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When the Going Gets Weird . . .

Hello Class of 2020! I've just come from the river where I'm setting up the rafts for YOUR journey.

I have a pre-trip orientation that begins, oddly enough, with [Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson](#). As was sometimes said of Lord Byron, Thompson was “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.”

How many of you know of [Thompson](#)? His book “[Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas?](#)” The not-so-great movie by the same name, starring Johnny Depp?

Well, what you need to know for now is that Thompson was [an American writer](#) and provocateur who rose to international prominence in the 1970s. In 1974, he dropped a catchy line into an essay for Rolling Stone magazine. Some of you may know it: “When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro,” where, in this instance, “pro” means “professional.”

The essay – “[Fear and Loathing at the Superbowl](#)” – was another instance of Thompson’s life-long preoccupation with the sheer craziness of the American Dream, and the sheer craziness of those who would emulate it.

The essay made a splash but was soon forgotten. Nevertheless, the line “when the going gets weird, the weird turn pro” still pops up in Pinterest posters, essays by first-semester college students, and 3 for \$10 T-shirts, though rarely in ways that do justice to Thompson as a social critic.

You see, throughout his life, Thompson was enraged by the parade of packaged distraction that permeates modern life. By our retreat from authenticity. By the numbing routinization of our souls. He’d be aghast that his crisp line about being different, and proud of it, has been so thoroughly commoditized.

As our world begins to come unglued, and our habits and routines fall under siege, I find myself thinking back to Thompson, to what [one reviewer](#) calls his “mad, corrosive prose poetry” about the lives we’re meant to live, rather than the ones we too often get by bowing to our own fears or loathings.

I've been thinking too about fear and loathing itself, about how it pulls us down into human ugliness, about how it may be the greatest threat of all to our shared prosperity.

And, most importantly, Class of 2020, I'm wondering still about those nine words from Thompson's 1974 essay. It feels as if those words about weirdness, and about turning pro, are meant for you. Let's see if I can explain.

The first five words – “when the going gets weird” – have rarely been more relevant than today. We're at the leading edge of a global pandemic and the worst economic collapse in a century.

And it's not one-and-done with Covid 19. Other forces of global disruption loom large, especially [climate change](#), a clear and present danger spawned by a few and shouldered by the many. The great amplifier of inequality and ecological decline. Covid-19 on steroids.

You think a global pandemic is rough, [climate scientists are saying](#)? You ain't seen nothing yet.

So, I'm betting you'd agree that “the going” has gotten decidedly weird. And not the cute-and-endearing “weird.” We're talking about the nasty and dangerous version of “weird.” The one with teeth.

Which means that, for you, the years ahead could be tough. It'll be like rafting down an uncharted river of wicked rapids, hidden vortexes, and gnarly surprise. And you won't have the benefit of an informed guide at the back of the boat to help you avoid the big rapids, because no one has been down this stretch of river before.

You're going to get wet. It's going to sting.

Materially, you're looking at tougher job searches, lower salaries, less accumulated wealth, less stuff. Ethically, you'll be challenged too. On the river banks, sometimes just out of view, inequality will grow and poverty will deepen, assailing your conscience, your commitments to justice, your religious teachings, your moral compass.

You'll want to act, to help, to do something. But then another rapid will appear. And you'll need to focus all your energy on grabbing your paddle, shouting to your chums, paddling hard, and doing your best to stay in the raft.

That's one heck of a graduation present, Class of 2020. You don't deserve it. You got here today, to this moment, because you worked hard, made the best of your talents, and played by the rules.

So hear me, please, when I say this: I know in my core that you are built for this moment, this river, these rapids, even if you don't yet know it. Life vest upon you and paddle in hand, you will shine.

The reason, simply put, is that you're weird. Weirdness uncannily matched to the times. The kind of weird that's primed for pro.

In a world of sometimes-calcified specialists, you are nimble generalists. Perfect for the weird times upon us.

You are among the few of your generation trained in assessing the big picture, flagging the important bits, and making important connections that elude others. All are essential skills for getting downstream in one piece.

Unlike most of your generation, you are comfortable with ambiguity and confusion, having been repeatedly tossed into the deep end by your profs, including me.

For you, hard questions that make other students panic are catalysts for curiosity, strategic investigation, inclusive collaboration, and creative problem-solving. That's exactly what we need when the roar of an approaching waterfall fills our ears.

You're practiced in how to drill deep into a body of knowledge, while simultaneously staying open to serendipitous insight from the breadth of your training. That balance, leavened by humility, is going to keep your boat right side up while others are going topsy-turvy.

Most important, you care. Questions of right and wrong trouble your sleep, and community over individual is your frequent choice. That's good, since many of you could be tossed from your rafts, and will need big-time help to climb back in. Many of the less advantaged will be tossed too. They'll also need your help.

I know from mentoring liberal-arts students for 27 years that the full extent of these skills and attributes, these "liberal arts powers," remain largely hidden from you. You've been too busy with coursework, and perhaps too anxious about the future, to notice the subtle yet profound changes that your time in the liberal arts has produced.

Nevertheless, a special weirdness resides within each of you. When you hit the rapids and get that first bracing slug of water in your face, you'll begin to see how and why you're built for the days ahead.

Watch for that epiphany. Invite the abrupt wetness, the rude discomfort. Don't fear it. And when it comes, stay true to your liberal-arts training and commitments, and to one another, no matter how drenched or bruised you get. That's how you'll become superbly suited to the waters churning around you.

When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.

And so it's time, Class of 2020, to suit up and get focused. Find your life jackets and come get a paddle.

It's time to turn pro. Your amateur status ends now.

I have several training tips for you, gleaned from the pros already on the river, and trainers who are prepping newbies like yourselves. Most of these tips describe how to cultivate and nurture your liberal-arts powers for the voyage ahead. It bears repeating that you're going to need these powers, as the water is looking rough.

You'll find these tips on the web, in the "[Get Weird, Turn Pro](#)" section of my website. So check it out, then email me your pro tips. With your permission I'll post your thoughts to the web and blast them across social media. Let's see what we can together create.

Thank you, Class of 2020, for having me as your speaker. You've been handed a raw deal, but you are especially equipped to turn it to your advantage, in service of our shared prosperity.

Stay healthy. Stay strong. And please, by god, stay weird.

See you on the river.

<Splash – go to the last few seconds of [this](#)>