Thank you Dr. Bitterbaum, the SUNY Board of Trustees, Howard Lindh who nominated me, and my dear friend, Dr. Donna Anderson, who supported my nomination.

I am proud to say that I now have two doctorates; in Germany they would address me as Doctor Doctor! As Dr. Bitterbaum mentioned, I am the first woman to graduate with a doctorate from Juilliard. Now I play the toy piano. When Dr. Bitterbaum called to inform me about this great honor that I am receiving today, my initial reaction was the SUNY Board of Trustees are very broad-minded people. Or else the toy piano has arrived.

I regret that I did not bring my toy piano to play for you. But I hope to do so on a future occasion. In the meantime you can enjoy its magic on YouTube.

The title of my address today is “FAILURE IS AN OPTION: The Art of Failing Successfully.” It came spontaneously into my mind when I was riding the New York subway wondering what to say to all of you.

Let me begin at the point when I myself graduated. After I graduated I wasn’t sure what I really wanted to do with my life. Since I love animals (I live with six dogs) I went to the dogs literally, enrolling in a program that trained dogs to assist hearing-impaired people. This was rewarding work but unfortunately the organization folded.

Then I had the good fortune to meet the great American avant-garde composer, John Cage, and that was the turning point. In fact, I define my life as AC/BC - After Cage and Before Cage.

John Cage is one of the most influential people of the twentieth century so please google him if you are not acquainted with his name. His revolutionary ideas have permeated the fabric of our lives even while we remain largely oblivious to its impact. He redefined music to encompass all sounds, including noise and also silence. Without Cage we wouldn’t be having the kind of “music” known as ‘heavy metal’ qualify as music. This is just one example.

John Cage was an adventurous spirit and a maverick. A towering iconic influence, I consider Cage’s most important gift to American artists (and I use the term “artist” in the broader sense) to be the gift of self-confidence. He gave them the assurance to be themselves, as creative Americans, not as copies or spin-offs from the European cultural norm. I can say this was true for me, personally, as well. Here I was – a classically trained musician with impeccable credentials but plagued by an inner restlessness that sought to escape the rigors of that tradition in which I had been brought up. In getting to know John Cage I was emboldened to free myself from the mold, to become, over time, an avant-garde pianist, toy pianist, multi-toy instrumentalist, performance artist, vocalist, writer and, as was recently brought to my attention, a comedienne. In short, Cage gave me the courage to re-invent myself.

Class of 2011, today is a milestone in your lives and I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. You are emerging from The Fishbowl. Now you are either moving on to another larger fishbowl, or, you are venturing out to swim in the Ocean of Life. That ocean holds obstacles and also opportunities. In the process of finding yourself a niche in this economically challenged environment, you will inevitably encounter setbacks, failures. Do not be afraid. Failures are a good thing. They are not only the bruises inflicted by Life, they are also our teachers. Tavis Smiley, the radio and TV host, made the following comment on NPR last week: “Failure is our friend. We ultimately fail our way upwards.” A baby taking his first steps would agree. And here is a small personal example: I learn more from a bad performance than from a good one. Once I get beyond beating myself over the head, I analyze what went wrong. I learn something that will stand me in good stead the next time around. When I play well it certainly is a nice feeling, but it does not teach me anything new.

Now what is Experience? Experience is the sum total of our trials and errors which become stepping stones along the Road of Life. This road is also known as The Process. Whether you ultimately achieve your goal, or not, is inconsequential. It is The Process that counts. To quote the esteemed Japanese potter, Shoji Hamada, “I am not interested in the pot; I’m interested in the process of making it.” This emphasis on The Process is one of the main tenets of Zen Buddhism. So be a little more Zen as you venture along
your way - keep your antennae up, you may very well find that digressions from your chosen path may turn out to be the most meaningful after all.

Very often The Goal is associated with Perfection. Perfection is another grand illusion. Perfection is Infinity so please kiss the idea of Perfection goodbye.

I am going to be open with you. I suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) which ties into Perfectionism. Both OCD and Perfectionism have crippling consequences - OCD, because you get stuck in the quagmire of repetitive thoughts and actions and Perfectionism, where the fear of failure as you reach for those unreachable standards, invariably leads to procrastination. But remember, failure is your friend, so to hell with perfectionism, procrastination and goals!

As you go out into the world in these uncertain times, transform your anxieties into excitement. Focus not on the fear of what lies ahead but the adventures you will encounter. Do not fear failing as the only true failure lies in not trying. And please don’t wait for inspiration to strike to get going, as getting going is what sparks inspiration.

I leave you with these wise words from the great Irish playwright, Samuel Beckett. In *Worstward Ho* he wrote: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Thank you.

Margaret Leng Tan
Brooklyn
May 18, 2011