

First of all, I want to say thank you to everyone at Liggett for this honor. I have often dreamed of my name being anywhere near Gilda Radner's so you've definitely helped me achieve a lifelong dream there — and for the youngins' who might not be familiar with her work, please go down a YouTube hole of her old SNL sketches — you'll thank me later.

I don't think I need to tell you all what a special place Liggett is. I was somehow nostalgic for it even while I was here. Every facet of this school is special but I am forever in debt to the arts department, and specifically Dr. Moss for believing in me, and showing me that I could actually pursue a career and a life in the arts.

I'll never forget taking freshman year acting class with Doc, auditioning for my first musical here, (Where's Charley), coming to crew call on Saturdays and building the sets with my fellow players in between bites of Little Caesars pizza. I remember going to Dr. Moss' office to pick out new plays to read like it was a library. I looked so forward to rehearsals because I'd found a new outlet, a way to

express myself, but mostly I loved that every new play, every new scene, every new role was a challenge that required me to further question, explore and figure out who I was and how I felt about things — this, I believe, is what makes art so important.

Working on the plays with Dr. Moss and my classmates also taught me what I think is the most important tenet in art — finding joy in the doing of the work, not just focusing on the result. To me, this is the real key to fulfillment as an artist and as a person. Nothing feels as good as getting into the weeds of a project and becoming so absorbed in the work that you hardly notice what others think of it. There's true freedom in that, in going back to the source in between jobs and remembering why you love it.

Before coming here, I thought about how things have changed since I was in high school. I thought about what'd be inspiring to hear, and what new world your generation is entering. I know that these are increasingly challenging times for so many reasons — our focus is constantly being pulled in so many different directions, there's so

much stimuli, so much information coming at you, a lot of it negative, a lot of it out of your control...but the good news is that if you have found yourself interested in the arts, you have given yourself a lifelong gift that no one can take away from you. Whether you're alone at a canvas, playing piano in a rehearsal room, reading a monologue, you have carved a little space out for yourself to be present, to express, to say something that transcends whatever might be going on in the outside world.

Speaking of the outside world...I want to talk for a moment about pressure and pretty much the only advice I feel comfortable giving which is to, sometimes, put your blinders on. Whether you're going into the arts as your career path, or not, there will be people, as there have always been, who will think it frivolous. They will think it not practical, not lucrative, but I'm sure I'm not the only one who has seen firsthand the importance of art during times of turmoil. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has had a bad day and decided to watch their favorite film, entering a different world where through another character you can really feel seen, or even turning on an old episode

of Cheers at the end of a long day to laugh, deciding to take yourself on a solo date to the museum and marvel at works of art created hundreds of years ago that still move people today.

So I want to encourage you, whether you pursue this as a career or not, to hold onto this gift, and to live life as artist...which to me simply means presence. It means taking meandering walks for inspiration, re-reading your favorite novel, listening to that favorite album for the 100th time and finding something new and all of this just for the sake of doing it.

In a world where so many things need to be quantified with likes, and monetization, this love for art, to me, is a little act of rebellion.

Standing up to the cynicism that is the current trend and finding ways to love the world anyway.

So I could really go on forever about what this school has meant to me — but I'll wrap it up with a quick thank you to my parents, who sacrificed a lot so my brother and I could go here — they succeeded in opening up our world to such amazing people, students and

teachers alike who inspired me to not only be a good student and actor but a good person. Also, to my brother, thank you for exposing me to great art at a young age...I was probably too young to watch The Godfather when I did for the first time but it changed my life and is still my acting North Star movie. And Mr. Knote deserves credit for showing us great films (Apocalypse Now). Thank you to Liggett, of course, and to Dr. Moss — I recently watched a performance of a monologue from John Patrick Shanley's PRODIGAL SON — (Timothée Chalamet, Youtube, you're welcome). He says “ this school has been a miracle for me, because somebody, Mr Hoffman, finally saw me. And more than that, somebody, a grown person, decided I was good before I was good.”

So thank you for believing in all of us, maybe sometimes before we even earn it, thank you for giving us the gift of art, something we all get to have for life, something that will always challenge us, something that will always engage us and keep us all, ever evolving. Thank you again!