Good morning! Congratulations and thanks to each and every one of you Honor students. Congratulations on your academic achievements, and thanks for making the job of us faculty and staff so much more enjoyable and gratifying.

It is hard for me to believe that it is exactly fifty years since I was in the position you are in now as I listened to a faculty speaker commend me and my fellow Honor students on our academic performance at a small liberal arts college on the other side of the country. Little could I have imagined, then, that all these years later I would be addressing another group of Honor students (and others) in this, the final formal address of my own academic career. It is truly a privilege, for which I am grateful.

A privilege, mind you, but also a bit daunting. What can I say, after all, that might be interesting or useful to you? At first, thinking of the twenty-seven years that I have been at UR, I thought I might begin this address with something like this: “Imagine a UR campus in which there was no Arts Center, no Jepson Hall, no International Center, no Alumni Center, no Recreational and Wellness Center, no Wilton Center, no fully renovated and expanded Robins Stadium, Business School, Science Center, Library, Dining Hall, and other buildings, no Gateway Village coming to be, and no electronic systems (yes, no wired campus or classrooms, no WIFI, no email, no Google, no online library catalog, journals, or books – in fact, no online anything; and no pocket-sized cell phones much less smart phones, no Blackboard, no Facebook, no Twitter, and so on).” And after elaborating upon all of these things, emphasizing how the
campus and its infrastructure have changed, I could have moved on to saying: “Now, imagine a UR curriculum that included only one or two programs with an interdisciplinary character, relatively few study abroad options, even fewer research and internship opportunities for students, rare occasions for applying knowledge in the community, and only two or three co-curricular events, such as lectures by visiting scholars, movies, plays, or concerts, on the entire campus over the course of an entire week,” and on and on. And after that, after talking about all the curricular and co-curricular changes that have taken place since 1989, I could have added: “Now, imagine a UR community that came largely from this region of the country, albeit with a good number of students from up the Eastern seaboard, extending from Virginia to New England, but relatively few students from other areas of the United States, and few students or faculty from other countries or from non-Caucasian backgrounds.” The obvious reason for asking you to imagine all these things, of course, would have been to underscore how much has changed, and changed for the better, in the past 27 years, so that you – indeed, so that all of us – could pause, appreciate, and celebrate these developments, which facilitate our own day-to-day academic efforts and achievements in the mid-2010s. All of us stand, we would have realized, on the shoulders of those who went before, and we would have had more than ample cause to acknowledge and be grateful to our predecessors, as we should be.

But I soon realized that it makes more sense to look around now rather than look back, and consider how we might assess ourselves as an academic community today in terms of how we are taking advantage of the benefits we have received from the past; and in particular, how we are preparing ourselves for the future. And thinking of you students who will be graduating soon, I thought I might ask, What difference has it made that you have spent four or so years here at Richmond, this place that has enjoyed so many blessings? And, if need be, what
difference might it have made or should it have made? Critical self-reflection, after all, is good for the soul.

As some of my faculty colleagues and a few of you students know, over the past decade I have enjoyed delving rather deeply into the life and work of William James, one of the major psychologists, philosophers, and thinkers of the past 125 years. (He died a little over a century ago.) So, as I began to consider how I might approach this question of how we are doing in preparing ourselves for the future, which leads to the question, what should we be doing to so prepare ourselves, I naturally thought of James’s 1907 talk on “The Social Value of the College-Bred” (not the college’s bread, mind you, but the social value of those who have been bred [B-R-E-D], that is, developed, in college). In that talk, James asserted that “the best claim that a college education can possibly make [is] that it should help you to know a good man when you see him.” And he added immediately that “this is as true of women’s as of men’s colleges,” thus acknowledging that men and women were still typically segregated at the college level in 1907; and of course, we would amend James’s amendment by saying, less ambiguously, that a college education should help us know good women as well as good men when we see them.

But what did James mean by this somewhat cryptic statement? As he made clear in his talk, he meant that just as students in a business school should learn to distinguish between first-rate and second-rate business men (and business women), and just as students in a medical school should learn to recognize what it takes to be an exceptional doctor, so too should students of a college (which is to say, in our context, a School of Arts and Sciences) learn to recognize first-rate writers, artists, historians, social and political thinkers, scientists and philosophers, and the like. In short, a liberal arts college should foster students’ encounters with past and present
exemplars of exceptional talent, dedication, and accomplishment so that they will learn what it means to be first-rate in the wide variety of endeavors represented by the arts and sciences, and learn what standards to use in measuring true achievement in these fields, and what it takes to reach the highest level of potential.

I can’t help but reflect that such concerns are precisely why I myself have been drawn to William James: He represents, for me, the kind of openness, curiosity, fresh and acute thinking, generous appreciation of others, and deep concern for making positive contributions in his chosen areas of endeavor that I myself appreciate and have tried to emulate. He has set a high bar, from which it is easier to discern what is at least possible as well as worthwhile.

So, if you grant me this criterion of collegiate learning – that it should allow us to recognize good men and women in various fields of human endeavor, how have we – and you – done here at UR? Are you seniors about to leave UR with a clearer sense of what it means to think clearly, to write well, to see through prejudice, to solve significant problems in the social and political realm, to create and appreciate things that are beautiful or helpfully provocative, to lift veils in see more clearly what needs improvement – not through reliance on memorized rubrics or formulas, abstract principles or generalized guidelines, but through your own close encounters with – and careful consideration of – the tangible examples provided by once- and perhaps still-living first-rate individuals who have struggled to achieve – and have achieved – some or all of these kinds of things? Have you found and begun to follow models for what it takes to persist, to try and fail and try again to achieve accurate and useful knowledge, to convert something bad into something good, to improve what is common, to produce something beautiful? For these vital life skills, reading a self-help book or adopting canned catch-phrases won’t suffice; to learn more deeply and truly, to thoroughly incorporate what can be learned, one
must encounter and come to appreciate the actions and reactions of real individuals and to evaluate the consequences of their texts, artifacts, experiments, insights, decisions, actions, and whatnot. Observation, inspiration, and temporary imitation generally precede and facilitate the lasting appropriation of skills and personal transformation.

Education involves lots of vicarious experience – lots of living momentarily through others, imagining ourselves achieving in like ways; but then it also involves actually doing things ourselves, essentially assuming the role of apprentices and gaining what Michael Polanyi has called “tacit understanding” of what is invaluable, but difficult to articulate. Significant encounters with the kinds of good women and good men that James had in mind – perhaps some of your teachers as well as persons whose work you have studied – are the means by which you will have prepared yourself to do things that matter on our own, eventually doing these things better than you could have without such models and guidance, and ultimately doing them in your own ways, just as your exemplars did them in their own ways. Imitation may be flattering, but adaptation of what you have learned to your own genius and your own circumstances will be the means by which you produce your own distinctive contributions and successes. For that, you will need to apply what you have learned in pursuit of your own concerns and projects.

Long ago, educational theorists spoke of assuring that students encounter the best that had been thought and done in human history, but James’s point is that such thoughts and deeds are always actions of actual, particular human beings. Reading their works with appreciation of their individuality, even idiosyncrasy, scrutinizing their distinctive paintings, walking thoughtfully in their footsteps, considering the historical consequences of their ideas, whether fortunate or unfortunate, interrogating their various practices – this is the most powerful and
effective way to arrive prepared for your own meaningful and useful endeavors. In effect, although we weren’t thinking of James’s dictum at the time, this kind of thinking went into the development of the General Education curriculum that is still largely in place, more than 25 years after it was first established here at UR. It is a curriculum intended to provide first-hand exposure to exemplars of good data-gathering, thinking, writing, and performing in the various fields represented within our School of Arts and Sciences. We faculty, in the early 1990s, didn’t want to just talk about these things; we wanted you students to observe them being done in a variety of ways and by a variety of practitioners in the artistic, humanistic, social and political, natural and social scientific fields studied in our School. To the extent that we faculty have remained true to the purposes of this General Education program, you will have had to encounter some of the good women and men whose example has hopefully helped to prepare you for the future. And courses for your majors and minors, not to mention your own electively chosen courses, should have – at least could have – added to and enriched these encounters.

This recognition of good men and women, and the analysis and assessment of their signature achievements, is as relevant for faculty as for students. My own ongoing encounters with William James, for instance, have put me in touch with the ways in which he struggled to make sense of things, often coming up with ideas and suggestions that I am happy to consider, both for their own sake and as means toward my own ends, my own efforts to understand and to make a difference. I am not a “Jamesian” in any technical sense, and don’t want to be one, but I am a better scholar, teacher, and person, I believe, for having carefully considered his example, his endeavors, his achievements, and even his admissions of having fallen short of the ideal – admissions (as he put it) that he was “ever not quite” what he wanted to be: ever short of perfect understanding, of completely appropriate emotional connection, of totally effective action.
In any case, my hope at this convocation is that each of you, too, has discovered someone – and perhaps a number of individuals – who have provided similar points of reference, moments of motivation and encouragement, helpful models of what good women and men in your areas of interest can do, achieve, and contribute. Hopefully, this exemplar or these exemplars have helped you become a better man or woman, someone who one day might serve as an exemplar for others! I don’t doubt that that is possible.

One final comment. The student of business *qua* student of business has a fairly circumscribed range of topics and exemplars to keep in mind. But the student of arts and sciences – the potential beneficiary of what has been called “liberal education” – has a much broader portfolio to fill and maintain. Here again William James can serve as a model, for what constitutes the particular character and advantage of liberal education is its wide range of disciplines, topics, methods, and – as James indicated – good exemplars with which we can and should become familiar. To take but one example of the advantages of such an education, suppose a political or public policy issue comes to the fore in the place you live in the years to come. The more liberally educated you are, the more resources you will bring, as a citizen with a stake in the matter, to the consideration and possible resolution of that issue. For instance, any serious political or public policy issue will have an historical dimension – a history of good and bad attempts at resolution. Knowing about these earlier attempts, good and bad, successful and unsuccessful – and knowing which is which – can only be helpful in dealing with the issue. And any serious political or policy issue will also have prompted thoughtful as well as unthoughtful written commentaries in the past and present, which you can read and consider with profit if you have learned to read with critical facility, conceptual discrimination, and appropriate judgment.
And yet again, any serious political or policy issue is likely to have a scientific and/or ethical and/or humane dimension that warrants capable understanding and sensitive consideration. You – as college-bred, to use James’s term – should be better prepared to take advantage of – to use to good effect – a wider range of knowledge and skills than others, non-college-bred, are likely to have developed.

In James’s case, as a scientist and scholar, the resolution of various philosophical issues benefited from his deep immersion in psychological studies. And his psychological understanding benefited enormously from his extensive familiarity with and careful pondering of some of the great literary works of the past – works by Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, George Eliot, and the Brownings. It also profited, in very significant ways, from his intensive study of the physics, neurology, and sensory physiology of his time. Indeed, James serves as a wonderful example of the fact that any significant advancement of knowledge, in any field, is likely to stem from some creative transfer of ideas or methods from one discipline or one area to another. There, I would like to underscore, in fitting and broadly generated responses to pressing questions as well as in appropriate and effective resolution of important issues, whether private or public, is the real practical advantage of a liberal education, to say nothing of the deeply personal impact of such learning upon one’s abiding sense of self and world. We can never anticipate, before we need them now, without delay, which areas of acquired knowledge and refined sensibility will prove to be useful. Being prepared for as many eventualities as possible is perhaps the chief benefit of a liberal education. And knowing – knowing about – many good people, in James’s sense, people who serve as exemplars of many different kinds of sensibility, understanding, creativity, and action, can only be seen as one of the best advantages and significant glories of liberal education.
With that claim, which is as plain and simple a truth as I can imagine, I salute all of you again for having given learning a chance! Serious, lasting, consequential learning demands hard work at times, but it can also be wonderfully enjoyable, and it can enrich your lives and the lives of others around you in untold and unpredictable ways for the rest of your lives – not that you can stop learning once you graduate. I trust you know that you can never stop learning; your accomplishments to date are but the foundation, though hopefully a firm foundation, for the ongoing learning that will make your lives matter more than they otherwise would.

In conclusion, I thank you for your attention to these almost final words of my career, and I wish each of you the very best, whether you will be leaving UR for good in the coming weeks or whether you will be returning in the fall, ready to encounter more good women and men.