Assembled guests, professors, Romans, countrymen, fellow Honors students—it’s good to see all of you and a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak before you. I have some words to share with you and they arose from some general pondering. Dr. Katz left the subject of these words almost maddeningly open-ended—I was free to cover whatever content I felt to be appropriate. I promise not to deliver a vindictive polemic.

I was forced to think. I was forced to ask questions to spark my thinking, and it made me aware of how many questions we can encounter. Some are mundane—cream or sugar? Would you like your receipt? Others are informational—where are you from? What do you study? We are asked for opinions, favors, ideas, and money. We are asked to hold the elevator, to mind wet floors, and to be on a vigilant, around-the-clock watch for falling ice. As we approach graduation, one horrible, terrible, no-good-very-bad question that I continue to encounter is the what must be obligatory “what’s next?” There may be varying levels of comfort with answering this question in this auditorium, and it can inspire any mix of optimism and angst at any point in time. It’s not a bad question.

But it’s not the right question at this time. I have two questions that I think are most worthy of our consideration at this time. Let’s begin with contemplating “what have we done?” in the last four years.

In brief, we have done tremendous work—well most of us have. As the finish line nears, let us be sure to bask in the triumph for at least a moment before surrendering to the relentless march of time and the future it brings. We have completed a rigorous, interdisciplinary academic experience tacked on to the rest of Loyola’s undergraduate requirements, and that’s impressive. These medals we have the great fortune of flaunting—or just wearing if you have a more tempered ego than I do—at commencement represent more than the completion of a checklist. Of course they are an outward sign of all that we learned—from Dr. Wisotzki’s lectures on Impressionism, to Dr. Katz’s discussion of Machiavelli and his dirty hands, to Dr. Danford’s obsession with impregnating us with knowledge—in relentless pursuit of ensuring that we become more than semi-literate. Yes, we have learned. But the medals are more than a talisman of acquired knowledge or skills.

When we don these medals, we tangibly display our willingness to accept and embrace a challenge. It is a sign that we craved an additional challenge and sought it out for the sake of the challenge itself. We discover both edification and a touch of nobility in taking that challenge—in accepting the dare to be exceptional.

This reflection reminded me of an Esquire profile of Fred Rogers, the famed host of PBS’ Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood, from November, 1998. It became available for free viewing on the Internet just a few months ago, and author Tom Junod has surely produced one of the finest pieces of journalism. Junod spent a considerable amount of time with Rogers, and the piece is littered with telling anecdotes. One story stands out, in particular.

Rogers was filming his show in Penn Station and he encountered a little boy with his mother. This little boy was brandishing a massive plastic sword, fully equipped with all the lights and sounds the late 1990s had to offer. In fact, the little boy said it wasn’t even a sword at all, but it was a “death ray.” Rogers approached the boy and whispered something in the boy’s ear. The boy reacted by looking Rogers in the eye and nod his head. Later, Rogers described what he said to him. “Oh I just knew that whenever you see a little boy carrying something like that, it means that he wants to show people that he’s strong on the outside. I just wanted to let him know that he was strong on the inside, too.”

The medal is not just a gaudy accessory designed to placate our own insecurities. It merely glances at an indescribably strong inner strength. The medal will gently bump on our chests. Let that bump be a reminder of the heart of a champion that resides within. We are not just going to forget how to overcome trials and obstacles. That inner resiliency was not a fleeting stage of life,
but a harbinger of things to come. We can remember this inner strength for the rest of our lives, and call upon it in times of need.

And this leads me to the second question to consider: “what does it all mean?” More than “what’s next?” this question invites investigation into the meaning of our challenge and triumph. And to do that, we must understand who we are.

If you spend about 7 minutes on a social media outlet, you’ll run into a so-called “think piece” about Millennials. How they’re garbage or underrated. Misunderstood or lazy. Blah blah, all that noise. I do not think the generational distinction is particularly useful. As our generation matured throughout the twenty-first century, we gradually built up a formidable case to fall into an inescapable pit of cynicism. We witnessed a disputed Presidential election in 2000, a war fought on false pretenses of weapons of mass destruction, Republican and Democratic presidents who presided over unprecedented invasions into the privacy of private citizens, and a recession that undermined fundamental assumptions about the attainability of the American Dream. Our generation could be forgiven for being highly cynical and insular as one truth after another was exposed to be less than true.

We are uniquely prepared to defy this turn towards pessimism and fatalism. We are so prepared that we actually express joy in our defiance—there is no coincidence that in the midst of an economic crash, our music was about “Dying Young” and “Giving Me Everything.” We laughed at our own decline. We have engaged with a host of material that explored the human experience in all of its variety. We have been exposed to the many nuances of existence, to times when we were limited by external contingencies, to times when humans rose above perceived limitations. Armed both with our knowledge and immense joy, we can confront the challenges of the future with action—not resignation. We are not consigned to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but have the tools to shape the world the best we can and the past experiences of success to lend credence to this boldness.

I suppose this has all been a long-winded, more abstract response to “what’s next?” What’s next is unmistakably positive. I’ve been listening to Taylor Swift’s “22” quite a bit recently for no real reason (ok, fine, because it’s an absolutely awesome song. Voice of a generation.), but it’s obviously forced me to listen to the music a little more and I think it has a tiny kernel of wisdom relevant to this moment. I’m not particularly confident that students studying the Western Intellectual tradition in a hundred years will be reading up on T-Swift, but they should, so bear with me. Throughout the song, Swift sings “everything will be alright if we just keep dancing like we’re 22.” I offer my own corollary. Everything will be alright as long as we remember just what we are capable of, as long as we remember what we completed when we were about 22.