at the receiving end of an informational stream--although I hope you remembered to turn off your iPhones and other baffling electronic devices.

In the very notion of information or an informational system a promise is inscribed that the number of answers to any given question is finite and that at least one of those answers is definite. Each and every source of information implicitly or explicitly promises that you can always know what you want to know. In a world defined by the dominance of information there are no mysteries. All pursuits have an end.

On the other hand, knowledge--which, we should recognize, has a distinct human quality, inasmuch as it cannot be divorced from actual human beings, from our bodies, from our memories, from our language--knowledge is infinite, ever incomplete, therefore not conducive to providing a finite number of answers,
let alone definite answers. Knowledge cannot be fragmented into units without being deprived of its human dimension; it cannot be digitalized without being dehumanized. Knowledge can be given or shared, but it cannot be sold, traded, stolen or lost (not for as long as there are living human beings). What you know is inside you and around you, it is yours and it belongs to all. Language--which is also yours while it belongs to all--is its organizing principle, the field in which the pursuit takes place.

This knowledge is the knowledge of human experience in this world, the knowledge that is at the same time essential and hopelessly useless, because we produce it by living human lives but we can never possess it in its entirety. It is within me, but I don’t have it.

Knowledge is acquired by asking questions, not by accumulating answers. That is why no amount of information suffices for answering questions about, say, the finitude of human life in the infinity of time and the universe. For all the information we have on death--and there has never lived a human being who
had no experience of it--we still don’t know what to do with it. We have no answers for the questions about the contrast between the immensity of human suffering and the tiny ethical dimensions of an individual life. No solution for the maddening fact that the same species produced St Matthew’s Passion and the Holocaust. Or the simplest of questions: How does love work? Why is it that my heart flutters every time I look at the woman I love? I cannot even begin to know answers to these questions, yet every day of my life I get up in the morning, have some coffee and then go on looking for them.

Which is all right, I suppose, tormentful though it may be, because a writer’s task--and a human predicament, I believe--is not to know, but rather to engage with and be humbled by the magnitude of human knowledge. A writer’s duty--and perhaps human duty just as well--is to ask questions, relentlessly, rather than provide, let alone sell, answers.
I stand here before you, humbly, yet with pride and knowledge that I know nothing, while I want to know everything and all I know is that I never will.

That is why I would like you understand today--the day that you are completing the longest and the most important stretch of your educational path--I would like you understand that the ideal outcome of any learning process is not a hefty bulk of useful information but amplified curiosity. I want to encourage you to think that what you have accrued here at Kalamazoo College is not information nor knowledge, but a thirst for knowledge; a willingness, hopefully uncompromising, to pursue it forever and, perhaps, beyond; an eagerness to ask questions for which there may not be answers. All the books you have read here in the past few years are part of that great human pursuit. They belong to you and to all of us. They contain what we know, because they know what we don’t know.

Finally, if you are willing to accept counsel from someone who knows little or, probably, nothing, this would be it: look ahead
of you, and if what you see is the beautiful, painful chaos of humanity, the boundless, bloody field of human experience waiting to absorb your own, be not scared or discouraged. Everything is there, all of our good and all of our evil, all of our sorrow and all of our joy, all that we know and all that we don’t. Ahead of you is all of your future and all of your past. Today, you are ready for it. So step in it without fear, and good luck. You are beautiful human beings. Live a good life.