Hello... and congratulations! I want to start by saying that I am really, really honored to be here, and I thank Wendy Kliewer and the Psychology department for inviting me to talk with you today.

There’s an old story about Albert Einstein on a train. The conductor comes around to take tickets and Einstein can’t find his. He checks all of his pockets and then he grabs his briefcase and starts going through it at a frantic pace. And all the while he’s getting more and more agitated and more and more upset. He can’t find the ticket in his briefcase and so now he’s getting ready to pull down his suitcase and start going through it, when the conductor, seeing how upset he is, stops him and says, “listen, professor Einstein. It’s okay. If you get home and find the ticket, mail it to us. If you find that you don’t have a ticket, just send us the money; we trust you.” And Einstein says, “No, no...you don’t understand. It’s not a matter of your trusting me; it’s a matter of where I’m going.”

That’s a true story that I made up.

And it’s my semi-clever way of saying that life is like Einstein on a train. You don’t really know where you’re going. And it’s unsettling. But it’s an adventure; you’re still on the train. I love trains, don’t you?

When I look back on my career thus far, it seems like a series of meaningful coincidences. Shortly after I got my master’s degree, there was a psychology instructor at a local community college who quit 2 weeks into the semester. They needed a replacement right away and the minimum qualification was a master’s degree. I had finished mine only a month before, and much to my amazement, I got the job. How cool is that? I had a one semester teaching appointment – 4 courses – beginning on my 23rd birthday. I thought I had arrived! Turns out I was wrong.

But that semester was a great time. I loved teaching – although I’m sure I wasn’t all that good at it at the time. At the end of the semester, I applied for the permanent position – me and 45 Ph.D.s – and that was that.
Soon I found myself working at a state institution for emotionally disturbed adolescents. It was an interesting job and taught me a lot for 2 years. Unfortunately I was there for 3 ½ years and the last year and a half were really very rough. I felt burned out, stagnant, and dissatisfied.

I had a roommate at the time with whom I used to talk about my job frustrations and he said, “well, what do you really want to do?” And I said I want to teach. He said, “so why don’t you?” Because you need a Ph.D. “So, why don’t you get one?” Because I’m not smart enough.

Meanwhile, I was living in a place that had a really cool adult education program. You could put together a course on anything, and if enough people signed up, they’d give you a room in one of the schools to teach it in the evening. I had read a book by Albert Ellis, the father of cognitive therapy—some might say, the godfather of cognitive therapy—called Overcoming Procrastination. And I thought, “well that’s a common problem; I could teach a course on it.” I proposed a 4 week, one night a week course, and about 15 people signed up. Which is a little surprising considering that there was a deadline.

So I walk in there the first night – I’m 25, and nobody in the room is under 35. Most people are in their 40s and 50s. And I’m thinking, “yikes! Grownups!” But by then I was starting to cultivate the ability to be like a duck. And by that I mean look calm and unruffled on the top, and paddle like hell underneath.

I mustered every bit of coolness that a suburban white boy could command, which is to say not much, and I said something like, “this is a course on overcoming procrastination based on the cognitive principles of psychologist Albert Ellis. I thought we’d just kind of go around the room, introduce ourselves, and talk just a little about the tasks we tend to procrastinate on.
This is when I found out that most of the people in the course were not actual procrastinators. I remember one middle aged woman who said “I work full time for Price Waterhouse and have four children. I’m going to school at night and weekends to earn my Masters in Fine Arts. I’m head of my daughter’s girl scout troop and volunteer for the Heart Association. I used to be able to make the best peccary pie in all of Lampoc, but I just can’t seem to get everything done anymore.”

Okay, I’m thinking, here’s someone who needs to learn how to prioritize. I can help her do that. And we continue to go around the room until we get to a man in his mid-to-late 40s who’s wearing a three-piece suit – clearly he’d just come from work – and he says, “My name is Howard Davis. I’m a Ph.D. psychologist with the national Institute of Mental Health.

Oh – it gets better…

and I’ve worked with Albert Ellis and a number of other very prominent psychologists…”

And at that moment, I began to float above my body and look down at myself to say, “you are so busted…” Well, Howard was making a six-figure salary and hadn’t paid his mortgage in three months because he couldn’t seem to get around to writing the check. I hasten to add that I also was making six figures at the time, however two of them came after the decimal point.

Meanwhile I continued to have the same conversation with my roommate: I’m really tired of my job; what do you really want to do?; I want to teach; why don’t you?; you need a Ph.D.; why don’t you get one?; I’m not smart enough. Then after we’d had that conversation about five times, I started to ask myself if maybe I was wrong and if maybe it might be a good idea to just apply to some graduate programs. If I didn’t get in, I’d just be out a little time and a little money. I began to think I could absorb that.
In my Overcoming Procrastination course, I continued to look calm while I was panicking inside. I kept saying to myself, “be a duck; be a duck; be a duck.” And I did alright. I got Howard to write a check and pay his mortgage, which was important for him, as he was facing foreclosure, but for me, I got him to write something else: a letter of recommendation. And I think it was an especially strong letter, because it was from a prominent psychologist who was also my student. And he delivered the letter to my mailbox along with postage to send it overnight, because it was due the next day. He got it done barely on time, but he got it done, and I counted that as a win.

I don’t know how much weight that letter carried, but I do know this: a few weeks later the phone rang and on the other end was Dr. Everett Worthington, who sits behind me at this very moment. He was calling to offer me a place in the Counseling Psychology Ph.D. program at Virginia Commonwealth University.

And that was a good day. It led to 4 of the most exciting years of my life--soaking in a ton of psychology from a lot of smart people and just loving it.

Remember when you first came to college? You had this voice in the back of your head that said, “well, I fooled people into thinking I was pretty smart in high school, but now that I’m in college, I’m going to be exposed for the fraud that I am.” You were scared, just as I was when I walked into my adult education course the first day. But then you started to work. You gathered some evidence that you were competent, you learned the ropes. And here you are, successful! Congratulations!

And now you’re scared again, aren’t you? Hell, I’m scared for you! Because that voice is back. “well, I fooled people into thinking I was pretty smart in college, but now that I’m going to the real world, or
going to graduate school, or going wherever you’re going, I’m going to be exposed for the fraud that I am.”

I’ve got some bad news for you. That voice never goes away. It comes back any time you take on a new challenge. When I decided to write my first book, the voice said, “A book?! You?!” and for reasons that are completely unclear to me, the voice in the back of my head is British.

Your voice might be different. It might say, “hey, man, I’m sorry, there’s just no way.” Or simply, “uh-uh, girlfriend.” But as long as you challenge yourself, that voice will always be there, from the womb to the tomb, from birth to earth, from the sperm to the worm, from the nurse to the hearse, from the basket to the casket.

So here’s some advice—kind of a tipster from the Christer—If the voice won’t go away, the only thing you can do is to learn to talk back to it. I say, “hi, critical british voice.” A book..you?! Well, yeah…maybe…listen, I’ve got some work to do; I’ll talk to you later.

Now I suppose that it’s the commencement speaker’s job to give some advice to the graduates, so here it is:

Don’t inflate disappointments into catastrophes. When I first came to Richmond, I started doing stand-up comedy, first as a hobby, then as a part-time job. But it never occurred to me for a second that doing stand-up would be an important part of my professional training. The faculty didn’t know that either.

When I tell people I do stand-up, they often say, “oh, I could never do that.” Well, why not? “What if I bombed?” Guess what? We’ve all bombed. And after a while, the worst that can happen is that you bomb and get paid. It’s sometimes easier said than done, but try not to place your self-esteem in the hands of your audience.

Create the voice that says, “I hope this is the worst thing that ever happens to you.” Learn from your disappointments, but learn that you can survive them.
Allow your mind to wander from time to time.

Imagine the possibilities. It’s easier to tame a wild idea than to energize a dull one.

Don’t text while driving

Do something outside of work that gives you a feeling of accomplishment: fix something, learn to play a musical instrument, practice a skill.

Cultivate the habit of thinking of things in desire terms rather than demand terms. You didn’t go to class because you had to, you went because you wanted to. Not that something else wouldn’t have been more pleasurable. You went to class because it helped you get where you wanted to go. There are few things in this life that we have to do; there are many more that we want to do. Distinguish desire from pleasure. There are things that aren’t pleasurable that we want; there are things that are pleasurable that we don’t want. Like maybe heroin.

Have the courage to face your fears. There are few mistakes that you can’t recover from.

Call your parents from time to time.

Appreciate the people who helped you get where you are, and look for opportunities to help other people get where they want to go. It’s good for the soul.

If you choose to drink, do it because you enjoy the drink and the social interaction that goes with it, not merely because the person to your immediate left bounced a quarter into a cup.

Allow yourself to be silly from time to time. There’s a structure deep in the brain that is naturally silly. It’s called the medial forebrain suprachiastic sillium. I’m serial.

Pay attention to your intuition. It might lead you somewhere that your rational mind doesn’t know is important.
And before I bid you fondue, I want to pass on a piece of wisdom that I got here in grad school at VCU, right after the Spanish American War, and that has stayed with me all these years. I took a course in career counseling from Dr. Sandy Olsen, and on the first day, she explained the difference between a job and a career. A job, she said, is something you do because you need the money. A career is a *reimbursable means of being who you are*. Most people don’t have careers; most people have jobs. Those of us who do have careers have worked very hard for them. But we’re still lucky to have them, a lot of people helped us along the way, and we need to cultivate and appreciate them. So this is my wish for you as you embark on the next phase of your life – that you attain a career, not merely a job, that your work is a life, not merely a living, and that your future involves expressing yourself and doing something you love for that one-third of your life that you will spend at work. Congratulations class of 2012. Onward and upward!