Wow. Thank you President Killpatrick for that kind introduction. Always nice to get to a position where all that gets listed is the highlight reel. Of course it still remains to be seen if this commencement address will live up to the expectations and join that list or be relegated to the blooper reel.

When David called me and told me I was this year’s Distinguished Alumni awardee, I was incredibly honored and humbled. It was at Seattle Central that I rediscovered my love of learning and set out on my path. And when I was told the award involved speaking here today I instantly said “ABSOLUTELY!” and then started to get nervous. This is my typical M.O.- absolute certitude followed shortly thereafter by creeping panic.

Despite giving lectures to students, scientists, doctors, journalists, parents, and the general public, this is my first foray to the dreaded commencement address. I’ll have to be insightful but not trite, funny but not corny, inspiring but not cheesy, and youtube is a thing now and the internet NEVER FORGETS.

Oh and last year’s Distinguished Alumnus was a mega famous rock star. Great, that’s super. No pressure.

And I have it on good authority- aka google scholar searches- that I am supposed to deliver pearls of wisdom for success and bestow brilliant advice on a life well-lived.

There are two problems with this.

The first is that it is overwhelmingly evident looking at the graduating class here today and knowing the challenges you faced and the sacrifices you made to pursue your education- well, you already know about a life well-lived.

And secondly, the fact of the matter is, HAD I LISTENED TO THE ADVICE OF OTHERS, I WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN INVITED TO BE ADDRESSING YOU TODAY. I would not have the accomplishments I do had I always taken the advice I was given. From Seattle Central, I came to many crossroads. At almost ALL of them, I ignored the advice I was given. (Sorry parents).

Shortly after I declared my biological anthropology major, my dad and I were driving around Seattle. And my Dad turns to me to say “Science, really? You know I hear they have a really great creative writing program at the UW.” And I looked over at my bizzarro dad pushing me out of the sciences into the humanities and said “Nope, science- it’s awesome.”

When I was picking a dissertation topic a lot of folks were not terribly impressed that I wanted to study mother’s milk from an evolutionary perspective. A cherished mentor- we’ll call him J. Sackett, I mean Jim S.- said “don’t even bother, you won’t be able to
milk a monkey and even if you do you won’t find out anything interesting.” Sidebar: Monkey milk is crazy amazing.

Another mentor worried that since my research program sits at the intersection of anthropology, psychology, animal behavior, nutrition, and evolutionary biology, I would never get a job- it was too outside the intellectual mainstream of any one department. Folks would love the research, but hope the other department would hire me.

After I earned my PhD, landed a major grant, and launched a long-term study, my grandpa pulled me aside and said “My only regret about you Katie is that you didn’t go into finance.”

ALL of this advice was provided with the best intentions, people wanting for me to succeed and be happy. But ultimately, they envisioned success and happiness through the lens of their own perspective.

Not mine.

I never wavered, because I always returned to my truth:

I would rather fail doing what matters to me, than succeed at someone else’s dream.

That truth is the touchstone that centers and guides me.

So since my advice would be “IGNORE MOST OF THE ADVICE!”, it seems silly to attempt to give advice in this speech. Instead I will share with you the key life lessons I have learned along the way. And many of you have already learned these 10 lessons, so I am highlighting them primarily reinforce that these are the ones I have found most important.

Lesson # 1: I already touched on this earlier, but I'll repeat: Don’t say stupid shit on the internet. What you post echoes in eternity. And don’t think you can go back and delete it or rely on platforms in which your post disappears in 10 seconds. It is called a screen cap and it will burn you.

Lesson # 2: Imagine the life you want, and build it. I said “the life,” not the career. You, I am sure, have encountered the phrase “work-life” balance. This phrase is asinine. It implies that work is not part of your life and that “life” is something you schedule for non-work hours. Your work is part of your life, so just as you live your life according to your values, strengths, and joy, so select your career.

So often we think “I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a politician, a doctor, a teacher, a researcher.” But think about you, your life, and ask yourself some questions:
Future lawyers, ask yourself: can I handle losing a case? b/c lawyers lose, some of the time.

Future politicians: Can I handle talking to people ALL the time, because glad-handing and negotiating are the politicians 24/7.

Future doctors, ask: Am I cool getting covered in blood, and urine, and vomit, and poop-because as a doctor- that will happen

(incidentally- as every parent in the audience knows- all of these questions about losing arguments, socializing excessively, and bodily fluids are quite relevant for raising children).

But what we do for work is not who we are.

Rather our lives are a complex system of balance and tradeoffs between what we need to do, want to do, have to do, and get to do. Think about that integrated life and work toward building or strengthening it. Often a key part of that life is a significant other, which brings me to Lesson # 3

Lesson # 3: Don’t be afraid to be alone. A bad relationship is worse than no relationship and you do not need someone else to complete you. Growing up my Dad had three rules for significant others. He would say “Katie, do they have more problems than you? do they make your life harder? and do they make you compromise too much? Because if the answers are yes, the relationship is a NO.” And spending time with the wrong person keeps us from finding the right one.

In the interest of time, I am going to bundle lessons # 4-9:

Speak your mind.
Wear your heart on your sleeve.
Dance like nobody is watching.
Be true to yourself.
Be the Change you want to see in the world.
Life is too short.

I know that sounds like a parade of clichés or the inspirational photos that your aunt posts on Facebook, but fundamentally they boil down to “Embrace love and joy, don’t let others dictate your life to you, and DON’T WAIT- DO IT NOW!”

I speak my mind. A lot. My blunt and caustic mouth has gotten me in trouble. A lot.

But the words I most regret, are the ones I didn’t say. When I didn’t speak up for the things that matter, when I didn’t share my feelings before it was too late, when I missed an opportunity to have a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation.
When you speak your mind, are true to yourself and your values, when you show to the world who and what you love, then others who share your perspective, share your values, share your loves CAN FIND YOU. You get buddies, you get momentum, and you build community.

And building community is essential.

All of us have to deal with set-backs at some time or another, and a community helps to nurture, protect, and buffer us through these set-backs. However, many others of us will encounter obstacles and barriers to our goals because of gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, nationality, faith, sexual orientation, among other characteristics.

I say this as a woman in a STEM field who sees this first hand every day. In Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics white women and people of color are under-represented. Empirical research has shown that insidious biases, both explicit and implicit, still poison our society.

And it doesn’t just affect STEM classrooms- this is evident from the boardroom to the congressional hearing room.

That’s the bad.

Here’s the good: As you dream your dreams and make them a reality, you have allies who have scaled these walls, broken these ceilings and HAVE NOT PULLED THE LADDER UP BEHIND US. And you have allies that have been endowed with opportunities that use their position to build opportunities for you.

I stand before you today because I had mentors that nurtured my enthusiasm for learning (Nada Oakley, Peter Knutson, & Gilda Shepherd, I am looking in your direction). As I moved on to other degrees and into research many mentors created opportunities for me and cleared obstacles from my path. Now my generation is stepping up, reach out to us, we are here, and we want you in our community.

Right now movements of inclusivity, dignity, and respect are continuing to change our cultural landscape. In the last months, #YesAllWomen and #ITooAmHarvard have brought me to tears because people young and old are standing up to be counted, to tell their stories.

And people are listening.

People are imagining the world they want, and building it.

This national discourse is so crucial, but some of the strongest voices emerge, not surprisingly, from community colleges, specifically because these dialogues represent a core tenet of a community education.
Which brings me to

Lesson # 10: Be proud to be a graduate of Seattle Central College.

People too often conceptualize community college as a STEPPING STONE. But it is so much more.

Your degree does not just represent the classes you passed, and the training you gained. Nor does it solely reveal that you made the very savvy and economic decision to enjoy smaller class sizes and teaching-focused faculty.

You carry with you a foundation of the principles of a diverse community. Emerging from Seattle Central, your grasp of the lives of people different than you is extraordinary.

Many institutions of higher learning are relatively impoverished when it comes to the lived experiences of their student body.

Not so the Seattle Central College graduate. Among you are immigrants, veterans, union-workers, conservatives, single parents, only children, grandfathers, survivors, working class, artists, advocates, activists, and searchers. The legacy of being a Seattle Central graduate is an unparalleled educational endowment. Here in a Posse on Broadway, you expanded your mind and you engaged your hearts.

Celebrate that.

By virtue of the time you spent in these classrooms and corridors, you have talked with others, listened to their stories, shared your own, and for these moments in time, walked together.

As you transition from today to tomorrow, headed to adventures and opportunities, to future careers and other classrooms, I hope that you, like me, come to appreciate these years at Seattle Central as NOT merely a stepping stone, but AS THE CORNERSTONE of your achievements. A strong foundation from which you continue to make this world a better place.

I say continue, because each of you has already accomplished so much, just by being here at your graduation today.

For yourself, for your family, for our community, and for our society.

Seattle Central graduating class of 2014, I congratulate you and I salute you.

-Katie Hinde, June 14th, 2014