

Last time I was in a stadium this size, I was dancing in heels and wearing a glittery leotard. This outfit is much more comfortable.

I'd like to say a huge thank you to NYU's Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Bill Berkeley and all the trustees and members of the board, NYU's President Andrew Hamilton, Provost Katherine Fleming, and the faculty and alumni here today who have made this day possible. I feel so proud to share this day with my fellow honorees Susan Hockfield and Felix Matos Rodriguez, who humble me with the ways they improve our world with their work. As for me, I'm...90% sure the main reason I'm here is because I have a song called '22'. And let me just say, I am elated to be here with you today as we celebrate and graduate New York University's Class of 2022.

Not a single one of us here today has done it alone. We are each a patchwork quilt of those who have loved us, those who have believed in our futures, those who showed us empathy and kindness or told us the truth even when it wasn't easy to hear. Those who told us we could do it when there was absolutely no proof of that. Someone read stories to you and taught you to dream and offered up some moral code of right and wrong for you to try and live by. Someone tried their best to explain every concept in this insanely

complex world to the child that was you, as you asked a bazillion questions like 'how does the moon work' and 'why can we eat salad but not grass.' And maybe they didn't do it perfectly. No one ever can. Maybe they aren't with us anymore, and in that case I hope you'll remember them today. If they are here in this stadium, I hope you'll find your own way to express your gratitude for all the steps and missteps that have led us to this common destination.

I know that words are supposed to be my 'thing', but I will never be able to find the words to thank my mom and my dad, and my brother, Austin, for the sacrifices they made every day so that I could go from singing in coffee houses to standing up here with you all today because no words would ever be enough. To all the incredible parents, family members, mentors, teachers, allies, friends and loved ones here today who have supported these students in their pursuit of educational enrichment, let me say to you now: Welcome to New York. It's been waiting for you.

I'd like to thank NYU for making me technically, on paper at least, a doctor. Not the type of doctor you would want around in the case of an emergency, unless your specific emergency was that you desperately needed to hear a song with a catchy hook and an

intensely cathartic bridge section. Or if your emergency was that you needed a person who can name over 50 breeds of cats in one minute.

I never got to have the normal college experience, per se. I went to public high school until tenth grade and finished my education doing homeschool work on the floors of airport terminals. Then I went out on the road on a radio tour, which sounds incredibly glamorous but in reality it consisted of a rental car, motels, and my mom and I pretending to have loud mother daughter fights with each other during boarding so no one would want the empty seat between us on Southwest.

As a kid, I always thought I would go away to college, imagining the posters I'd hang on the wall of my freshmen dorm. I even set the ending of my music video for my song "Love Story" at my fantasy imaginary college, where I meet a male model reading a book on the grass and with one single glance, we realize we had been in love in our past lives. Which is exactly what you guys all experienced at some point in the last 4 years, right?

But I really can't complain about not having a normal college experience to you because you went to NYU during a global pandemic,

being essentially locked into your dorms or having to do classes over Zoom. Everyone in college during normal times stresses about test scores, but on top of that you also had to pass like a thousand COVID tests. I imagine the idea of a normal college experience was all you wanted too. But in this case you and I both learned that you don't always get all the things in the bag that you selected from the menu in the delivery service that is life. You get what you get. And as I would like to say to you, you should be very proud of what you've done with it. Today you leave New York University and then you go out into the world searching for what's next. And so will I.

So as a rule, I try not to give anyone unsolicited advice unless they ask for it. I'll go into this more later. I guess I have been officially solicited in this situation, to impart whatever wisdom I might have and tell you the things that helped me in my life so far. Please bear in mind that I, in no way, feel qualified to tell you what to do. You've worked and struggled and sacrificed and studied and dreamed your way here today and so, you know what you're doing. You'll do things differently than I did them and for different reasons.

So I won't tell you what to do because no one likes that. I will, however, give you some life hacks I wish I knew when I was starting

out my dreams of a career, and navigating life, love, pressure, choices, shame, hope and friendship.

The first of which is...life can be heavy, especially if you try to carry it all at once. Part of growing up and moving into new chapters of your life is about catch and release. What I mean by that is, knowing what things to keep, and what things to release. You can't carry all things, all grudges, all updates on your ex, all enviable promotions your school bully got at the hedge fund his uncle started. Decide what is yours to hold and let the rest go. Oftentimes the good things in your life are lighter anyway, so there's more room for them. One toxic relationship can outweigh so many wonderful, simple joys. You get to pick what your life has time and room for. Be discerning.

Secondly, learn to live alongside cringe. No matter how hard you try to avoid being cringe, you will look back on your life and cringe retrospectively. Cringe is unavoidable over a lifetime. Even the term 'cringe' might someday be deemed 'cringe.'

I promise you, you're probably doing or wearing something right now that you will look back on later and find revolting and hilarious. You can't avoid it, so don't try to. For example, I had a phase where,

for the entirety of 2012, I dressed like a 1950s housewife. But you know what? I was having fun. Trends and phases are fun. Looking back and laughing is fun.

And while we're talking about things that make us squirm but really shouldn't, I'd like to say that I'm a big advocate for not hiding your enthusiasm for things. It seems to me that there is a false stigma around eagerness in our culture of 'unbothered ambivalence.' This outlook perpetuates the idea that it's not cool to 'want it.' That people who don't try hard are fundamentally more chic than people who do. And I wouldn't know because I have been a lot of things but I've never been an expert on 'chic.' But I'm the one who's up here so you have to listen to me when I say this: Never be ashamed of trying. Effortlessness is a myth. The people who wanted it the least were the ones I wanted to date and be friends with in high school. The people who want it most are the people I now hire to work for my company.

I started writing songs when I was twelve and since then, it's been the compass guiding my life, and in turn, my life guided my writing. Everything I do is just an extension of my writing, whether it's directing videos or a short film, creating the visuals for a tour, or standing on stage performing. Everything is connected by my love of the craft, the

thrill of working through ideas and narrowing them down and polishing it all up in the end. Editing. Waking up in the middle of the night and throwing out the old idea because you just thought of a newer, better one. A plot device that ties the whole thing together. There's a reason they call it a hook. Sometimes a string of words just ensnares me and I can't focus on anything until it's been recorded or written down.

As a songwriter I've never been able to sit still, or stay in one creative place for too long. I've made and released 11 albums and in the process, I've switched genres from country to pop to alternative to folk. This might sound like a very songwriter-centric line of discussion but in a way, I really do think we are all writers. And most of us write in a different voice for different situations. You write differently in your Instagram stories than you do your senior thesis. You send a different type of email to your boss than you do your best friend from home. We are all literary chameleons and I think it's fascinating. It's just a continuation of the idea that we are so many things, all the time. And I know it can be really overwhelming figuring out who to be, and when. Who you are now and how to act in order to get where you want to go. I have some good news: It's totally up to you. I also have some terrifying news: It's totally up to you.

I said to you earlier that I don't ever offer advice unless someone asks me for it, and now I'll tell you why. As a person who started my very public career at the age of 15, it came with a price. And that price was years of unsolicited advice. Being the youngest person in every room for over a decade meant that I was constantly being issued warnings from older members of the music industry, the media, interviewers, executives. This advice often presented itself as thinly veiled warnings. See, I was a teenager in the public eye at a time when our society was absolutely obsessed with the idea of having perfect young female role models. It felt like every interview I did included slight barbs by the interviewer about me one day 'running off the rails.' That meant a different thing to everyone person said it me. So I became a young adult while being fed the message that if I didn't make any mistakes, all the children of America would grow up to be perfect angels. However, if I did slip up, the entire earth would fall off its axis and it would be entirely my fault and I would go to pop star jail forever and ever. It was all centered around the idea that mistakes equal failure and ultimately, the loss of any chance at a happy or rewarding life.

This has not been my experience. My experience has been that



my mistakes led to the best things in my life.

And being embarrassed when you mess up is part of the human experience. Getting back up, dusting yourself off and seeing who still wants to hang out with you afterward and laugh about it? That's a gift.

The times I was told no or wasn't included, wasn't chosen, didn't win, didn't make the cut...looking back, it really feels like those moments were as important, if not more crucial, than the moments I was told 'yes.'

Not being invited to the parties and sleepovers in my hometown made me feel hopelessly lonely, but because I felt alone, I would sit in my room and write the songs that would get me a ticket somewhere else. Having label executives in Nashville tell me that only 35-year-old housewives listen to country music and there was no place for a 13-year-old on their roster made me cry in the car on the way home. But then I'd post my songs on my MySpace and yes, MySpace, and would message with other teenagers like me who loved country music, but just didn't have anyone singing from their perspective. Having journalists write in-depth, oftentimes critical, pieces about who they perceive me to be made me feel like I was living in some weird

simulation, but it also made me look inward to learn about who I actually am. Having the world treat my love life like a spectator sport in which I lose every single game was not a great way to date in my teens and twenties, but it taught me to protect my private life fiercely. Being publicly humiliated over and over again at a young age was excruciatingly painful but it forced me to devalue the ridiculous notion of minute by minute, ever fluctuating social relevance and likability. Getting canceled on the internet and nearly losing my career gave me an excellent knowledge of all the types of wine.

I know I sound like a consummate optimist, but I'm really not. I lose perspective all the time. Sometimes everything just feels completely pointless. I know the pressure of living your life through the lens of perfectionism. And I know that I'm talking to a group of perfectionists because you are here today graduating from NYU. And so this may be hard for you to hear: In your life, you will inevitably misspeak, trust the wrong people, under-react, overreact, hurt the people who didn't deserve it, overthink, not think at all, self sabotage, create a reality where only your experience exists, ruin perfectly good moments for yourself and others, deny any wrongdoing, not take the steps to make it right, feel very guilty, let the guilt eat at you, hit rock bottom, finally address the pain you caused, try to do better next time,

rinse, repeat. And I'm not gonna lie, these mistakes will cause you to lose things.

I'm trying to tell you that losing things doesn't just mean losing. A lot of the time, when we lose things, we gain things too.

Now you leave the structure and framework of school and chart your own path. Every choice you make leads to the next choice which leads to the next, and I know it's hard to know sometimes which path to take. There will be times in life when you need to stand up for yourself. Times when the right thing is to back down and apologize. Times when the right thing is to fight, times when the right thing is to turn and run. Times to hold on with all you have and times to let go with grace. Sometimes the right thing to do is to throw out the old schools of thought in the name of progress and reform. Sometimes the right thing to do is to listen to the wisdom of those who have come before us. How will you know what the right choice is in these crucial moments? You won't.